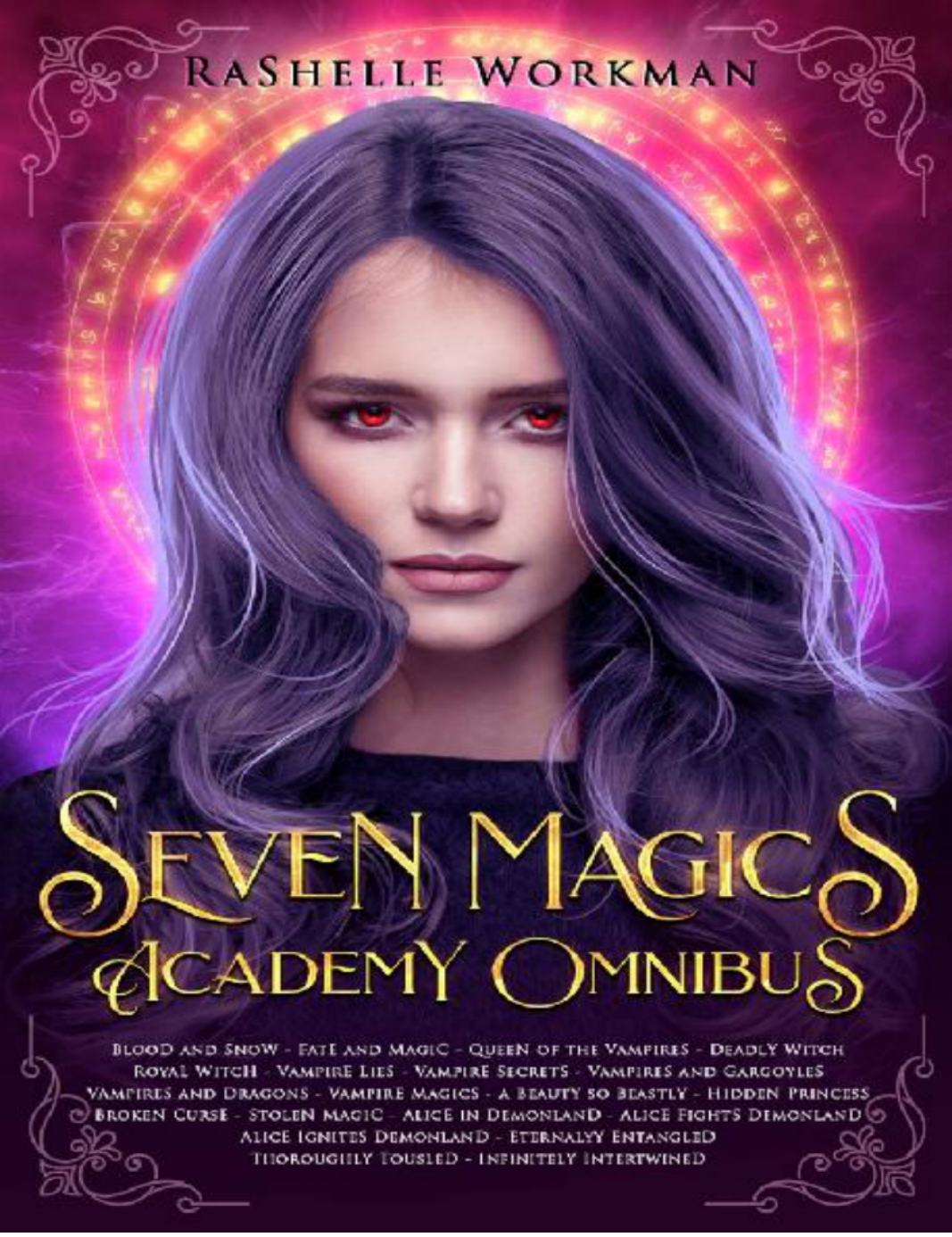

OceanofPDF.com

SEVEN MAGICS ACADEMY ULTIMATE OMNIBUS SET

BLOOD AND SNOW, FATE AND MAGIC, QUEEN OF THE VAMPIRES, DEADLY WITCH, ROYAL WITCH, VAMPIRE LIES, VAMPIRE SECRETS, VAMPIRES & GARGOYLES, VAMPIRES & DRAGONS, VAMPIRE MAGICS, A BEAUTY SO BEASTLY, HIDDEN PRINCESS, BROKEN CURSE, STOLEN MAGIC, ALICE IN DEMONLAND, ALICE FIGHTS DEMONLAND, ALICE TAKES DEMONLAND, ALICE IGNITES DEMONLAND, ETERNALLY ENTANGLED, THOROUGHLY TOUSLED, INFINITELY INTERTWINED + TANGLED CHRISTMAS

RASHELLE WORKMAN

POLISHED PEN PRESS

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2022 by RaShelle Workman

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

EDITED BY: Jen Hendricks, Debbie Davis, & Booklover Legion

Cover Designed by: Jervy Bonifacio/Phoenix Design Studio

OceanofPDF.com

Dedicated to all my readers! With more than a million copies sold and a million words written (and counting), this world is still going because of you.

This series has been through a lot of changes over the years but one thing is certain, each story is filled with romance, magic and happily ever afters.

When I first started writing these books, I had no idea how big the world would become. Now, here we are all these years later and I have so many more to tell.

Enclosed are TWENTY-ONE novels + a short story. All told from the Seven Magics Academy world. This series includes modern-day reimagined fairytales of Snow White, Cinderella, and Jasmine, to name a few.

More more than 3600 wondrous, exciting, magical, and swoon-worthy pages for you to enjoy.

Thank you for reading my books!

~ RaShelle Workman

SNOW WHITE'S STORY:

Blood and Snow

Fate and Magic

Queen of the Vampires

CINDERELLA'S STORY:

Deadly Witch

Royal Witch

JASMINE'S STORY:

Vampire Lies

Vampire Secrets

Vampires & Gargoyles

Vampires & Dragons

Vampire Magics

BELLE'S STORY:

A Beauty so Beastly

**** If you want more of Belle's story, let me know! ****

AURORA'S STORY:

Hidden Princess

Broken Curse

Stolen Magic

ALICE'S STORY:

Alice in Demonland

Alice Fights Demonland

Alice Takes Demonland

Alice Ignites Demonland

RAPUNZEL'S STORY:

Eternally Entangled

Thoroughly Tousled

Infinitely Intertwined

+ the short story Tangled Christmas

———

Books written by Rachel James and told in the Seven Magics Academy world include:

Undercover Reaper

Twice Reaped

Reapers Creepers (2023)

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

BLOOD AND SNOW

1. He Isn't A Kitten
2. Yeah, That's Funny
3. Kind Of Sexy
4. What About Chace
5. Butterfly Kisses
6. Snowflake
7. Train To Boston
8. You're Just Jealous
9. Water Dragons
10. Deadly Serious
11. Bloodlust Tea
12. Bees In A Hive
13. Hot Pink Bra
14. Pledged To Destroy Her
15. Do I Tell Cindy
16. What You Desire
17. I Wanted His Blood
18. Gladly Be Your Boyfriend
19. Stake Christopher
20. Unofficial Lesson
21. Part Of Who You Are
22. I Like You
23. You Saved Me
24. I Don't Do Dresses
25. Love Your Shirt

26. Symphony Of Heart Beats
27. My Queen
28. Chemistry Together
29. Failed Him
30. Catch Christopher
31. Shimmering Wings
32. Eat You For Dinner
33. New Born Vampire
34. Stained With His Blood
35. Bossy Pants
36. Original Vampires
37. Twice A Day
38. Keep Your Hair On
39. Revealing Their Fangs
40. Ignore His Beating Heart
41. I Want You
42. Dorian Eyed My Fork
43. My Canines Grew
44. Museum Of The Supernatural
45. Innate Goodness
46. Patch Things Up
47. Abernathy's Spells
48. Did Cindy Take It
49. Cool You're A Witch
50. Glass Fell Like Rain

FATE AND MAGIC

51. Kiss Me
52. The Vampire Queen

53. You're A Mess
54. Poisoned Apple
55. You Are A Vampire
56. Hello Snowflake
57. Are You Real
58. I Was Evil
59. Maybe I Deserved It
60. I Love You
61. You're So Beautiful
62. Needed To Escape
63. Half Angel
64. Kiss Me
65. Happy Birthday
66. Sweet Sixteen
67. Be There In Twenty
68. Pink Lip Gloss
69. Mr. Unicorn
70. Where's Your Mask
71. Birthday Party
72. Five Layers Of Red
73. Destiny
74. Flaming Sword
75. Of Two Minds
76. Two Souls One Body
77. A Piece Of His Soul
78. Sensuous Lips
79. Holy Monster
80. Sirens Circled The Boat

81. Snooty Blue Blood
82. My Favorite Blood
83. I Call Her Envy
84. Mingle With Your Magic
85. Fulfill That Desire
86. Envy
87. Inside My Head
88. My Fate
89. Not Sane
90. Christopher
91. Eyelashes Fluttered
92. Loss Of Fairy Wings
93. Dna
94. Kill Him First
95. Scent Of Lilacs
96. Hard Choices
97. The Little Imp
98. I Have A Surprise
99. Shatter Me
100. Unknown Creatures
101. Back To The Future
QUEEN OF THE VAMPIRES
102. Red Hot
103. Love And Light
104. Come Away With Me
105. My Blood Is Yours
106. Dream Crusher
107. Miss Virginia

108. Lions, Tigers, And Dragons
109. Know Your Destiny
110. Borders Of Mizu
111. Mermaids Are Fish
112. Eel Skin
113. Are You Happy
114. I Have A Dragon
115. You're Glowing
116. Someplace Safe
117. Plans For The Chayot
118. Sacrifice Yourself
119. If You Love Me
120. I Need You
121. Saved Us All
122. Fresh Pain
123. The End And The Beginning
124. Secrets Revealed
125. Happily Next Life
126. Light Some Candles
127. Made Of Stone
128. Senseless Death
129. Missed You
130. Broken And Bruised
131. Slapped Him Playfully
132. Clean Soap
133. Defeating Sharra
134. True Love
135. Gorgeous Husband

136. Seven Magics
137. Body Against Mine
138. Night Pixies
139. Three Years Later
DEADLY WITCH
140. A Grim Smile
141. Magical Shield
142. Altered With Magic
143. Lumia
144. Saved Me Dessert
145. Fairy Godmother
146. Introductions
147. Extremely Rare
148. Normal Is Overrated
149. Not Ordinary
150. What Am I
151. Leolas
152. Lose My Number
153. Mirror Mirror
154. Leo Is Sketchy
155. They Are Huggers
156. Soul Of Polonias
157. A Diary And Letters
158. Chat With Quilla
159. Posies
160. A Rabbit Truth
161. Senor Saucy Pants
162. Magical Trees

163. Party Crasher
164. I'll Go With You
165. Easily Lose Myself
166. My Thighs Trembled
167. Stupid Boys
168. Stopped Loving You
169. They Are Brothers
170. The Truth
ROYAL WITCH
171. Witch Mists
172. School Dance
173. Someday Isn't Good Enough
174. Sacrifice
175. Polly's Paradise
176. Wedding A Stranger
177. Trust Is Foolish
178. Save This Land
179. Await My Fate
180. Burned At The Stake
181. Stryker
182. To The Rescue
183. It's My Turn
184. Healing Takes Time
185. The Death Keeper
186. He's Looking For Me
187. Make Us Work
188. Party Sparkles
189. Resurrection Spell

190. Glimmer Of Fear
191. Ties Thicker Than Blood
192. Is He An Angel
193. Haunted House
194. Siphon Her Powers
195. What Happened To Gabe
196. Angel Fight
197. A Proposal
198. A Wedding
199. Some Time Later
VAMPIRE LIES
200. Spring Fling Dance
201. Heavy Caterpillar
202. By Their Blood
203. Fight My Battles
204. Destroy All
205. Want More Land
206. Secret Cave
207. Master Requests It
208. My Mom's House
209. Rub A Lamp
210. Shopping
211. Human School
212. First Day Jitters
213. Locker Trouble
214. Vintage Rules
215. I Want You
216. Tattoo Trouble

217. Secret Party
218. Demura
219. Fangs In Your Neck
220. Make You Mine
221. A Bad Dream
222. A New Trend
223. Hot Guys
224. Kissed Me
225. Drank Her Blood
226. Essence Of Evil
227. Late For School
228. Eleven Brothers
229. Blanketed Fears
230. Magic Carpet
231. A Wicked Deal
232. Destroy Them All
VAMPIRE SECRETS
233. Ripped Away My Wings
234. Actually Human
235. Troy In A Tree
236. Glad You Are Here
237. Worn Leather
238. Akuma
239. Combat Boots
240. Hunting
241. Tribal Tattoo
242. Abrea
243. Cave of Lost Souls

244. Komoni Tree
245. Old Hunters
246. Circus Tent
247. Unstoppable
VAMPIRES & GARGOYLES
248. 89 Days Until Total Darkness
249. Vampire Hunter Diet
250. Foolish Girl
251. A Giant Whale
252. Death Happens
253. Ash Lined Her Face
254. Not A Monster
255. Hang On Princess
256. Frog In My Throat
257. You Look Better
258. Goodbye Grandmother
259. Momentary Fear
260. Professor Pops Part One
261. Professor Pops Part Two
262. Professor Pops Part Three
263. 47 Days Until Total Darkness
264. Gargoyle Realm
265. It Isn't Afraid
266. I Must Be Dreaming
267. Raunchy Thing
268. Dragon Boy
269. Sucked To Be Me
270. Gargoyles

271. My Property
272. Emperor Edge
273. The Creators
274. Blood Bond
275. Wizard's Chamber
276. Freaking Damsel
277. Goblin Shark
278. Dragon Statues
279. Stop To Make Out
280. Selfish Jerk
281. What I Deserve
282. Relief And Worry
VAMPIRES & DRAGONS
283. 33 Days Until Total Darkness
284. Christopher
285. Blood-Flavored Cake
286. Sense Of Dread
287. I Had Power
288. Fifteenth Century
289. Master Blacksmith
290. Joan Of Arc
291. Deep Resolve
292. Stalking Us
293. Wolves
294. Coming War
295. Knights In Shining Armor
296. Green Fire
297. Full Of Love

298. A Little Awkward
299. A Rainbow
300. Her Visions
301. King Arthur
302. I'm A Monster
303. Pain In My Head
304. 25 Days Until Total Darkness
305. Desperate Anxiety
306. Dragon Dream
307. Prophecy
308. You'll Be Alone
309. Motherly Irritation
310. Silindra and Jasmine
311. 18 Days Until Total Darkness
VAMPIRE MAGICS
312. Athwana Meyana
313. Hot And Cold
314. About The Crown
315. Into The Cave
316. Smelly And Gross
317. A Vampire Genie
318. Seven Huntsmen
319. She's Alive
320. Enormous Nests
321. Lirle, The Dragon
322. Ondror's Magic
323. A Fighter
324. Slayer Of The White Dragon

325. Nipaforte Wood
326. Wings
327. Access To Your Neck
328. An Announcement
329. One Year Later
330. The KPID
A BEAUTY SO BEASTLY
Prologue
331. You Aren't Invited
332. Want To Kiss Me
333. A Curse I Leave Upon You
334. The Diamond
335. Beck And Call
336. A Deal
337. Snapping Her Neck
338. Ride In Your Ferrari
339. He Was Tender
340. Loopy Letters And Chicken Scratch
341. Agony Inside Of Me
342. So Completely Evil
343. First Shift
344. I Am A Beast
345. Naked and Tangled
346. Acting Weird
347. A Kiss Full of Feelings
348. In Total Darkness
349. A Werecat
350. Red Warrior

351. Beastly Strength
352. Gargoyles and Vampires
353. Werecat Form
354. Instinct Wins
355. Steak A La Raw
356. A Surprise Visit
357. Swear An Oath
358. Do What I Must
359. Uncontrolled Ability
360. Linger On The Bed
361. Frightening Creature
362. Let Go
363. Tall Tale
364. Grand Entrance
365. A Little Nakedness
366. More Beastly Than You
HIDDEN PRINCESS
Prologue
Chapter 367
Chapter 368
Chapter 369
Chapter 370
Chapter 371
Chapter 372
Chapter 373
Chapter 374
Chapter 375
Chapter 376

Chapter 377
Chapter 378
Chapter 379
Chapter 380
Chapter 381
Chapter 382
Chapter 383
Chapter 384
Chapter 385
Chapter 386
Chapter 387
Chapter 388
Chapter 389
Chapter 390
BROKEN CURSE
Chapter 391
Chapter 392
Chapter 393
Chapter 394
Chapter 395
Chapter 396
Chapter 397
Chapter 398
Chapter 399
Chapter 400
Chapter 401
Chapter 402
Chapter 403

Chapter 404
Chapter 405
Chapter 406
Chapter 407
Chapter 408
Chapter 409
Chapter 410
Chapter 411
STOLEN MAGIC
Prologue
Chapter 412
Chapter 413
Chapter 414
Chapter 415
Chapter 416
Chapter 417
Chapter 418
Chapter 419
Chapter 420
Chapter 421
Chapter 422
Chapter 423
Chapter 424
Chapter 425
Chapter 426
Chapter 427
Chapter 428
Chapter 429

Chapter 430
Chapter 431
Chapter 432
Chapter 433
ALICE IN DEMONLAND
Chapter 434
Chapter 435
Chapter 436
Chapter 437
Chapter 438
Chapter 439
Chapter 440
Chapter 441
Chapter 442
Chapter 443
Chapter 444
Chapter 445
Chapter 446
Chapter 447
Chapter 448
Chapter 449
Chapter 450
Chapter 451
Chapter 452
Chapter 453
ALICE FIGHTS DEMONLAND
Chapter 454
Chapter 455

Chapter 456
Chapter 457
Chapter 458
Chapter 459
Chapter 460
Chapter 461
Chapter 462
Chapter 463
Chapter 464
Chapter 465
Chapter 466
Chapter 467
Chapter 468
Chapter 469
Chapter 470
Chapter 471
ALICE TAKES DEMONLAND
Chapter 472
Chapter 473
Chapter 474
Chapter 475
Chapter 476
Chapter 477
Chapter 478
Chapter 479
Chapter 480
Chapter 481
Chapter 482

ALICE IGNITES DEMONLAND
Chapter 483
Chapter 484
Chapter 485
Chapter 486
Chapter 487
Chapter 488
Chapter 489
Chapter 490
Chapter 491
Chapter 492
Chapter 493
Chapter 494
Chapter 495
Chapter 496
Chapter 497
Chapter 498
Chapter 499
Chapter 500
Chapter 501
Chapter 502
ETERNALLY ENTANGLED
503. Escape
504. Through The Curtain
505. My Deepest Desire
506. Breath of Familiarity
507. Like A Drug
508. She's Half Angel

509. I Want More
510. Sneaking Out
511. Green Eyed Monster
512. I Want Him
513. Can't Help Myself
514. It's Not A Disease
515. Heaven Or Hell
516. Body And Kiss
517. Head Spins Faster
518. Buried In A Pillow

THOROUGHLY TOUSLED

519. Behind The Murders
520. Compelled Me
521. Slayer Type
522. Roommate Chat
523. It's You
524. Little Pieces
525. Make It Right
526. Always New
527. Taste Every Inch
528. Queen Of Awkward
529. He's Family
530. Reel Feelings
531. Cousin Is Fishing
532. Party Face
533. My Little Secret
534. Die, Doug, Die
535. A Meeting With The Dragon

536. Chocolate Muffin
537. Destiny Will Find Me
538. Blood is Divine
539. I'm Not Afraid
540. The Death Squad
541. Sober Kiss
542. Who Changed You
INFINITELY INTERTWINED
543. Evan's Cologne
544. We're Related
545. Pair of Scissors
546. Golden Letters
547. Austin's Suffering
548. Overindulge
549. Supernatural Madness
550. Hovering Like Ghosts
551. Like A Cat
552. Yank It Away
553. Pink Roses
554. Unable to Fight
555. Lower Me
556. Slight Groan
557. With Pleasure
558. Off the Snow
559. Blood to Survive
560. Find Him
561. Bottom of the Ocean
TANGLED CHRISTMAS

562. Christmas Day

563. Follow Austin Anywhere

564. That’s a Promise

565. Bring Her Back

566. She Isn’t a Pet

Leave a Review

About the Author

Also by RaShelle Workman

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

HE ISN'T A KITTEN

"I'VE HAD several seriously sexual daydreams about the new guy. Have you seen him, Snow?" Cindy fanned her face with her hand while she spoke.

"Cin, too much information. I don't need to hear about your boy crazy fantasies."

We forced our way down one of Salem Academy's busy hallways as we spoke. Directly in our line of sight appeared Jesse, a guy from the football team.

He was handsome, except for the fact that I'd known him since elementary school and knew he was a walking turd.

He winked, and I blanched, thinking for a split second that he'd winked at me.

"Cindy. Babe. Looking good." He made a point of checking her out.

"Don't you know it," Cindy said, giving him a coy smile.

He hadn't been winking at me but at Cindy. I wasn't wink worthy.

Whatever.

I was fine with that. I had plenty to deal with, and worrying about what guys thought of me wasn't one of them.

Except that wasn't totally true.

We exited the throng of bodies to my locker. I turned my combination and lifted the latch, letting my backpack fall off my shoulder.

Most of my books were online, saving me from shoulder and back pain, but occasionally some assignments required a good old-fashioned book.

I unzipped my backpack, took my social studies book and my chemistry book, and jammed them into my bag before slamming the

door.

"You can never get too much information about hot guys, and let me just say, wow!" Cindy rested her petite frame against the locker next to mine. Her bright baby blues twinkled in anticipation.

I hefted my backpack onto my shoulder. "Apparently, he's cute?" I asked, closing my locker.

She snorted. "Cute? No! He isn't a kitten. He's dazzling. I'm talking completely gorgeous, and he has a voice that could melt chocolate."

"Sounds delicious," I said, laughing.

We wound our way back into the mob of students on our way toward the gym.

Cindy had a way with words. It'd been like that since the first time we met in kindergarten when she traded me her cream cake for my apple. "I don't think you should eat the apple, Snow White."

We'd been friends for more than ten years.

She was different than me in every way, except for our eye color.

She was the epitome of a waif while I towered over her at five foot eight.

She had blond hair that hung to her hips and was always perfectly styled.

My hair was coffee brown and stopped just below my ears.

Her clothes looked like they'd come straight out of her latest fashion magazines. It was the same with her nails, makeup, and jewelry, including the heart-shaped stud in her belly button.

Me?

Well, let's just say I didn't own any makeup, and my clothes consisted of baggy jeans and sizeable old tee shirts, thanks to my seven best friends and their hand-me-downs.

My nails were stubby, and my ears weren't even pierced. Honestly, I wondered if Cindy found me embarrassing sometimes.

It could've been because she felt sorry for me.

The same year she and I met, I jumped out of a swing, cutting my arm on something on the ground.

At the hospital, it was determined I had hemophilia, a rare blood disorder. Which basically means my blood doesn't clot like other people's.

After that trauma, most school activities and recess became out of the question. Thankfully, my hemophilia was one of the milder cases.

A girl walking by bumped into my shoulder.

I glanced at her, but she just kept walking.

Rude!

I shook my head, noticing that Cindy was looking at me. "What?" Then remembered the guy.

"He sounds nice." I shrugged. What did she want from me?

"Snow!" Cindy stomped her foot. "Nice isn't even a proper word. It's in the same arena as fine, good, okay, and pure." She shuddered, clinging to her sparkly blue notebook with even more fervor.

"What's wrong with pure?" I asked, unable to help laughing at her indignation as we turned a corner before heading down a set of stairs.

She jogged down the steps to keep up. "Nothing if you're Snow White." A look of amused disgust sat on her face.

I pulled the locker room door open. An immediate whiff of steamed perfume smacked my nose. It was extra hot in there as well as muggy.

Cindy followed me in and sat on a bench while I changed into my workout clothes.

I would've been self-conscious had it been anyone else since I tended to bruise easily, and there was always at least one or two on my body. They looked worse than they were.

I was thankful for my body because I knew I could do more than a lot of people.

Growing up, my mom hadn't coddled me per se, but she had been

extra cautious.

Once my mom died and my dad remarried my stepmother, all caution went out the window. She thought I needed to be whipped into shape, which was why I was currently dressing for track practice.

"I can't believe your dad and stepmother are still forcing you to participate in this nonsense. Haven't they seen you run? You're an accident waiting to happen, and you don't have to wait long." She tenderly touched a more recent bruise above my knee.

I huffed. "Rude!" But it was the truth.

I ran like a herd of super klutzy elephants or a drunken rhino.

Hence, the bruises. I wasn't graceful or fast. It was just sad.

Still, my dad and stepmother had agreed to buy me a laptop if I participated. I think they hoped I'd get some rhythm or become less bumbling if the coach gave me some pointers.

Both Coach Sorensen and I knew there wasn't a snowball's chance I'd become more agile anytime soon, but he understood why I tried so hard.

"For the sake of a laptop, I'll let you stay on the team," he'd said. "But I couldn't let you participate even if I wanted to. Not with your issues."

That was fine with me. With our mutual understanding, I went to every practice and every meet, holding up my end of the stupid deal.

I knew my dad thought the idea of me running track was foolish, but he kowtowed to my stepmother, and I didn't want to make waves.

Sadly, my disgraceful running behavior had made me the brunt of several jokes.

"Hide the dust bunnies, Snow's on the loose. We don't want her to fall." Unfortunately, that one had been making its way around school lately.

But others popped up every so often.

"What's the difference between Snow and a tree?" they'd ask.

Answer: "A tree sways, Snow falls."

And another: "What do a leaf and Snow have in common?"

Answer: "They both fall."

The lamest one of all: "Why'd the chicken cross the road?"

Answer: "Because he was afraid Snow would fall on him." The jokes weren't really funny or even that creative, but they were shared within my earshot on a regular basis.

"Want to hear the latest joke?" Cindy asked, as though reading my mind.

I gave her a look I hoped said, no freaking way!

"It's actually kind of fun-ny," she said in her sing-song voice.

I plopped down next to her and slid on my shoes. "Do I have a choice?"

OceanofPDF.com

YEAH, THAT'S FUNNY

"SNOW? C'MON." She smacked me playfully on my super white knee.

I couldn't help but notice how sun-kissed and perfectly shaved her legs were compared to mine. I'd missed a spot or two - or three - in the shower this morning.

Sighing, I nodded reluctantly and pulled up my tube socks.

"What's the only thing that runs slower than Snow White?"

I double-knotted my shoelaces, waiting.

"Come on, ask."

"Fine." I grimaced, leaning my elbows on my thighs. "What?"

A strangled snicker escaped her glossed lips. "A snowman," she said, laughing hysterically. "Get it? Because it's snow, and it can't run because it has to legs."

I forced a smile. "Yeah, that's funny." Standing, I slammed my locker with more oomph than intended. The noise reverberated through the locker room.

I wasn't angry.

No point.

It was true.

Running and me were like oil and water, or rocks and battery acid; we didn't mix.

Still, I didn't enjoy hearing the jokes very much.

"I'll see you later." I stood, clutching my fists at my sides.

"Hey, we still watching a movie tonight?" She took hold of my wrist, her voice pouty, and I knew I'd hurt her feelings.

That wasn't my intention. She hadn't come up with the joke, after all.

Without a doubt, I knew she wouldn't do that.

"Of course. Want to meet at the regular spot around nine?" I asked, trying to relax the strain out of my face.

A brilliant smile lit her up. "Yep, I'll see you after my shift at Bertilini's. Invite the guys if you want."

The guys she referred to were my next-door neighbors, who also happened to be my best friends.

Their names were Bart, Sebastian, Daniel, Dorian, Gabriel, Heathcliff, and Salvatore.

They lived in a mansion with an old professor by the name of Adam Henry.

I called him Professor Pops because that's what the guys called him.

He wasn't their real father as far as genetics went, but I'd never seen a man love his sons more than Professor Pops loved his adopted boys.

Sometimes I got a little jealous since my dad and stepmother were gone a lot - like right now.

They were in St. Bart's doing what, I had no idea.

Staying away from me, probably.

"Cool. See ya." I raised a hand in farewell and pushed open the door that led out onto the field behind the school.

"Au revoir," she returned, waving.

I smiled to myself as I went outside.

It seemed French was the latest foreign language Cindy decided to study in her free time. She'd already tried to learn Italian, Chinese, and Spanish.

Chewing a nail, I headed down the stairs. One of my steps was too big, and I started to fall forward. Stretching out my arms, I braced for the inevitable, closing my eyes out of habit.

Skinned hands and bruised knees, along with embedded pavement

rock, would be a part of my very near future, along with a possible trip to the ER.

But the fall never came.

Someone had a hold of me.

He or she smelled like sweat and spicy cologne: oranges and cinnamon, maybe.

The chest felt taut, and the hands seemed large. I was betting a guy caught me.

Slowly I peered through my lashes.

Dazzling hazel eyes watched me. His lips turned up in a half-smirk.

"You should be more careful. That fall would've hurt."

"You're singing to the choir, buddy," I said, blushing as I flopped around like a dying fish.

Then made matters worse by trying to stand and smacked him in the mouth with my forehead.

A drop of rosy, red blood immediately formed on his bottom lip.

He helped me onto my feet, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I was shocked he didn't immediately run away.

All guys did.

"Sorry about that," I said, studying his handsome features.

His hair was a sandy blond, and he was tanned.

I absently noticed that he was at least six inches taller than me, making my heart do an excited pitter, skippity-skip, pat since most guys were either shorter or as tall.

I'd always had a thing for taller guys, not that it mattered. I'd never had a real boyfriend, and I was pushing sixteen.

"It's okay," he said, a strange look on his face.

I couldn't figure it out but guessed it fell somewhere between abhorrence and shock.

I touched his lip with my thumb and wiped the blood on my

shorts.

Yeah, not the most enchanting of moves. "No, it isn't. Really, is there anything I can do? Help you find the nurse? Get you an ice pack?"

I guessed that since I hadn't seen him around before, he must be the new guy all the girls had been gossiping about.

Not that I could blame them.

Salem, Massachusetts, wasn't very big, and most of the families had lived here for generations, so a new student propelled the school into a frenzy the way blood excited sharks.

"Nah, I'll be fine." I noticed his black shorts hung low on his hips, and, if it wasn't for the white tank, I might've seen more than I'd bargained for.

As it was, I was able to see a lot. Muscles rippled down his arms. He had a trim waist and great-looking legs.

I blushed brighter, guessing both cheeks were now the color of radishes.

"Okay." I glanced at his running shoes. "Are you on the track team?"

"I hope so. Coach is having me try out."

Oh, no. If he didn't do well, it'd be my fault.

"Good luck," I said, looking up.

"Thanks, but I don't need luck." He smiled, showing two straight rows of white teeth. Reminded me of a toothpaste commercial. "You wanna watch me?"

"Yes, sure." I smiled back.

He didn't seem upset or hurt, and his lip wasn't even swollen.

"I'm Chace Charming," he said as we headed toward the field.

I snickered, and he gave me a sideways look.

"It's nice to meet you, Charming. My name is Snow White."

One glance was all it took to know he understood what was so funny.

"What were our parents thinking?" he asked. "I've considered having my last name changed. But if you can deal with yours, I guess I can deal with mine."

He bumped into my side. I would've gone flying, except faster than I thought possible, he grabbed hold of my arm and held me vertical.

"I know, right?" I couldn't help the punch of excitement running through my veins.

I was glad Chace and I walked together because I tripped two more times before he led me to a bench, where I gave the coach a thumbs-up and happily sat for the duration of practice.

OceanofPDF.com

KIND OF SEXY

I DIDN'T HAVE my driver's license yet. Two more months and then it was look out world, figuratively and literally.

What I did have was an old purple Schwinn, which was what I rode to meet up with Cindy.

The night air was clammy - the kind that made me wonder why I bothered to shower that day - and the sky sparkled with crisp stars and a full moon.

The perfect night for magic, I thought only half wistfully and snorted.

But I did live in Salem, after all.

If magic were going to happen anywhere, it'd be in our town.

Our regular spot was a movie rental place called Warehouse Video.

Classic movie posters were plastered on the windows, and a neon sign hung along the top.

It actually said AREHOUSE VID thanks to several missing light bulbs, but I liked it that way. It was "our house."

The place probably would've closed up a long time ago, but the owner's son got the brilliant idea to add a coffee shop.

The inside reminded me of what I thought a seventies disco would look like, and it smelled like stale popcorn and frothy coffee.

It was fantastic. At least I thought so.

The adults? Not so much, which is probably why I loved it.

Cindy and I had been coming here since we were thirteen.

Carefully getting off my bike, I grabbed the bike chain, stuck it in between two spokes of my front tire, and locked the other end to a chipped green concrete post.

The parking lot was full of cars and teens.

I searched for Cindy or her blue Altima but couldn't see either.

Gabe, one of my seven besties, was there, though, leaning against his silver CRX.

A flock of girls surrounded him.

He must've said something funny because they all laughed.

I smiled and shook my head.

His eyes found mine, and I sucked in a breath, stumbling backward. My hands and butt hit the pavement at about the same time.

Gabe pushed through the girls and rushed over.

"Jeez, Snowflake, if you wanted my attention, all you had to do was wave. This falling all over yourself, for me, is unnecessary."

He stood there with his hands on his hips, smiling at me, looking stunning.

He knew about my blood disorder, but he also knew not to fuss over me because I didn't like it.

He leaned down. "I mean seriously." His gorgeous green eyes were filled with humor.

Gabe was good at teasing me - the best of all the brothers - but I'd recently developed a serious crush on him somehow, and I took everything he said way too personally.

"Ha-ha. Could you help me up, please?" I asked through gritted teeth.

He put a hand around my waist and his other out for me to grab.

Heat spread over my face and down my neck at his touch.

I couldn't look at him.

If I did, I'd get a close-up view of his beautiful face and dark brown hair that curled slightly, perfectly, in a way that made me want to touch it and wrap my fingers in it.

This whole crushing on my best friend really wasn't working for me.

I pulled my hand from his once I was standing. "Thanks, Gabe. But you better get back to your groupies, they're getting impatient."

I moved away, trying to focus on the sting in my hands and not the strange tingle in my heart.

He pulled me back toward him by tugging on the waist of my baggy jeans before forcing me to face him.

He was an inch taller than me, so we were practically eye-to-eye. His green eyes were serious, searching.

I looked away toward the girls, still hanging out around his car. "I need to find Cindy."

"Snowflake, wait. Are you bleeding? Let me see your hands." He grabbed them, flipping them over.

A couple of rocks were still embedded in the palms, and he tenderly brushed them away, but thankfully there wasn't any blood.

Each place he touched caused a jittery flutter in my stomach like I'd had one too many espresso shots.

I tried to pull my hands away, but he held them firm.

"I'm fine, Gabe," I said, flustered, and made the mistake of glancing up. My breath hitched.

"You're constantly falling because of these clothes. If you'd wear something that fits instead of," he paused and wrapped his fist in my blue American Eagle tee shirt, pulling me close, so close I could smell his cologne.

It was my favorite, like clean sheets that'd been dried on a hot summer day. "This shirt used to be mine."

A wondrous smile ignited his lips and spread all the way to his eyes. "Actually, that's kind of sexy."

"Gabe quit it." I tried to pull away, knowing my face burned red hot.

He wrapped his hands around my waist, coming in close.

His breath tickled my cheek, warm and delicious. It smelled like minty toothpaste. "You aren't always going to think of me as a brother. Someday, Snow. You'll see me the way I see you," he said in my ear, his lips brushing against my hairline before releasing me.

He gave me a wave and started walking. "See ya, Snowflake."

Stunned, I watched him go.

Did he have feelings for me?

I really needed to talk to Cindy.

Right on cue, she tapped me on the shoulder and jumped in front of me. "So, are the guys coming over for the movie?"

Cindy overflowed with bubbly happiness.

"I don't think so," I said, sneaking a peek at Gabe.

He'd returned to his car and the flock of girls. They were giggling again. That was one of the reasons I was glad Cindy hadn't dumped me for cooler friends.

Sometimes I needed girl time, and she was my only girlfriend.

Her face fell. "Did you invite them?"

I gripped her elbow, and we walked into the video store together. "I did invite them, told them to meet at my house at ten-thirty. They might show."

I decided to change the subject. "Are you going to crash at my place tonight?"

"No, my parents are taking me to the Cape this weekend."

It was my turn to frown as we perused the old video cases. "How come you didn't tell me?" I really needed to discuss Gabe.

"I just found out, silly." She smiled. "Besides, I'm sure the guys will keep you company."

I hid a sigh. There was no way I could talk to the guys about my feelings for their brother. That'd be gross.

"Let's find us a scary movie, something that'll let me snuggle up with Gabe. I hope they show." She swiveled around, and I knew she was searching for Gabe because that was what I did.

I paused mid-stride.

Abruptly my mind registered what she'd said. "Wait. What? Gabe, why Gabe?"

OceanofPDF.com

WHAT ABOUT CHACE

THERE WERE SIX OTHER BROTHERS, all of them good looking.

Besides, I thought Cindy liked the new guy, Chace. "What about Chace?" I asked, desperate for her to tell me she was joking.

Her glossed lips pouted, and her perfectly lined eyes got all dreamy.

She looked like one of my stepmother's fairytale figurines.

"Nah, I'm over him." Cindy headed toward the horror section and started browsing.

I followed, studying her too-perfect features as she picked up a movie. I plucked it from her hands and put it back on the shelf.

After several movie denials, she crossed her arms. "All the girls like Chace. Besides, I talked to him and - " She didn't finish but shrugged. "He isn't for me."

I had a feeling Chace hadn't gushed over her, which was what most guys did, including my guys, my best friends.

"Besides, Gabe is gorgeous and so sweet."

She'd noticed he was sweet. When? How?

Had he done something to impress her recently?

This was just not good. I had a crush on him.

"How about S - " She held up the movie case.

I grabbed the movie from her well-manicured hand, cutting her off. "Please, no. Not that one again. That movie is terrifying." I shuddered.

The first five minutes, with the girl hanging in the tree. Ugh, the whole movie gave me the heebie-jeebies.

"What about a love story, like Titanic or The Greatest Showman?

That one has Zac Efron, and I know you like Zac Efron." I wiggled my brows, trying to be enticing.

She paused a moment, debating, then shook her head. "Not if the guys are coming. We need gory death and kissing, and jump scares."

I groaned inwardly.

Should I tell her I had a crush on Gabe too?

Even as I thought about telling her, I cringed.

If Gabe knew Cindy was interested, there'd be no contest.

I glanced sideways at her.

She was wearing a baby blue mini skirt with a sleeveless white peasant shirt.

On her feet were strappy silver sandals, which matched the thin silver bracelets dangling from each of her tiny wrists.

Her hair was down and curled to perfection. Her honey skin had that just-lotioned look.

I glanced down at my black Converse and gripped my tee-shirt the way Gabe had. He'd said it was sexy that I wore his old shirt.

I seriously doubted that.

Maybe if I told her how I felt?

"Cin," I started.

"Aha, this is the one." She held up the case. It felt like something inside me deflated.

"Okay," I agreed without looking at it. I was too stressed and sad to care.

GATSBY, my gray rescue cat, snuggled next to me. He purred softly like he didn't have a single worry. I absently stroked his ears while I tried to block out the frightening images on the TV screen.

Cindy hadn't chosen Scream, but Urban Legends, another horror movie from the nineties.

We weren't sitting next to each other.

I was sprawled out on the leather couch, and Cin sat in the burgundy high back.

She had a bowl of plain popcorn on her lap and a diet soda placed precariously on the brown-carpeted floor.

The family living room was medium-sized and outfitted with furniture that would be considered eclectic.

Nothing matched, but it didn't matter.

The couch, chairs, end tables, coffee table, TV, lamps, and curio cabinets seemed irrelevant compared to my stepmother's fairytale figurine collection.

On every surface stood, or hung, a statuette or painting. I'd counted once.

There'd been over six hundred figurines placed around the house, and the number kept increasing.

I mean, talk about extreme.

Cindy thought it was funny.

She especially loved the Cinderella figurines, probably because she looked identical to them.

Young girls would stop her in the mall and ask if she was the real Cinderella.

My stepmother agreed and even gave her a Cinderella figurine for a birthday.

What was weird, though?

Out of all the figurines, paintings, pillows, dishtowels, and clocks, there wasn't a single Snow White.

There were several castings of the Seven Dwarves, the Wicked Queen, Prince Charming, and even an apple, but no Snow White.

I'd asked her about it once when I was eight and realized she was missing. "My darling," my stepmother said. "I don't need a Snow White figurine because I have you."

At the time, I thought it was sweet and tried to hug her, but now, I don't know, it just seemed strange.

"For goodness' sake, Snow. Open your eyes. You're going to miss the best part," Cindy hollered, throwing a piece of popcorn at me.

It smacked me in the forehead. I tried to glare.

She giggled, which sent me into a laughing fit.

"There isn't a best part in this movie. It's icky, and it makes me feel icky." That was the truth, the reason I hated horror movies.

I didn't like how I felt while I watched them, and especially after.

The film was almost over. Cindy would leave, and then I'd be alone in my old, creaky house with only my cat for company.

"Are you kidding? Watch this. It's classic." She pointed at the screen as she talked with popcorn in her mouth. "Here it comes."

I couldn't and scrunched my eyes closed, wishing I had earplugs to block out the screaming, the spine-chilling music, and the terrible acting.

As I lay there, working to think about anything but the death and mayhem going on the screen, something bizarre happened.

An image popped into my head and began playing like a movie.

I tried to shake it, but it was as though my brain had been hijacked.

A man stood in the trees behind my house. I got the feeling he waited for me to do something.

Several of the guys - Sebastian, Bart, Salvatore, Heathcliff, and Daniel - plowed out of my back door and wrestled with each other as they trampled down the stairs.

They laughed heartily.

I followed along with Dorian, but Gabe wasn't there. They were tossing something back and forth, and I was trying to intercept it, desperate for whatever they were keeping away from me.

Suddenly they all stopped, and their faces turned grave.

Sebastian had the thing I was trying to get in his hands. He and the others circled me. There was a coppery stench in the air, and it made my mouth water.

Sebastian opened his hand.

The thing, whatever it was, beat rapidly, and blood dripped from his fingers.

The guys began speaking together, their voices monotone: "Lips red as rubies, hair dark as night. Drink your true love's blood; become the Vampire, Snow White."

"I want it." Taking the bloody thing in Sebastian's hand, I brought it to my lips.

It beat faster and faster.

At that moment, I knew it was a heart, the heart of my true love, but that didn't matter.

Sinking my teeth into it, I tasted the blood, felt it run down my throat, like liquid pleasure and I shuddered.

A cackle rang through the night, and profound darkness entered my body.

"Now, you are mine," the voice said.

I screamed, grabbing one of the decorative pillows from the couch, and covered my mouth.

Startled, Cindy threw the popcorn bowl in the air.

Fluffy kernels scattered everywhere.

Gatsby gave me an evil eye, rose, and casually jumped off the couch.

He sniffed a popcorn kernel before darting from the room.

"Merde," Cindy swore in French. "It isn't that scary."

She skulked off her chair and started picking up the mess.

I crossed my arms, embarrassed. "Sorry," I whispered, unable to

stop the trembling in my limbs or the chattering of my teeth.

OceanofPDF.com

BUTTERFLY KISSES

"GATSBY, C'MON KITTY," I called quietly into the darkness that was my backyard.

From my porch, I searched the night, waiting to hear the soft patter of his running feet.

After five minutes, he still hadn't come. Obviously, he must still be upset with me over the screaming fiasco.

I stepped back inside, shutting the screen door while keeping watch.

Cin had left already with a quick hug and a promise to call Sunday afternoon when she returned from the Cape.

The guys hadn't ever shown, and Gatsby didn't seem to want my company either.

Stifling a shiver, I wrapped my arms around myself.

I wasn't cold so much as unsettled. The disturbing dream thing, along with that scary movie, had me all messed up.

Instinctively I searched the trees beyond my yard, studying between the low hanging branches that smelled of peppermint, their leaves soft as butterfly kisses.

Would he be out there? The man who watched me in the dream.

A noise like crunching leaves pulled my head in its direction. My pulse picked up speed like a thumping rabbit.

Something moved out there - something I couldn't see.

Opening the screen door, I called for Gatsby again. "Here, kitty kitty."

The sound of my own voice made me nervous.

The noise grew more intense.

I'd let the screen door slam behind me and now reached back, grabbing the handle. Opening it, I put a hand to my throat. If it was the man, what should I do?

I wouldn't be safe in the house. I so needed a cellphone.

I was about to turn when two guys stumbled out of the trees and fell onto the grass, laughing uproariously.

A scream escaped my lips before I could stop it.

I clamped a hand over my mouth, realizing it was just Salvatore and Bart.

That's what my eyes told me; the rest of me was frozen in fear.

I wanted to laugh with them. They'd only been teasing; it's what they did.

I'd done it to them on more than one occasion: snuck into their yard and scared them.

"You should see your face," Salvatore said, rising and coming toward me. "I should've taken a picture." Tears were streaming down his face from laughing so hard.

Bart was in a similar state.

I still couldn't move.

In the dream, Salvatore had been holding the bloody heart, the heart of my true love. The brothers had been tossing it around like they were playing catch before a game.

I shook my head, remembering I'd tasted the heart.

A rush of pleasure rushed through me, and I swallowed back the disgust and guilt.

"How-how could you?" I stammered, tears filling my eyes. "You know I'm all alone. You could've been a psychotic murderer."

I rushed into the house, letting the screen door slam behind me.

I'd seen their stricken faces and knew they hadn't meant to do any harm, but I couldn't act rationally.

Sobs wracked my body, and snot dripped from my nose.

I was losing it, and I had no excuse.

I ran past my parents' unused bedroom and the bathroom in the main hall until I reached my bedroom.

Flinging open the door, I launched myself onto the bed and buried my head in my purple pillows. My dad, being gone for so long, plus knowing Cindy liked Gabe and the weird daydream, was fuel for my pity party.

The guys scaring me ignited it, and now there would be no stopping the floodgates.

All my sadness, my loneliness, my pent-up hurt, and fears seemed to crash into me.

Wave after horrible wave.

Why had my mother died?

Why had my father remarried such a cold, uncaring woman, and why did they have to leave me alone all the time?

Why did my dad choose her over me?

Why was I such a dork?

The questions went unanswered, probably always would.

My life was what it was, and most of the time, I accepted it, even enjoyed it.

Right now was not one of those times.

I'd fallen into my enormous chasm of hurt and allowed myself to sink in.

"Care for one more in your pity party?"

At the sound of his soft voice, I stiffened.

There was a thud, and then I felt the bed give as four soft paws jumped up.

"Gatsby invited me. I hope you don't mind if I join you?"

Two feelings swirled through my heart at once: relief and

embarrassment.

Relief, because I was happy he was here. I didn't want to be alone.

Embarrassment because I was a blubbering mess, and he would see me, and I'd never be able to look him in the face again.

"Gabe, what are you doing?" I asked, casually wiping my eyes and nose on my pillowcase. Gross? Sure. But it was better than him seeing me covered in snot.

The bed dipped as he sat.

His warm skin so close to mine sent tingles through my belly.

"I told you Gatsby invited me, and I never miss a pity party, especially not one thrown by my beautiful best friend, Snowflake."

There was amusement in his voice.

He was trying to make me feel better, but that wasn't the point of my feeling sorry for myself. I wasn't supposed to feel better. It was about misery, and that's what I wanted.

Him saying I was beautiful just added to the many waves of hurt.

It wasn't true, and having him rub that in didn't help.

"Go away," I said.

He answered by scooting closer, and I felt my body respond hungrily to his nearness.

"I'll go away when I know you're feeling better. Professor Pops knows I'm here. He also has Salvatore and Bart on bathroom duty tomorrow. He wanted me to be sure to tell you that."

"Huh," was all I could utter, though I had to smile.

"Serves them right." I sniffled.

He shifted his weight and pushed me over slightly, then I felt something fall over me. It was the quilt my mother made.

Tears filled my eyes again, and I squeezed them shut.

"Now, I'm just going to lie down next to you until you fall asleep. I've already locked up the house, but I'll lock the back door when I

leave, okay?" He spoke softly.

Gatsby growled before there was a thud. Gabe dropped him to the floor.

The bed shifted as Gabe got comfortable.

Then there was only his breathing.

I held mine for several long seconds.

He meant it.

Gabe was just going to lie there with me.

I took a deep breath and relaxed.

The moment reminded me of our overnighters when we were younger, sleeping out on the trampoline in our sleeping bags.

The seven of them and me all started out at typical distances from each other, but by morning we'd all slid into the middle - a pajama-clad mashup of arms and legs.

I'd always been the first to wake up, lie there, listen to them inhale and exhale, and wish that was how we could be every night - my brothers and me sleeping under the stars.

Only now, I didn't see them that way anymore.

They weren't my brothers, but gorgeous men and the one next to me had my pulse pounding in my ears.

I took a deep breath, thinking about our overnighters.

They'd ended once my stepmother came into the picture.

She'd pointed out that they were boys, and all boys only had one thing on the brain.

As I listened to Gabe now, I wondered what was on his mind.

After a while, I fell asleep.

In my dreams, there were arms wrapped protectively around me, my back tucked against his chest, legs intertwined.

I heard a whisper. "Snow, my Snow. You aren't alone."

My heart soared with happiness in the dream.

"Gabe, don't leave me," I whispered back.

"Never, Snowflake."

OceanofPDF.com

SNOWFLAKE

THE SUN PEEKED through my sheer purple bedroom curtains, its brightness burning my eyes. I was on my side, facing my alarm clock, which said seven o'clock.

Gabe's steady breath tickled my neck.

A weight pressed against my hip - Gabe's arm.

All that had happened last night came crashing back, and he was still there, in my bed with me.

I slowly rolled onto my back.

Gabe shifted.

A smile curled his lips.

"It's a bit early for a Saturday, Snowflake." His words were low, heavy with sleep.

Sensual, my mind uttered, and my heart responded by beating rapidly.

Before I could give him a comeback, my nose registered the sultry smell of bacon. "Someone's cooking," I whispered.

"Do you think it's the psychotic murderer? He's going to feed us before he slays us?" he asked, mischievous.

I punched him in the arm. "You heard me last night?"

"Snowflake, I think the whole town heard you." He opened his eyes then.

Two beautiful pools of green searched my face, lingering on my lips before focusing on my eyes.

My skin warmed, and I looked away.

"I love it when you blush," he said softly.

"You do?" I couldn't believe he'd stayed, and we were lying next to

each other.

All night.

Did he like me?

What about Cindy?

Should I tell him she had a thing for him?

His hand rested on my stomach, and I wondered if he could feel the electricity buzzing beneath.

"Snowflake, I do." He rolled onto his side, and I did the same, his fingers creating goosebumps as they moved back to my hip.

Our noses practically touched, and I suddenly worried about morning breath.

I hadn't brushed my teeth and turned in my lips, pressing them together.

He started laughing. "What are you doing?"

"I haven't brushed my teeth," I said, cupping a hand over my mouth.

He pulled my hand away. "Don't care."

"Yeah, but what about your morning breath? It might singe my eyelashes," I said, finally coming up with a snappy comeback.

He laughed and rotated off the bed. "You have a point. Let's go see what the psychotic murderer is cooking along with that bacon."

I grinned, thankful, and disappointed that the moment had ended.

"I'll be down in a minute."

He raised his eyebrows in question, and I glanced in the direction of my bathroom.

"Ah," was all he said as he went to the door.

A bolt of agony shot into my heart. I didn't want him to leave.

I'd clung to him in my dreams last night.

Awake, I didn't want to stop.

I needed him, with his incessant playfulness and thoughtfulness.

On top of that, well, he was hot.

"Gabe," I called, hearing the tremor in my voice.

He turned back, concerned. "Yeah, Snowflake?"

"Thank you." I looked down, unsure.

My feelings for him were new, and a part of me wished I could go back to just being his best friend.

He walked around the bed to where I stood and gripped my tee-shirt, which used to be his in his hand, making a fist and pulling me to him.

He lifted my chin with a finger, but I kept my eyes down, focusing on his masculine hands that were big, but not too big.

"Are you going to be okay?"

I nodded, unable to understand why tears stung my eyes.

He pulled me into his arms, and I reciprocated with a fervor I didn't know I possessed.

Tucking my face in his neck, I held on as though my life depended on it.

We stayed that way until I heard snickering from the doorway.

"Professor Pops wanted me to tell you both to come down for breakfast."

It was Bart. He stood there, looking super uncomfortable.

I cleared my throat.

Gabe whispered, "Never, Snowflake." Gave me a pointed look.

My heart leaped into my throat.

Maybe last night's words and the way he'd held me hadn't been dreams.

"Promise?" I examined his face, his eyes, to see if he was serious.

In answer, he kissed my cheek, and my whole body melted like butter. "Promise."

"Hurry up," Bart said and disappeared.

Gabe squeezed my hand before exiting my bedroom.

And I sighed.

AFTER HANDLING the necessities - change of clothes, brushing my teeth and hair, and a bathroom break - I ran downstairs.

All the guys were seated around the kitchen island and at the table. I couldn't help but smile. Having the kitchen bursting with delicious smells, and most of my favorite people filled me with total happiness.

"Hi," I said, sitting on the oak dining chair next to Dorian.

The guys were piling their plates with waffles, eggs, and more eggs, and cantaloupe, and strawberries.

Taking a dish, I scooped some of the fruit onto it.

Professor Pops came over and plopped a waffle onto my plate. I looked up. Grateful he'd done so much.

"Thanks, Professor, but I'm a vegan. No eggs or milk for me." I grimaced, feeling bad, but I couldn't bring myself to eat anything meat or meat-related.

I picked up the waffle, but Professor placed a hand over mine and patted.

"I know all about it," he said. "These waffles were made without eggs, and I used almond milk instead of regular."

His gray eyes twinkled like he'd lived a thousand lives and knew everything about everything.

"Oh," I said, setting it back on my plate happily.

Neither my dad nor my stepmother would've been so thoughtful.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, the skin around his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

The notion that he'd come over and cooked for me was incredible and another testament to the reasons I adored him and his sons.

They were extraordinarily good, decent men because that's the example Professor Pops set for them. I had to wonder how he and the guys had gotten in and where all the food came from.

My refrigerator held yogurt, apples, raw almonds, and orange juice, and I had some vegan, whole-wheat pasta, and tomato sauce in the pantry, but that was about it.

I wasn't going to ask him, though.

That would've been rude.

Besides, I was too busy stuffing my face with fruit covered waffles.

Gabe sat at the island, his back to me, so I didn't get a chance to talk to him during breakfast.

There'd been a lot of grunting and chewing going on after Sebastian uttered a quick prayer, but not much else.

The food was divine.

Salvatore and Bart had apologized, clearing the air.

Afterward, I helped Professor Pops clean up the kitchen. When it was just the two of us in the kitchen, Professor Pops filled the large sink with hot water and dish soap.

A perfectly good stainless-steel dishwasher had been installed next to the sink, but he wanted to hand wash the dishes.

"You know, we could throw these in there." I pointed at the dishwasher.

"True, but where's the fun in that?" He wriggled his eyebrows, and I giggled.

Pops handed me a plate.

I dried it and placed it in the cupboard.

"Your sixteenth birthday is in two months," he said out of the blue.

"It is," I agreed, curious about where he was going with his question.

"Have you made any plans yet?"

OceanofPDF.com

TRAIN TO BOSTON

I STOOD beside Professor Pops and took another plate he handed me. It was hot, and I hurriedly dried it.

"Not yet. My parents won't be back from St. Bart's for a while, so I'm not sure."

He didn't say anything right away.

I looked up.

His jaw flexed, and his eyes were scrunched as though he had to concentrate on washing the plate.

Professor Pops had thick gray hair. He was tall and lean.

I figured he'd probably been very handsome when he was younger. As it was, I'd say he was distinguished.

He had on a pair of tan slacks, a red and white checkered button-up shirt, and a tan sweater with dark suede patches at the elbows.

On his feet were loafers, and in his left breast pocket were silver wire-rimmed reading glasses.

He was the epitome of what I believed a Professor of Religion should look like.

Well, a professor of any kind, really.

After I put away the dried plate, I came back for the next one.

"It isn't a big deal. Maybe I'll invite the guys and Cindy over to watch a movie. That'll be fun."

He blew out a breath, and I deliberated if I'd made him mad.

"Professor?" I asked tentatively.

He dropped the plate in the soapy sink, letting it splash and turned to me.

Taking the towel from my hands, he dried off his and then placed

it on the counter.

"Snow, I know I'm not your father, but I've come to look at you as an adoptive daughter over the years. I'm very fond of you." His eyes glowed as he spoke.

"I know," I said, my insides tingling with the sweet warmth of his genuine love for me.

But I was curious as to what he was getting at.

"I really appreciate that. Thanks again for making me breakfast."

We waved a hand dismissively. "I intend to call your father and stepmother," the words came out like they were laced with acid, "and ask their permission, of course, but if you let me, I'd like to throw you a birthday party at my place. Something big, grand, something that declares to the world what an amazing young woman you are."

At the last part, he squeezed my shoulders affectionately.

Unbidden tears crept into my eyes, and I quickly blinked them away.

What was up with me?

"That is very kind of you but you don't have to," I said, my voice trembling with emotion.

"I would be honored if you'd allow me to. This old man hasn't ever had the chance to throw an extravagant birthday party. All the boys ever want is pizza and some sort of activity."

"An activity sounds great," I inserted hurriedly.

I didn't want him to have to go to all the trouble.

"No, please. Let me do this. May I?" He took one of my hands and held it between his. They were soft and warm.

"Okay," I said, a little shyly.

"Excellent." He patted my hand. "Now, about Gabe."

I swallowed a lump I hadn't known existed in my throat. "Gabe?" I squeaked out.

"Yes." He nudged me over to the table, and we both sat. "The boy -" he began but couldn't finish.

The whole group forced their way into the kitchen, and one of the guys cleared his throat, interrupting whatever Professor Pops had been about to say.

Dorian spoke. "We were wondering if we could take the train into Boston."

Professor Pops released my hand. "That sounds intriguing." He looked from Salvatore to Bart. "Bathrooms must be cleaned first. Then you may go. Just be home before midnight."

Pop handed Dorian some money he'd pulled from the wallet in his back pocket.

"You have your cells if there's an emergency?" he asked though it was apparent he knew the answer.

They all nodded, and I hid a smile behind my hand.

They were men. The youngest were Gabe and Dorian, and they were both seventeen.

Four would be graduating from the academy this year, but they knew Professor Pops cared for them a great deal and would never intentionally disrespect him.

A twinge of longing surged through me.

"Want to come, Snowflake?" Gabe asked, eyeing me.

The guys all added their assent.

I searched Gabe's face.

Did he really want me to tag along?

It seemed that he did.

"Sure. Sounds fun."

"Cool."

The brothers took off, leaving Professor Pops and me alone again.

I wanted to bring up Gabe and ask him what he was going to say,

but I couldn't figure out how.

AFTER SHOWERING and blow-drying my short hair, I searched for an outfit that wouldn't embarrass the guys.

It frustrated me to realize I cared, and it was all Gabe's fault.

Before last night - before his words, and kindness, and his snuggling without trying anything, and kissing my cheek - before any of that, I hadn't given what I wore a second thought.

In the past, I just put on any old thing.

Not even the gorgeous Cindy Croswell and all of her helpful hints had done any good.

It. Was. Gabe.

He'd said I was sexy, and he'd made me feel sexy, so I wanted to be sexy.

I growled in frustration.

"Ugh, what's happening to me," I hollered at myself, throwing on a pair of baggy faded jeans and a vintage Def Leppard shirt.

At least the sleeves were a light blue that matched my eyes.

That seemed girly.

I didn't have makeup, but I did have cherry lip balm. I applied some after brushing my teeth again and fluffed my hair a little.

"Cindy would be so proud," I mocked my reflection in the mirror.

Adding a pair of black Converse and a black leather belt, I grabbed my wallet and headed next door to Adam Henry's house.

Calling Professor Pops' house a house - well, it was a downright lie.

The thing was a sprawling mansion.

An acre of land separated my house from his, but the mansion sat on ten acres.

The amenities included a tennis court, a basketball court, a heated swimming pool that could be indoor or outdoor, a three-hole golf

course, a putting green, and the house.

My house looked like the servant's quarters.

Maybe it had been a long time ago.

I dinged the bell and waited.

You'd think a butler would answer the door, but no.

It was Salvatore. His shiny black hair was wet and pulled into a tiny ponytail.

"Rockin' the pirate look, I see," I said as I stepped into the foyer.

Almond colored eyes registered shock, as did his gasp and the way he dramatically put his hand on his chest.

I couldn't help the laugh that started in my belly and bubbled into my throat.

"Where's your poofy shirt and pantaloons?" I asked, following him into the kitchen.

He had on a getup similar to mine, baggy jeans, and a vintage shirt. His tee-shirt was black and had AC-DC across the chest.

Pulling open a door on the large side-by-side stainless steel refrigerator, he grabbed a soda and popped the top.

"You want one?"

"Um, duh," I responded, to which he grinned and tossed me one.

I flung up my hands in an effort to at least block the can, but a hand reached in front of me and grabbed the can from the air.

"Dude," Dorian grumbled. "Did you forget who this is?" he asked, pointing in my direction with a thumb.

OceanofPDF.com

YOU'RE JUST JEALOUS

I SMACKED Dorian in the arm. "I totally had it. Right Salvatore?"

He responded by chugging down his soda.

"Uh-huh, sure you did." Dorian looked freshly showered too.

His sandy hair was still wet and slicked back.

He always dressed so nicely, and today was no exception: a light green polo with dark jeans and a brown belt that matched his shoes.

"You're so pretty, Dorian." I grabbed the can of soda from him and cracked it open.

He smirked. "Don't I know it."

One by one, the guys sauntered into the kitchen, each handsome in his own way, each dear to me.

These guys were my family.

I'd do anything for them, and I knew the feeling was mutual.

After last night's freak-out, I figured the guys might act weird toward me, but it was the same ol' same ol', and for that I was grateful.

Gabe walked in last.

He looked just as he always did - gorgeous brown hair, mischievous green eyes, olive skin, and a body of lean muscle - but everything was different too.

Those arms held me last night.

He'd made me a promise, and as he walked toward me, I knew he meant it.

The closer he got, the warmer my body became. Ignoring his brothers, his lips brushed against my face, as though resealing the promise he'd made earlier.

One of them - Sebastian, I think - did the whole fake cough thing. "Jerk."

"Yeah, you're just jealous. Get over it," Gabe responded.

Jealous, I thought.

No way.

But as I scanned the faces of the brothers, I realized something.

Sure, they were family, but we weren't related, and they saw me as a potential girlfriend, not a sister.

How long had this been going on?

Had I really been so oblivious?

I knew I was turning red, and I lowered my face, intently studying the soda can.

But I'm not even pretty, I thought, mortified.

Heathcliff cleared his throat. "Let's go. The train leaves in twenty minutes. Hopefully, we'll make it." He grabbed a set of keys off the hook on the wall that said, coincidentally, KEYS.

Eight of us in one car; this ought to be interesting.

Turned out to be four of us in two cars. Heathcliff drove the red Audi, and Salvatore drove the black Mercedes SUV.

Gabe sat in the back with me, and Dorian sat in the front next to Heathcliff.

Heathcliff had been right.

We made it, but not by much.

As soon as we were in, the train pulled away.

The ride into the city was fun but uneventful.

There was one brief moment when I got the distinct impression someone was watching me. The little hairs on the back of my neck and on my arms stood up, and I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Trying to be nonchalant, I searched for the cause, but didn't notice

anyone acting strange or, at least, not odd towards me.

Shrugging it off, I listened to the guys and their interesting conversations about sports, cars, and women.

THERE WAS something magical about Boston.

Puritans founded the city in 1630, so perhaps magic would be considered blasphemous, but that was the word that came to mind.

After Salem, this big city was my favorite place.

A hum, or a vibe, pulsed through the city, uniting its occupants.

We started at Boston Common.

Salvatore brought a Frisbee, and we played on the grass for a while.

The air was humid, hot.

After an hour, we were all sticky and in need of liquid refreshments.

The eight of us went to a local coffee shop for a cold drink.

After that, we split up.

Sebastian, Salvatore, Bart, and Daniel decided to get out of the heat and see a movie.

Heathcliff informed us Professor Pops had asked him to drop something off. It was all very secretive.

Dorian, Gabe, and I said we'd keep him company.

We took Tremont Street to State and decided to stop at the Faneuil Hall Market Place.

It was packed with people and all sorts of shops, from clothing to jewelry to food to purses.

The guys each bought themselves a slice of pizza, which smelled so heavenly I almost rethought my food choices but settled on an almond fruit smoothie.

We purchased tickets to see a play contending for Broadway

called Chasing Disaster later that night. It was a musical about the life of Sylvester Stallone. Stallone and a musical didn't seem to mix, but we wanted to give it a shot.

The sun had begun to set, making the glass buildings glow as though they were on fire.

Heathcliff led us into an alley that, at one time, hundreds of years ago, had been a cow path.

Sunlight dappled the brick buildings high above, but down near us, darkness prevailed, as did the dank smell of rotting trash and fish.

I breathed through my mouth with little relief.

"Where are we going, Heath?" Dorian asked, a hand over his nose.

Gabe shoved him. "You're such a baby." He glanced at me, worry creasing his forehead. "How are you handling this?" he whispered.

I put a hand over my nose and mouth. "Gotta say, Dorian has the right idea. The smell is atrocious."

Gabe nodded.

Heathcliff didn't seem to be bothered by it. He kept looking from a piece of paper in his hand and side to side at the old doors almost hidden in the walls.

The alley seemed to go on forever, and I wondered how much longer we would be here.

Finally, Heath stopped and scratched his head.

"I think this is it." He knocked, and we waited.

After several seconds a young Asian boy in navy shorts and a white tee shirt answered the door.

He appraised us before asking in perfect English, "What do you want?"

I felt the hesitation in the brothers. They all had their shoulders hunched except Heathcliff.

"Hello," Heathcliff said, giving the boy a smile. "Adam Henry asked me to bring something to Kenmei-sensei."

The boy stepped back as though Heath had cursed.

"One minute." The door slammed, and there was high-pitched shouting in Japanese.

We looked at each other.

I shrugged, tucking my hands into my front pockets. After several more minutes, an elderly Asian man opened the door.

He wore clothes similar to Professor Pops.

"Adam Henry has something for me?" He bowed slightly.

Heath, Dorian, Gabe, and I returned the bow.

Professor Pops had been teaching the boys about different cultures since they were little. Sometimes he'd teach me, too, and for that reason, I knew that it was a sign of respect to return the old man's bow.

Heath pulled a folded paper from his back pocket. "Are you Kenmei-sensei?"

A smile ignited the man's face. "Hai."

Heath handed him the paper. "This is for you, then."

With slightly shaking hands, Kenmei took the paper and unfolded it. He studied whatever was on it.

The four of us shuffled back and forth, waiting patiently, but I thought I'd gag if I had to stay in the alley much longer.

The smell was more than awful.

Finally, Kenmei looked at Heath and then set his gaze on Dorian and Gabe before his eyes rested on me.

A prickling fear surged along my spine.

Looking into his dark eyes was like looking into the Universe.

If anyone asked, I would swear I saw stars and planets rotating within.

"You are not one of Adam Henry's sons." It wasn't a question.

I shook my head, placing my hands behind my back in fists. "No,

I'm just a friend of the family."

"A good friend," he added.

"Yes," I agreed, working to keep the overbearing fear crawling along with my appendages in check.

His stare worried me, and I glanced down at my feet, realizing I stood in a puddle of murky yellow water.

Shifting, I moved closer to Gabe.

He placed a hand at the small of my back, and I relaxed.

"Come." Kenmei stood back, his hand gesturing that we enter. "Adam is expecting an answer. Won't the four of you come in? My grandson, Hiro-san, will make you some tea."

OceanofPDF.com

WATER DRAGONS

HEATHCLIFF ANSWERED as though he'd been holding his breath. "We'd love to."

"Excellent." Kenmei moved inside. "Apologies for the smell. It keeps away the undesirables."

"No problem," Heathcliff said.

After the four of us were inside, Hiro appeared seemingly out of nowhere and barked, "Take off your shoes," as he closed the door.

"I'll be right back," Kenmei said when he reached the end of the hall. "Show them into the dining room and get them some tea," he added, speaking to Hiro.

Hiro bowed. "Yes, Grandfather."

Kenmei disappeared.

I rolled up my pant legs because the ends were wet and removed my shoes as I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room.

It'd been dusk outside, but for some reason, it seemed darker in here.

I could barely make out that Gabe and the others were removing their shoes as well.

"Follow me, please, and don't touch anything." Hiro shook his pointer finger at us slowly but seemed to be looking directly at me.

Did I have "klutzy" stamped across my forehead?

Probably, I answered with a sigh.

I followed Hiro.

Gabe and the others followed me.

We seemed to be taking the same route Kenmei had gone.

It looked like the only way to get anywhere.

The floor was covered in plush Oriental carpet, the design intricate.

The walls were covered in cream paint.

Lights ran along with the ceiling, but elaborately painted lamps covered them, which was why the room emitted only a slight reddish glow.

Pictures of ancient-looking people, water dragons, and creatures that looked like they'd been pulled from nightmares hung randomly on the walls.

The air smelled like incense, which was much nicer than the rancid garbage stench outside.

As we padded along, I got the distinct impression I was being scrutinized.

Paranoid much?

It was just that I was in a strange place. It was unnerving.

Abruptly the hallway ended, and we had to either turn to the left or the right.

Hiro led us to the right.

Not too far after that, he stopped in front of double paper-looking doors. Sliding one open, he ushered us inside the room.

A shiny onyx table that could seat at least twelve sat majestically in the center.

Black leather chairs surrounded it.

In the middle of the table sat a rock and bamboo water fountain, gurgling contentedly. Directly above, hung an enormous chandelier.

I couldn't see the ceiling, though.

It just seemed to go up and up and up without end.

That had to be a trick of the light.

Hiro patted a chair at the head of the table.

"You, girl. Sit here. The rest of you can find a spot wherever. I'll be

right back." Without another word, he left.

We looked at each other and laughed.

"That kid has more confidence in his little finger than most people have in their whole bodies," Dorian said, taking a seat.

We all agreed.

"I wonder why he wanted me to sit here?" I asked, cautiously pulling out the chair and sitting.

"Probably because you're cute," Gabe said, and the others agreed.

He winked at me.

I blinked, unsure of what was happening.

Gabe shook his head, a half-smile on his lips.

"Snowflake," he muttered, grabbing my hand between his and massaging it.

Heathcliff looked from me to Gabe. "What's going on with you two? Are you a couple now?" He seemed irritated, and I flinched at the question, surprised.

Gabe would have to answer this one because I didn't know either.

Gabe gave Heath a pointed stare. "You've known about my feelings for Snow for quite some time. It wasn't until last night I had a suspicion she might feel the same way about me."

His feelings?

I was in shock but worked to keep my emotions hidden behind a blank face.

Gabe turned to Dorian. "You guys don't have a problem with me asking out Snow, do you?"

Hey, what about me?

As much as I was sure my feelings for Gabe were obvious, shouldn't he have mentioned this to me first?

Dorian shook his head. "It's cool with me, man," he said but his tone was off. Like he didn't mean it.

Heathcliff turned his attention to me.

"How do you feel about all of this? About you and Gabe?" he asked.

I blew out a breath. "I'm not sure," I said, pulling my hand from Gabe's and biting a nail.

Of course, I liked him, but this conversation didn't sit right.

Gabe's green eyes penetrated mine.

"I think we should talk alone, don't you?" I asked in a whisper, though it echoed around the room.

His eyes fell, and I wondered if I'd hurt his feelings.

"You're right," he agreed.

Hiro walked in with a silver tray that was almost as big as him.

On it sat a white teapot and several cylinder-shaped cups.

He set it down to my right.

I watched as he poured the tea in four cups and handed one to each of us.

"Drink," he said. "Grandfather will be with you shortly."

Then he was gone.

I picked up the cup, and the others followed.

I sniffed it, letting the steam hit my face, and it was then that I realized it was quite chilly in here.

The tea smelled good, like ginger and other spices. Carefully, I took a sip and swallowed. The heat hit the back of my throat, and I felt it go all the way down to my stomach.

Contentment fanned through my insides like the sun on a hot day.

I took another sip, then set down the cup.

"Is that sugar?" Heathcliff asked.

I opened the container and looked.

"Sure is. You want some?" I picked up the white container and handed it to him.

My eyes suddenly seemed weighted down with lead. I struggled to keep them open.

I watched Heath put one, then two, then three scoops of sugar in his tea.

Dorian did the same.

By the time Gabe reached for the sugar, my eyes had shut.

What was happening to me?

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, I knew I wasn't in the dining room anymore, but lying on a satin-covered bed.

Thick white curtains sealed me in like leftover spicy tofu in a takeout box.

Sitting up, the slick red sheets fell into my lap, revealing I wasn't wearing my clothes anymore.

Instead, I had on a black silk nightgown with thin straps.

What in the world, I thought, too bewildered to be nervous.

I'd been tired.

Perhaps Kenmei had put me to bed.

But where were the guys?

I needed to get out of here.

Hopefully, they were okay.

We still had a musical to attend.

"Gabe," I called out, trying to find separation in the curtains.

"Hello, Snow White." It was a male voice, low and soft.

It sounded familiar, but it wasn't Gabe's.

"Who's there?" A little more vigorously, I ran my hands over the velvety softness, searching for an opening.

I heard a click, and the room was blanketed in darkness.

"W-What's going on?" My voice didn't sound like my own but was

raised an octave.

This was what terror felt like, I told myself, standing up on the mattress, trying to pull the curtains from the frame.

"Where's Gabe? Where's Kenmei?"

"Relax, beautiful. You've been marked by her highness, and the queen always gets her way."

"Marked? What do you mean by that?" My lips quivered.

OceanofPDF.com

DEADLY SERIOUS

"LET ME SHOW YOU."

Even freaked, I noticed a twinge of regret or remorse in his words.

Focusing on that was pointless, though.

Escaping.

Leaving the room in one piece. That was priority number one.

I'd moved from one side of the bed to the other, trying to get out.

Without meaning to, I stepped off the edge and between the curtains and the mattress.

When my foot hit the floor, a sharp pain zinged my knee, but I barely noticed.

Swinging my other leg around, I placed it on the floor, scooted onto all fours, and climbed out of the curtains.

Free! I let out a sob of relief but quickly covered my mouth as I stood.

If I couldn't see, then maybe he couldn't either.

Wiping my eyes, I stuck my hands out in front of me, feeling for the wall, or a chair, or a door, and took a cautious step forward.

My knee gave, and I whimpered. "This isn't funny," I said, my teeth chattering.

A moment later, I bumped into something. It was pliable yet solid.

Apprehensively I touched it, trying to figure out what it was.

It wasn't a door or a chair.

But a person.

His jaw was square, his hair soft and thick, shoulders broad and muscled. His chest was taut.

When my mind realized what my hands were doing, I screamed

and took a step backward. Strong hands grabbed me by the waist.

"Snow," he whispered. His breath brushed against my cheek and smelled of ginger tea.

A wave of relief washed over me.

It had to be one of the brothers.

"Who is this?" He hadn't really sounded like Dorian, Heathcliff, or Gabe, but he'd kept his voice low, so the possibility of it being one of them still existed.

I reached up and touched his face with my hands.

It wasn't Gabe. Of that, I was confident.

Heath was tall, like this guy, but he didn't have scruff on his face.

Dorian was taller than them both and certainly as brawny as the man in front of me.

"If you're trying to tease me, I'm not laughing. I hurt my knee, and I'm scared." Another sob grabbed my throat, but I clamped it down.

I hoped my honesty would reprimand him, and he'd turn on the lights.

"I'm not teasing. This is deadly serious." His grasp on my waist shifted as he pulled me firmly against him with one arm.

His other hand slid into my hair.

With a firm yank, he pulled my head back, exposing my neck.

I sucked in my breath, preparing to scream.

My eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and I could see the red tinge in his eyes.

They glowed the way Kenmei's had.

"What do you want?" Fear pulsed inside my ears.

"To taste you." He opened his mouth.

So close to him, I watched his canines grow.

Without thinking, I sent my good knee into his groin.

A look of humorous surprise sprang into his eyes before burning

anger replaced it.

His teeth sank into my neck, my skin parting like a boat gliding through water.

When he started to suck, everything became hazy, like a dream.

My body suddenly ached for his touch even as my mind revolted.

I heard myself sigh and pushed my neck deeper into his mouth.

The man shuddered, and the pull of my blood from my body became more vigorous.

Then there was darkness.

I WAS BEING SHAKEN.

"Snow. Snow. Wake up."

With a jolt, I shot up in my chair. My head had been resting on the table.

My eyes were blurry.

The light from the chandelier glared.

All my thoughts were on the man with the glowing red eyes and the way he'd been drinking my blood.

Yearning and loathing swirled through my organs.

A scream gurgled out, and I grabbed at my throat.

"What's wrong?" Gabe asked, his face contorted with worry.

Wiping my eyes, I scanned the room.

Kenmei, Hiro, Heathcliff, Dorian, and Gabe stared at me with a mixture of apprehension and worry.

Standing, my chair shot out and knocked to the floor.

"What's going on?" I don't know why, but I focused all of my anger on Kenmei.

"Some psycho bit me," I screamed, slamming my hands on the table. It shattered right down the middle.

The guys stood as the table leaned toward them, and the white

cups slid to the floor.

Kenmei bent and whispered something to Hiro.

The boy nodded and ran off.

Gabe put his hands out. "Snow, it's okay." He studied the table, dragging a hand through his hair as though he were trying to come to grips with what had just transpired.

I'd broken a freaking table with my bare hands, and I should've been terrified, but I was unable to rein in the burning anger.

Loud pounding noises, like a hundred drummers banging the bass, sounded inside my head. The rhythm made my blood boil.

I touched my neck in the place where the man had bitten.

I could feel the raised scar tissue.

"Aha!" It had really happened. Somehow.

That knowledge thrilled me in a strange, crazy way.

"Look," I said, grabbing Gabe's hand and pressing his fingers to my neck.

So close, I smelled his shampoo and his deodorant.

Ginger tea tinged his breath.

I also smelled something else. It was fragrant, musky. Kind of like air on a rainy day.

Was it fear?

Placing a hand on his chest, I realized the banging bass in my brain was Gabe's heart, and the other pounding was the beating of the others' hearts.

"Can you feel the scars?" I asked Gabe, trying to contain my need to shout. "Or see a bruise? There must be a bruise, at least."

He leaned away slightly, his green eyes wide. "No."

He tried to look at my neck, but I pushed him away, frustrated.

"No? How can you not feel it? Where's a mirror?"

Bowing slightly, I stopped in front of Kenmei. Tilting my neck

toward him, I swallowed my overwhelming panic, brushed away tears, and fought my ferocious anger.

"Do you see anything?" I asked through clenched teeth.

He kept his face neutral. "There is something supernatural surrounding you. I felt its presence the moment you appeared on my doorstep."

That wasn't an answer, but I couldn't push my wayward tears back any longer and sank into the chair Hiro had occupied a moment ago.

"What's happening to me?"

The little boy, Hiro, peeked around the corner. "Shiryo! Shiryo! Shiryo!"

The word filled me with panic. "What's that? What's he saying?"

Heathcliff, Dorian, and Gabe had come to stand behind me.

I knew it because the rapid pounding of their hearts grew closer.

"Shiryo. What does that mean?" Dorian asked, only slightly more calmly than me.

Kenmei gave Hiro a reproachful look. "Did you do as I asked?"

"Yes, Grandfather. Adam Henry is coming."

Heathcliff sprang into action. "I'd better leave a message with the others that we might be a while." He took his cell from his pocket and excused himself from the room.

Kenmei dragged in a deep breath. "Shiryo is Japanese for ghost, spirit, or revenant."

As he spoke the last word, he looked directly at me. His explanation sank deep into my veins.

Revenant.

I rolled the word over in my mind.

"What exactly is a revenant?" Gabe asked. His voice shook with emotion, and I looked back.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Our short-lived romance was over before it'd begun.

I could sense it.

But he promised, I thought, agony crushing my heart.

"After I tell you, you boys should head home. This may take a while."

"We aren't leaving her," Dorian added, coming to stand protectively beside me.

"I understand." A sad smile lifted Kenmei's lips. "A revenant is a changeling. Not quite human and not quite a vampire."

At that word - vampire - all hell broke loose.

The guys started shouting simultaneously about lies and fairytales.

I pulled my knees to my chest and put my forehead on my kneecaps.

Tears dripped from my eyes onto my jeans.

I'd let the brothers figure this one out.

OceanofPDF.com

BLOODLUST TEA

I SPENT another hour in the chair, hiding my face, barely listening to the conversation between Kenmei, Dorian, Heathcliff, Gabe, and Hiro.

Professor Pops finally arrived along with the other four brothers. With his assurance that he'd fill them in later, he sent them home.

Then Kenmei led Professor Pops and me into another room. It was small, more like a closet, with just an organized brown desk and three straight back chairs.

Professor Pops patted my back kindly. "Tell us what happened, and don't leave anything out."

I relayed the events, including the embarrassing fact that I'd found pleasure in the guy biting me, sucking my blood.

Professor Pops and Kenmei exchanged a knowing look.

"Do you understand what happened?" I asked Professor Pops.

He cleared his throat and studied his hands.

His nervousness scared me worse than anything.

"Snow, I've known for some time that you'd been marked. I expected she would wait until after your sixteenth birthday to send him," Pops said. "That's normally when the first exchange happens."

He glanced at Kenmei. "I'd hoped, between Kenmei and I, we could find a way to keep it from occurring." He blew out a breath. "We've failed."

"What does the bite mean? It did actually happen somehow, right? I didn't dream about it?" Part of me wanted them to say it was just make-believe while another part of me knew it was real and that everything was about to change.

"Yes, it happened. No, it wasn't a dream. The vampire queen has potent magic. While the boys believed you were asleep, you'd actually

gone into another realm. The hunter, a drone vampire, bit you. He is special, also marked by her." Pops paused a moment.

"The hunter has been given the specific task of changing you into a vampire. Do you remember anything about what he looks like?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Only his red eyes."

Answering my questions only filled me with more. Who was this queen? Why the hell had I been marked? And what did any of it mean?

Professor Pops gave me a meaningful look. "I can almost see the inquiries in your head. They will be answered. Of the utmost importance is for you to realize you're changing, and you'll be craving blood."

"I see," I said, not really seeing at all.

I'd never liked meat.

Never.

At the thought of killing an innocent animal, I winced in disgust, so the idea of craving blood seemed unimaginable and completely far-fetched.

Vampires weren't real.

Was this some elaborate joke?

As I asked myself the question, a wiggle of wanting hummed in my throat.

The beating of Professor Pops' heart called to me like an indulgent song.

Strange - I couldn't hear Kenmei's.

Out of everything, that's what I blurted. "Why can't I hear his heart beating?" I pointed accusingly and immediately felt ashamed.

Pointing was disrespectful. "Sorry, Kenmei-sensei." I bowed my head.

They both flinched in surprise. "You can already hear the beating

of a heart?" Professor Pops asked.

"Yes, I hear yours, but I don't hear his." I bobbed my head in Kenmei's direction.

"Kenmei's heart isn't like ours," Professor Pops said seriously.

"What? Why not?" I was stunned and discreetly pinched myself.

My life had gone from average, boring even, to the supernatural, in a matter of seconds.

"The world, as you've known it, is about to be altered most remarkably. Now that it has begun, there is no going back, I'm afraid." Professor Pops touched my cheek with his thumb, stroking it.

"I hoped it would never come to this, but I'm prepared nonetheless." He glanced at Kenmei.

"Are you ready to learn, Shiryo-san?" the old man asked softly.

"Okay." That was all I could utter. I didn't seem to have a choice.

BY MYSELF IN THE BATHROOM, I stared at my reflection. "You are a revenant," I whispered.

Even she wasn't buying it. I didn't appear any different.

I figured I'd have a bruise on my neck where he bit me, but I didn't. It'd been two hours, seventeen minutes, and - I checked my watch - eight seconds since the guy with glowing red eyes sank his extra-pointy canines into my throat.

One hour, forty-five minutes, and twelve seconds since Professor Pops and Kenmei told me what being bitten meant.

Was I worried I'd grow fangs and start shunning the light?

Damn right I was.

According to Kenmei, that wasn't going to happen - at least, not in this phase. Over the next several weeks, I'd gain strength, agility, and a penchant for blood.

Yay, I thought sarcastically, gagging.

Professor Pops and I were still at Kenmei's.

Obnoxious Hiro had gone to bed.

I didn't feel tired, not really.

From my expression, clearly, I was in shock.

No one could blame me.

It wasn't every day one was bitten and changed into a make-believe being, only apparently, they - we - weren't make-believe.

Evidently, revenants existed, as did vampires, fairies, unicorns, and many other creatures, I'd rather not think about.

I turned on the faucet in the bathroom, patted some water on my face. The cold temperature soothed.

"Snow, are you alright?" Professor Pops asked after lightly knocking on the bathroom door.

I jumped.

My first thought was, No! I'm freaked beyond my wildest imagination, and I want to go home and hide under the covers.

"Sure. I'll be out in a minute," I said out loud.

"Just know I'm here," he said.

I washed my hands and turned out the light. He waited for me on the other side of the door. I knew because I heard the slightly accelerated beating of his heart.

A twisting need rose in my throat, but I pushed the wanting down, the craving tolerable. Resting my hand on the knob, I turned it slowly.

The first thing Kenmei had given me after the revenant revelation was an herbal tea. It consisted of chaparral, red clover, bloodroot, mistletoe, the eye of newt, unicorn horn, and fairy dust.

It didn't taste the best, but it was bearable.

Professor Pops had explained I needed to drink the tea twice a day: once in the morning and once in the evening to control my bloodlust.

I still had a hundred questions.

"Why me?" I asked when I opened the door.

Pops stepped back, then cleared his throat.

"Come and sit. Let's talk." A sea of guilt washed over his distinguished features but, before I said anything, he turned away.

I followed him into the tiny office. A bowl of steaming rice and vegetables sat in front of my chair on the edge of the desk.

"Is this for me?" I hoped so.

My stomach growled with hunger.

"Yes, Shiryo-san. I had these cooked up for you. I hope you're hungry." Kenmei's fathomless eyes shone brightly.

"Thank you." I scooped up the bowl and ate with the fork provided.

The aroma had my mouth-watering, but the flavors fell flat.

After I finished, I placed the empty dish on the table, satiated but not satisfied. I also realized I'd eaten in silence and that Professor Pops and Kenmei watched me expectantly.

"Sorry, were the two of you going to eat?" They didn't have food in front of them.

"No. We are curious as to how you're feeling." Professor Pops asked.

My face grew hot. Did they want to know if I intended to jump them?

Attack them for their blood?

Was I?

OceanofPDF.com

BEES IN A HIVE

AT THE THOUGHT OF BLOOD, my mouth watered. I ignored it. "I'm fine," I said to Professor Pops, grinding my teeth.

"The food tasted wonderful. Please tell your wife thank you," I added, studying Kenmei.

It was a lie.

The rice and vegetables had tasted like ash, but I had the distinct impression it wasn't because of his wife's cooking skills; more that my body had already begun its transformation.

He nodded. "I will."

"Now, let me answer your question," Professor Pops said, crossing one of his long legs over the other.

I peered at him, slightly confused.

"You asked why she chose you."

"Oh, right. Yes." I leaned back in the chair and clamped my twitchy hands in my lap.

"First, a little history." He crossed his legs, his reading glasses perched on the edge of his nose.

"Okay," I said, noting it'd become my word of the day.

"The vampire queen has been alive for thousands of years. By our best guess," he eyed Kenmei, "we'd say probably since the world began. Every hundred years, she must change bodies. Regardless of, or because of, her immortal properties, like a snake that sheds its skin, she too must escape the old body in favor of a new, healthier one."

I shuddered at the image of skin peeling away.

"When the queen is within twenty years or so of her need to shed, she sends out drone vampires."

I must have had a confused expression on my face.

"Think about bees in a hive," Pops said. "There is one queen who commands roughly fifty thousand bees, and ninety-nine out of every hundred are workers. They are also female. Then there are the drones, which are the males. Their job," he shifted uncomfortably. "They are required to do the queen's bidding - whatever that might be."

He flinched as though he were in pain.

My curiosity piqued.

"Doing otherwise is nearly impossible and detrimental," Pops finally finished. Then hurried on. "Within the hierarchy of the vampire queen's hive, within her army, are many, many more females. The male drone vampire's job is - " he trailed off and cleared his throat before continuing, "slightly different."

"Correct," Kenmei said, taking over. "The drones are sent into the world, searching for the most exquisite female humans. Once they find one, they mark her."

Professor Pops leaned close; his hands hovered near my right arm.

I knew what he hoped to find. I had a dark birthmark near my shoulder in the shape of a star.

It appeared around my fifth birthday.

I'd been getting dressed one morning and believed the mark to be a bug at first.

Worried, I'd shown my mother. She'd said it was nothing to worry about. "A kiss from magical fairies," had been her answer.

At the thought of my mother, tears gathered on my lashes.

"May I?" Pops asked.

I pulled up the sleeve. "So, a drone vampire marked me?" I heard the raw pain in my voice but pretended it didn't matter and moved my shoulder, so he and Kenmei saw the mark.

"Yes," Kenmei said, his face growing soft.

"Why don't I remember?" I let go of my sleeve and tucked my

hands under my legs. Keeping my eyes down, I stared at my white tube socks - hand-me-downs from my neighbors.

"You were young, and the mark was most likely placed on you in your sleep," Professor Pops said.

At his words, something clicked.

"How do you know about all of this?" My stomach clenched.

Was Professor Pops' friendship only pretend?

Was he somehow involved?

Kenmei answered by moving his shirt. Where his shoulder met his arm, an evil-looking blade had been tattooed.

"What does that mean?" I asked after looking and sitting back. My heart raced rapidly, which made me happy. At least I still had one.

"When a drone vampire is marked to be a hunter by the queen, she marks him with one of these." He touched the blade hesitantly before covering it.

"D-did you mark me? Are you the one who bit me?" Fear flooded my veins. I stood, jumped over the desk, and pulled open the door before I grasped what I'd done.

"No, Shiryo-san." He shook his head once.

Both Professor Pops and Kenmei rose in unison, as though their movements had been synchronized.

Professor Pops had his arms out, a look of pleading on his face.

"We were a part of the queen's hive many, many years ago, but we left. For me, it's been more than five hundred years. For Kenmei - " He paused, glancing at the man.

"More than six thousand years," Kenmei said.

My hand dropped from the door handle. "Six thousand years? You're so old."

I also remembered the man who'd bitten me was much taller than Kenmei, his body firmer, younger. The way he'd smelled - like Heaven, my mind whispered.

I closed my eyes, trying to regain focus.

He bowed. "Yes, Shiryo-san. I was the first hunter. With my help, the queen transferred into a new body, the original Snow White."

I didn't want to believe but I had to ask. "Are you saying that the Snow White from the old movie was real?" I needed to sit before I fell.

On rubbery legs, I walked back over to my chair.

"Yes, Shiryo-san. She was real and very beautiful, just as you are. Though the story was more of a Brothers Grimm tale, and even they were way off."

It seemed strange to have someone say I was beautiful.

I didn't think I was ugly, just plain. I looked down, studying some nonexistent lint on my jeans.

"Am I the only one the vampire queen is after?" I asked after a few long moments of silence.

Kenmei smiled. "You are one of many. Hundreds. Adam Henry and I have made it our life's mission to help the marked."

"I am your Protector," Professor Pops stated.

I caught what Pops said but couldn't fathom the meaning behind the words at the moment.

Instead, I fixated on what Kenmei had said.

"There are hundreds? She only needs one body. Why not just take mine or one of the others right away? What's she waiting for?" I asked.

The two men looked at each other and something I didn't understand passed between them.

"A lot must happen for the body of a marked one to be ready. Many will die," Kenmei said.

Well, that sounded ominous.

"For the vampire queen's magic to work, the revenant must drink the blood of her true love," Professor Pops went on.

The memory of my dream where I'd tasted the heart, and its blood

filled my mind.

It'd been the heart of my true love.

A warm hunger rushed through my body, and I shuddered.

Professor Pops noticed. "What is it, Snow?"

"I dreamt of a heart. Of tasting blood."

Both men started.

I somehow perceived their panic.

"Tell us everything. Leave nothing out," Kenmei said.

I told them about the guys and that I'd known the heart had been that of my true love, but I hadn't cared.

When I finished sharing, Pops and Kenmei didn't speak for what seemed like forever.

"What did the boys chant?" Professor Pops finally asked.

OceanofPDF.com

HOT PINK BRA

I THOUGHT A MOMENT, then repeated the words, "'Lips red as rubies, hair dark as night. Drink your true love's blood, become the vampire, Snow White.'"

As I spoke, thick darkness packed the air.

It was as though the queen entered me.

"This is worse than we believed," Professor Pops uttered.

"Yes," agreed Kenmei. "It seems the vampire queen may have a distinct interest in this one. Perhaps it's her name or her beauty. I must admit, Snow does have something extra special."

The tremor in my hands traveled into my arms and down my body.

"Is there nothing we can do? Because, I don't want that. Her, to take over my body. No!"

Professor Pops patted my hand. "Yes, of course. But we've shared enough with you tonight. Let's get you home."

I wanted to yell and tell him I needed to know everything right then, but I didn't.

He picked me up, like I weighed nothing.

"I can walk," I said, though my legs were wobbly, but Pops wouldn't hear my complaints, so I relaxed, tucking my head against his chest.

Kenmei said something about the tea, and he set my shoes on my lap.

I thanked him and closed my eyes.

When Professor Pops stepped into the alleyway, I recognized the odor.

"Were you one of her hunters too?" I whispered.

"Yes, Snow, I was."

Part of me wanted to be afraid, but I couldn't.

He'd been nothing but good to me. "Why did you leave?"

"The same reason Kenmei did.

I fell in love with one of the marked." His voice sounded sad.

"Does that happen a lot?" An idea or an impression wiggled its way into my mind.

I tried to grab hold of it, understand it, but too much had happened.

Too much information weighed on me.

"Yes, it does."

I got the feeling he wanted to say more. "What happened to the one you loved?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"She died."

"I'm so sorry, Professor Pops."

"As am I, Snow White. As am I."

I fell asleep, the pounding of his heart, the warmth of his arms, and the movement as he walked, making it too difficult to stay awake.

When we stepped off the train, my strength returned.

Professor Pops led me to a waiting car.

Though I didn't see his face, I heard Gabe.

Had he been waiting by the car?

"Will she be alright?" Gabe asked.

"I hope so. That's what we're here for."

WHEN I WOKE, my immediate reaction was anxiety.

This isn't my room, I thought.

The bed was king-sized and made out of brushed pewter.

The sheets were white, as were the comforter and pillowcases.

The walls were covered in posters of the Patriots - Dorian's favorite football team.

For the briefest moment, I wondered why Gabe hadn't let me sleep in his room.

Then he walked in, a mug of something steaming in his hand, and all thought left me.

I focused on the emerald green of his eyes and his smile.

"Hi," he said, sitting on the bed next to me.

Seeing his teeth made me think of morning breath and the fact that I hadn't brushed last night.

Covering my mouth, I sat up. "Hi, back."

He laughed and moved my hand. "So, you're a revenant? How are you handling the news?" He held out the mug, its steaming contents were dark and uninviting.

Taking it, I pressed the cup to my lips and took a small sip.

"Yep, that's me: Snow White, the revenant. And I'm handling the change," I paused, gauging my real feelings. "Fine." I shrugged.

I wanted to tell him everything, including that I heard his heart thumping, the sound of it pumping blood through his veins, and that it smelled better than any chocolate, and how I longed to reach over and taste him.

Instead, I swallowed a large portion of bloodlust tea.

"Good." He studied me a moment before brushing a piece of hair from my face. "You up to going to school?" he asked, standing.

I searched for a clock, trying to hide the warmth caused by his touch. "Is it Monday already?" Where had Sunday gone? I must've slept through it. "Can I go to school? Isn't Professor Pops afraid I'll eat someone or something?"

Gabe laughed. "Drink your tea, and you should be fine. That's what Pops says."

He walked to the door. "There are towels and girly stuff in Dorian's

bathroom, including some clean clothes." He inclined his chin toward the open bathroom door.

"Don't freak out," he went on. "But yes, the shirt I chose for you is pink, and it's in your size and not four sizes too big."

I pulled back the covers and got out of bed. My socks had been removed, but I'd slept in my other clothes.

"Gee, thanks," I said, throwing a pillow at him. It smacked him in his face, and he fell, hitting his head against the wall with a thud.

I gasped and ran over to him. "Gabe. Gabe. Can you hear me?" I grabbed his arms and shook.

He moaned, and his eyes blinked open. "That was intense." He sat up.

"I'm so sorry. Remind me never to throw a pillow again." I noticed a dent in the wall behind him where his head made contact and swallowed down the tea coming back up.

"You've got some arm." He massaged the tender area of his head.

His amplified heartbeat pounded like a drum in my ears.

A delicious scent saturated his pores, like honey.

Without meaning to, I leaned into his neck and drew a deep breath.

His hands pressed against my shoulders, determinedly pushing me away. His expression was guarded.

I shook my head. "You good?" I asked, working to cover up what I'd almost done.

"Yep, great." He jumped up as if to show how good he was. "You mostly caught me off guard. But you'd better finish your tea." He eyed the mug warily.

"Right."

"Hurry and get ready. Pops made breakfast."

I nodded and closed the door after he was gone.

In the bathroom, I searched my reflection for changes.

Opened my mouth and checked my teeth for needle-sharp fangs.

Flexed my muscles.

They looked the same.

"You're still you," I said, pulling off my shirt and turning on the hot water.

AFTER MY SHOWER, I dressed rapidly.

Gabe had picked out a pink shirt with GO GREEN across the chest.

I liked it and the jeans.

They were fitted and sat low on my hips.

What I had issues with were the cotton hot pink bra and undies.

For one thing, they fit perfectly.

Not that I had a lot going on up top.

I was a good solid B cup.

How would they know, though?

Also, the undies were my style, except for the color.

I usually wore white underneath everything.

"Do I want to know?" I asked my reflection.

No, I definitely did not want to know.

Some things were better left unsaid.

After sliding on a pair of socks and a new pair of Converse, I brushed my hair and gathered my dirty clothes.

From the back pocket of my jeans, a piece of paper sailed to the floor.

I bent and picked it up.

"What's this?"

OceanofPDF.com

PLEDGED TO DESTROY HER

FONDLING THE PAPER, I unfolded the paper and read:

DEAREST SNOW,

You have been bitten by your hunter and are now a revenant.

Congratulations!

The strong survive, and only one will have the pleasure of becoming my new host.

Now is the time to play. Build up your strength.

Enjoy all your new body has to offer.

Find your true love.

Get your fill of him physically, emotionally, spiritually, and then kill him.

You must do so by your eighteenth birthday.

I believe in you, Snow.

You are passionate, and that is why I've marked you.

The sooner, the better.

Yours,

The Vampire Queen

MY HANDS SHOOK. The letter had been written by her and in - I sniffed the red ink and instantly knew it was blood.

Dread surged through me.

She could be anywhere, yet I knew nothing about her, not even what she looked like.

Quickly I went downstairs, the letter still clutched in my hand.

The aroma of toasted bread greeted me, and I hurried into the kitchen.

The guys were in varying degrees of feeding their faces, but when I walked in, they all froze.

I ran a hand through my still-wet hair.

"What's wrong?" Gabe came over immediately.

I held out the note.

"Please say you guys played a trick on me." I tried to laugh, holding out the paper.

Gabe took it and read it.

I watched the color drain from his face.

Professor Pops came over.

From his shirt pocket, he pulled his wire-framed glasses.

Gabe handed him the letter.

After reading, he set it on the counter, replaced his glasses in his pocket, and wiped a hand over his face.

"Do all the marked receive a note from her after they've been bitten?"

His face looked bleak. "In past centuries, I've heard that more than one of the marked have received something similar. I must speak with Kenmei and the others."

The brothers circulated the paper.

Had I not been panicked to the point of passing out, I might've laughed.

"How many others are there? And are you all drone vampires who've left the queens hive?" I asked, focusing on Professor Pops' navy button-up shirt.

Pops kept his voice low. "There are several, though none are as old as Kenmei and I. Not all of us are hunters. Some are workers. Some are supernatural creatures, born of the seven magics, and they know of the queen. All of us have pledged to destroy her."

I tucked my hands in my back pockets and started pacing.

"Can you, though? She's been alive for thousands of years. You've been fighting against her for, like, forever. What hope is there that you can accomplish this? I mean, really?"

I felt terrible for stating it so bluntly, but facts were facts. Might as well get them into the open.

"You're right, of course. The task seems bleak, but we believe we've figured out a way."

"How do you plan to stop her?" Gabe asked, moving farther from me.

That stung.

I guessed he was rethinking his crush on me.

The whole "kill him" line in the note was pretty disturbing, and then there was my dream. Gabe hadn't been with his brothers.

Was he my true love?

At the thought, my heart picked up speed.

Whoever he was, my true love's blood had tasted better than anything I could imagine.

My knees quaked, weak.

"Yes, how do you plan to stop her?" I repeated, forcing back the thoughts I'd been entertaining of tasting Gabe's blood.

Professor Pops regarded me. "You must receive true love's kiss, first."

Gabe perked up. And my face got hot.

"So my true love's heart will turn me into a vampire, and true love's kiss will what?" I cleared my throat.

"His kiss will free you, and you will once again become completely human," Professor Pops looked triumphant.

I wasn't convinced. That seemed too easy.

"Awesome," Daniel shouted.

He was usually so quiet. We were all stunned and turned to gawk

at him.

"Well, it is," Daniel added.

"Why don't you eat something, Snow? The waffles are vegan." Professor Pops seemed distracted, plucking his reading glasses from his pocket and rereading the letter.

I grabbed a waffle and took a bite, but it tasted like paper. I knew what I wanted - blood.

But that was out of the question.

Angry, I shoved the rest of the waffle in my mouth and chewed.

The brothers watched me.

I was too upset to be embarrassed, and if they had a problem with that, they could suck it.

"What?" I finally asked. "We've got to get to school. I'm hurrying," I said, after chewing and swallowing all of my food.

"Should she be going to school?" Heathcliff asked, his words hesitant.

"Yes, yes. Go to school. Keep an eye on her." Professor Pops waved in my direction. "After school, go to track practice and then come here. I need to get your input on some birthday plans."

He glanced at me over his glasses, an incomprehensible look in his eyes, and I was shocked. It was like he wasn't even worried that I was changing - and craving blood.

"If you're sure." I rinsed my plate in the sink, thinking he had more trust in me than I did of myself.

"I am. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to make a few calls." He walked out of the kitchen without a backward glance.

"Birthday plans?" Dorian asked.

I shrugged again, beyond confused by the way Professor Pops was acting.

"Professor Pops wants to throw me a birthday party here." How could he still be considering my silly birthday?

Did he expect me to go on with my life like nothing happened?

"Whoa, your letter has Pops worked into quite a tizzy," Salvatore said, sliding up to me. He grinned, and I guessed he wasn't afraid.

In fact, he wanted to kiss me.

It was weird that I could tell, but it was pretty obvious since his focus rested on my lips.

He licked his, moistening them.

"In fact, I think this will be fun." Salvatore placed his hands on my arms a little uneasily, like he was getting ready to press his lips against mine.

"What are you doing, Salvatore?" I asked snickering.

This close, it was like I could taste his aftershave, the sweet syrup on his breath, and the fabric softener on his clothes.

I didn't want a kiss, but to sample his blood and I shuddered at where my mind headed.

Ugh.

"Well, if true love's kiss will turn you back into a human, I say it's our duty, no, our responsibility as your friends, to kiss you." Salvatore smiled, leaning in, so the scent of his blood overwhelmed me.

Gabe shoved Salvatore. "Get away from her!" He breathed heavily, his hands formed into fists at his sides.

"Dude, you're so touchy," he said to Gabe. Then he waved and took off toward the garage. "I'll catch you later, Snow."

I laughed. At least he joked with me.

Gabe was just overprotective and growly.

Gabe followed after Salvatore. "I'll drive Snow."

I regarded the guys. "Guess I'm getting a ride with Gabe."

They chuckled, and each patted or slugged my shoulders or ruffled my hair.

Absently I noticed each of them had a distinctive scent, and it

wasn't their cologne. It was their blood.

"See you at school," Dorian said.

"Right, see ya." I hurried after Gabe, doubting school was a good idea.

OceanofPDF.com

DO I TELL CINDY

INSIDE THE SCHOOL, Gabe walked me to my locker. When we arrived, he stopped and touched my arm. Shivers danced along my sensitive skin.

"I've got to get to class. See you at lunch." He squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back.

A gnawing nervousness swelled as I watched him walk away.

I was nervous about being without him.

My first class was chemistry, and I was totally unprepared for the quiz on Matter.

I also had an assignment due in Algebra II and verbs that needed conjugating for Spanish.

While I emptied my books into my locker, I made a mental promise to talk to my teachers about extra credit or a way to make up the work.

"Bonjour, Snow. Where have you been?" Cindy asked, using the French word for hello despite the ring of agitated irritation I detected in her words.

"Hey, Cin. Your French is coming along nicely," I returned, wondering if she'd discern anything different about me.

Closing my locker, I turned to face her annoyance, which I knew I deserved.

She'd said she'd call me on Sunday when she got back from the Cape, but I hadn't been home.

When I'd picked up my backpack from home this morning, I noticed several messages flashing on our dinosaur of an answering machine.

I gathered they were from her, but I hadn't listened to them.

"Sorry. I - " I paused.

Did I tell her?

Professor Pops hadn't said I should keep what happened to me a secret.

But seriously, if I did, she'd probably think I'd gone batty.

"I spent the weekend over at Professor Pops' with the guys." I closed my locker and moved toward my first class.

"Lucky," she pouted. "I went to a party with my parents. Totally lame." She rolled her eyes. "But one kind of weird thing happened. I'll have to tell you about it later."

"Can't wait."

She looked gorgeous as ever.

Dark jeans, a sky blue cashmere sweater, strappy black wedge heels that made her almost as tall as me and showed off her perfectly french pedicured toenails.

Her hair had been pulled into a high ponytail and bobbed when she walked.

I smelled chemistry class way before reaching it, a combination of vinegar, sulfur, sugar, and sweat.

The odor was strong and stung my nose, but it wasn't strong enough to block the scent of so much blood.

Even with the bloodlust tea, I still might sink my revenant teeth into someone.

I clenched my free hand into a fist, only half-listening to Cin talk about the drama from the party over the weekend and the random guy she hooked up with.

When we entered class, Cindy took a seat.

We shared a table second row from the front and next to the wall full of windows.

After dropping my backpack on the floor, I propped a window open and dragged in a long, cleansing breath.

"Snow, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Needed some fresh air is all," I said, sitting on the stool next to her.

Unzipping my bag, I pulled out my notes, hoping I could do a quick review before Mr. Wallace passed out the quiz.

"It's cold. You should - " Cindy stopped, and her knee pressed into my thigh. "New guy," she hissed.

"Really? He wasn't here on Fri - " I lifted my eyes just as he stopped in front of me.

"Hey, Snow. Is this seat taken?" He pointed to the chair in front of us, which was empty and had remained vacant since Bobby Melville got sent to the principal's office for burning his partner, Sammy Snells, with acid and ended up expelled.

I shook my head. "Hey, Charming. No. Go ahead."

"Cool." He sat and inclined his chin toward Cindy. "Hi, Cindy. Did you have fun at the Cape?"

I heard her swallow before answering and was surprised.

It shocked me to think of Cindy as nervous. I thought she said she wasn't interested.

"Oh, yeah. It was a blast," she answered, twisting her ponytail around her fingers.

A light breeze blew in from the window. Thankful, I pulled in another large breath of air and froze.

My teeth, the ones Kenmei and Professor Pops said I wouldn't need to worry about for a couple of weeks, extended into fangs and pricked the inside of my mouth.

Electric butterflies danced in my stomach, and my body yearned for blood - Chace's blood. I felt my eyes grow wide in terror.

"Snow?" Chace rolled his seat over, touching my arm. "Is everything alright?" He appeared concerned, as did Cindy.

"What's the matter?" she asked, eyeing me with a look that said,

please don't embarrass me.

"I've got to go." I grabbed my backpack and dashed from the room. Knocking into our teacher, Mr. Wallace in the hall and mumbling a quick, "Sorry," I ran.

Thankfully, it was mostly empty.

Only a few stray students rushed by, the same as me. I dashed into the nearest girls' bathroom, locked myself in a stall, and dropped my bag.

With a ragged sigh, I leaned my forehead against the door.

Tears leaked onto my cheeks.

I closed my eyes, letting them fall.

"Snow." My name seemed to be threaded on the air.

Opening my eyes, I witnessed what my body had already confirmed.

I was no longer in the bathroom but in a lush forest.

The sun shone bright, and I knew I'd entered another realm and that I'd been brought here because of the vampire queen's magic.

Would I meet her this time?

There was so much I didn't comprehend.

I slowly turned in a circle, taking in my surroundings, and noticed I wasn't wearing my jeans and tee-shirt any longer, but a deep red cotton dress.

The sleeves were short and lined in black ribbing, as was the round, scooped collar, and the dress's hem went to my knees.

My feet were bare.

It surprised me that I wasn't afraid.

I was bitten in this realm.

The hunter took my blood and turned me into a revenant, so fear should've been what I felt.

"Hello," I murmured, carefully stepping over a boulder, moving in

the direction of a babbling brook.

As I walked, I sensed a presence: The hunter's.

That knowledge didn't frighten me either. Instead, excited anticipation filled my stomach with butterflies.

I bit my lip. "Where are you?"

The scenery shimmered in the early morning light, and dewdrops glistened on bright green leaves and spongy moss.

The air flourished, fragrant with flowers in lavender, rose, butter yellow, and blue. They bloomed in abundance.

Chipmunks, rabbits, and deer examined me. Their ears perked, and their noses wiggled, sniffing for danger.

"It's been too long since I've savored you." Each of his words came out laced with longing and sent jolts of longing through my veins.

"Let me see you." I remembered how I'd felt when he drank from me, and I trembled at the possibility of another round.

He stepped from behind a large tree.

A thick brown hood shaded his face, so all I saw were his glowing red eyes.

He wore a brown leather vest that enhanced his broad shoulders, rippling biceps, and trim waist.

His pants were made of cloth and hung low on his hips with a leather belt keeping them secured.

A large knife sat in a sheath and was attached to his belt.

Dark brown boots covered his feet.

At the sight of him, my body tensed.

Not out of fear but desire.

I wanted his arms around me. I wanted his lips on my neck, his mouth drinking from me.

"What is your name, hunter?" I asked, my voice shaking with need.

OceanofPDF.com

WHAT YOU DESIRE

"HERE I AM CALLED CHRISTOPHER," he replied gruffly. He stepped away from the tree and into the sunlight. I still couldn't see his face.

"If you're a vampire, why doesn't the sun burn you?" I asked, curious.

My hunger for his blood seared so strong, it took every ounce of effort I possessed not to attack him.

"The queen's magic is very powerful. I have no fear of the sun." Another step.

I moved toward him, our steps like a dance, a deadly dance, one I didn't want to win.

If I reached out my hands, I would've touched him, but I didn't.

He smelled earthy, like clover and honey.

"Are you going to bite me again?" The words left my mouth, and I instantly knew I wanted him to.

"I will if that is what you desire." He sounded so calm, but his heart raced.

Another step.

Our bodies practically touched, but we kept our hands to our sides.

"If you're a vampire, why does your heart beat?" I asked startled.

"More of the queen's magic," he replied his words like a soft gust against my face.

"Can I bite you?" I'd blurted the question before my brain had time to filter it.

That was my deepest desire, though.

The need pounded through my veins.

At my request, he raised his head, exposing the flesh at his neck. I

licked my lips, squinting to see his face. Still, all I saw were his eyes, and they appeared surprised.

"Yes," he said, in a voice that quivered.

I slipped my hands into his hood, caressing his neck.

His pulse quickened.

In one movement, he lifted me, and we were eye to eye. This whole business of biting and being bitten was new to me, but I was eager to learn and leaned in, desperate to taste him.

"Wait," he said huskily.

But I didn't want to.

I opened my mouth, allowing my fangs to extend as he walked backward until his back pressed against a tree, then he slid down, so he rested at its base.

I readjusted my body sideways as I sat in his lap.

His red eyes glowed with desire, and he slanted his neck toward me.

My hands were still on him, and he was so warm, his skin soft, like the supple leather vest he wore.

"Christopher." I said his name so I wouldn't say what I was really thinking, which was that I wanted to be drinking from him now.

His hands made their way into my hair, his body asking, the way mine had the other night. But he paused. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

His question brought me up short. "Yes." Then I thought of a question. "Is that bad?"

At that moment, I didn't care.

If it was bad, then I wanted to be bad.

His blood called to me like a siren's song.

"No." He sounded pained.

My fangs retracted some.

"Why can't I see your face? Do I know you?" He sounded familiar.

"If you drink from me, I can show myself; otherwise, the queen's magic won't allow it." I caught the tone, the pleading.

Physically he desired me, but there was a hesitation, almost an insistence that I resist.

I wavered, and my fangs retreated some more.

Instead of answering, he sucked in a breath before pulling me to him, his lips claiming mine with a hunger similar to what I was feeling.

As one, our lips moved together.

Like we were two halves of the same whole.

It made sense. He was a vampire, and I was changing.

Never once did I consider him my true love.

I didn't know him.

What I craved was purely physical.

But I had a moment's pause.

Even if I didn't know it yet, could he be my true love?

Could kissing him remove the curse or whatever that had settled on me when he marked me?

Did I have a say, or was my true love already embedded in my DNA?

Christopher bit my bottom lip, bringing me out of my thoughts.

Turning, I took his face in my hands and kissed him hungrily - even hopefully.

If he was my true love, this would all be over.

Even as I thought that I knew it wasn't so.

Still, that didn't dampen my desire for him, and when he pressed open my mouth and dove in with his tongue, I shuddered at the new sensation, tugging him closer.

It was my first real kiss, and if I could've popped a foot, I would

have.

As it was, I sighed, running my hands along his shoulders and down to his chest.

He groaned softly, our lips separating as he trailed kisses along my jaw to my ear.

As our hands roamed each other's bodies, it occurred to me that I was making out with a guy I didn't even know.

Oh my gosh, what was going on with me?

What about Gabe?

I pushed back, searching his face, and lifted a hand to slap him. But he didn't deserve my anger. I was mostly angry at myself.

"How dare you?" I asked, not really meaning it, and I jumped up, walking away, my hands clutching at the folds of my dress.

What was I doing? I dragged in a quick breath, desperate to control my irregular breathing. "I need to get out of here."

He sauntered over, this time with confident determination.

I saw the predator in him.

Felt it too.

A tangible force.

"Not yet."

Taking my face in his hands, he tilted my head, so he had access to my neck.

Like before, I watched his fangs grow.

My heart sprinted so fast I thought it'd come out of my chest.

When his teeth met my neck, I responded eagerly, unable to help myself.

It shouldn't feel so good, but it did.

My hands ran from his fingertips up his arms, past his shoulders, and into his hood.

I wanted to see his face. I wanted to see him.

With effort, I focused on tugging it off.

A laugh rumbled deep in his chest, and then I heard his voice in my mind as he vanished from my view.

"Seek out your true love," he said. "You, beautiful Snow, are the key to defeating the queen."

IMMEDIATELY, I was back in the girls' bathroom. The smell gave it away, even before I opened my eyes.

Someone was in the bathroom with me.

There was a knock on the stall door.

"Snow, are you alright?"

It was Dorian.

I picked up my backpack, thankful he'd found me.

Opening the door, I considered him. He stood with his feet apart, his arms at his sides as though waiting for battle.

Concern filled his features.

"I'm fine," I answered, trying to reassure him. "What are you doing in here? You're so not a girl."

That was true.

Dorian had become quite good looking over the years.

No longer a gangly teenager, but a tall man covered in lean muscle.

I pushed past him and walked to a sink, casually peering at my neck in the mirror.

Newly healed scars glared back.

"I watched you come in here. After ten minutes, I thought I'd better make sure you weren't drinking the blood of some poor, unsuspecting female." His eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Do you see anything on my neck?" I asked, slanting my neck toward him.

He shook his head. "Did something happen again?"

OceanofPDF.com

I WANTED HIS BLOOD

I DIDN'T WANT to lie. "Yes. I went into the other realm. He, the hunter, was there." I washed my hands and patted a wet paper towel over my face.

"I don't know if it's a good idea for me to be here."

At my words, his eyes grew wide in mock terror, and he circled his neck with his hands.

Lifted one brow comically. "Thirsty? Do you vant to suck my blood?" He spoke with the lively silliness of an old-fashioned vampire from a black and white movie, but the worry in his body was evident. Palpable.

I sighed, turning and leaning my butt against the sink.

"I am worried I might bite someone. Your blood pulls at my bloodlust, but not too bad," I said so he wouldn't be afraid.

His face fell.

Dorian actually seemed sad that I didn't want his blood.

Which wasn't true, anyway.

Of course, I wanted his blood.

It smelled intoxicating.

"Oh," he stepped closer, his features changing from teasing to seriousness. "If you ever do need some - blood, I mean - you're welcome to mine."

I gasped. "Do you even know what you're offering?"

Anger lanced within my brain.

How dare he tempt me? His naiveté made me want to bite him, inflict a little pain, a little reality check.

But then I wondered, would he enjoy it the way I had.

There was one way to find out.

Professor Pops hadn't told me not to bite humans, and Dorian offered.

I decided to give my new fangs a whirl.

"Come here, then," I said.

He gulped, and his pulse picked up speed.

"Nervous?" I asked, a smidge glad.

"A little," he admitted, but I saw he would hold true to his word.

I placed my hands on his appealing neck and pulled him down, much the same way I'd handled Christopher not too many minutes ago.

Tentative at first, I touched my lips to his neck.

He let out a soft groan.

Whether it was from fear or anticipation, I didn't know, and in the next moment, I didn't care.

My fangs extended, pricking his neck.

Before I could taste him, the door flung open.

Dorian tucked me into his chest. "Just a minute," he said, his voice heavy.

I quivered in a fury at being interrupted, but I didn't want anyone to see my fangs, so I took a deep breath, inhaling the delicious guy smell that was the handsome Dorian.

My fangs retracted.

Peeking up, I searched Dorian's eyes.

A tight smile sat on his lips.

I smiled back before gazing around him at who'd so rudely interrupted.

"What the hell is going on, Snow?" Complete shock filled Cindy's face, and I laughed.

"Hey, Cin," I said with choked amusement.

It wasn't that I found the situation funny so much as I had all of this anxiety stored up, and it was finally coming out, and I couldn't help myself.

Dorian recovered and swung around. "I was making sure she was okay. Our Snow needed a hug, that's all." He regarded me. "You're good, right?"

"Yes, thank you, Dorian." I closed my lips, trying to hold in the laughter, but that didn't help.

My conscience gnawed with guilt.

I'd kissed Christopher and nearly drank Dorian's blood.

But I liked Gabe.

I was changing in more ways than one, and it was happening so fast.

Dorian escaped the bathroom without a backward glance.

Cindy huffed and stomped her foot. "What's gotten into you?" She walked to the mirror and checked her reflection.

I faced her, rolling back my shoulders. "Oh, Cin. It's a long, crazy story."

She gave me the eye, the one that questioned my motives, the one that got right to the center of me.

"I want to hear all about it. First, Mr. Wallace wanted me to tell you you're supposed to go to the office for a tardy slip. He said you're not allowed in class without it. I've got to get back." She ran her hands through her ponytail.

"Chace seemed concerned. He even took off after you did. For a minute there, I thought you were in his arms." She let out a sigh.

"See you in a few. Au revoir," she added as the door closed behind her.

I straightened my shirt and picked up my backpack. Cindy's strong perfume lingered, and it dawned on me. Cindy's blood hadn't inspired even a little bit of hunger. "Huh."

In the office, I called Professor Pops and explained briefly what'd happened - the way my fangs grew and how I'd gone to the other realm where the hunter, Christopher, bit me again.

I left out Dorian offering himself.

The confession would be pointless, and I didn't want what he'd done getting back to Gabe or the other brothers.

Professor Pops spoke with the school's secretary, excusing me from the rest of my classes.

He picked me up in front of the school, his distinguished face lined with worry.

In the cupholder between the seats sat a carafe.

"Bloodlust tea?" I guessed as I buckled my seatbelt.

"Drink up. I made a double dose in the hopes that will help." He eyed me warily.

I took a sip and grimaced. It was intense, but I finished it all. When I placed the empty container back in the holder, Professor Pops nodded his approval.

"I know all about your hunter, Christopher. He is very good at what he does. I'm sorry I must say this, but at this point, propriety be damned." He gave me a quick look, probably to determine my level of shame.

"What is it?"

"He's skilled in the art of seduction. I also know he has an unlimited lust for power. He wants to be the vampire queen's second."

Hearing his words, I became angry.

Well, more like hurt.

I guess I wanted to believe Christopher reacted to me the way he did not because it was his job, but because he felt something for me.

Ugh.

I would not be that girl!

We rode in silence all the way to his mansion. Professor Pops pulled into the driveway, parked, and we got out.

After I followed him into the house and sat at a barstool in the kitchen, he gave me a sad smile. "Your revenant abilities are developing far faster than most, and I think I know why."

As he spoke, he peeled a banana and tossed it into a blender.

Then he pulled some almond milk from the refrigerator and some ice from the freezer, adding them to the blender as well.

Finally, he added some sugar and a dash of vanilla.

He turned it on, the noise drowning out everything running through my head.

Several seconds later, he turned the blender off and poured the smoothie into a tall glass.

"Here you go," he said, handing it to me.

"Thank you." I sipped, wishing for something else.

He handed me a napkin.

After I wiped my mouth, I asked the most straightforward question. "Why?"

He took a deep breath. "First, answer this question. Did you crave Cindy's blood? Or another female's blood at any time this morning?"

I thought a moment. "No, I didn't."

Professor Pops blew out a breath. "Your best friends are seven boys, young men who are desirable and who find you desirable."

At those words, I blushed. "Nu-uh," I said.

He patted my hand. "You may try to hide it, Snow, but you are very, very beautiful. Truly one of the fairest in the land," he added, his features softening.

My face felt like it was on fire. "What does that, or the fact that my best friends are guys, have to do with anything?"

OceanofPDF.com

GLADLY BE YOUR BOYFRIEND

PROFESSOR POPS WAITED until I got it. Then went on, "Not every teenage girl is in a situation like yours - seven young men vying for her attention."

"We're just friends, though. And they're not 'vying.'" That was ridiculous. I took another drink, thankful I had something to do.

"You may not have noticed it yet, but I believe every one of them would gladly be your boyfriend if you allowed him. I've seen the way you and Gabe act around each other. Something is going on with you two."

I stared into the drink. "I wanted something between us but, ever since I was bitten, and with the note this morning, he's been different." I took another gulp, worried about whether I should mention what Christopher said, but I couldn't bring myself to blurt it out.

Professor Pops sighed, rubbing his hands over his face.

It seemed he'd aged a hundred years in the past few days.

"I think it's time I tell you about the Seven Magics Academy."

I fiddled with the glass, unable to meet his gaze. I'd never heard of such a place, and I didn't know whether I wanted to.

"I've been training the boys since I adopted them," he went on. "Gabe, though he's younger than most of them, was actually my first student."

I nodded, remembering the day I rode my new bike along Professor Pops' circular driveway and fell off.

Before I could start to cry, Gabe ran out, all legs and arms and thick curly hair, and helped me up.

"You'll be okay," he'd said, brushing off my knees. "Shake it off."

"The academy is a place for them to learn about the supernatural,

train, and gain strength. They've been learning - though they didn't know it at first - how to help, hunt, and kill supernatural creatures of all kinds in case any of them came after my boys or, more specifically, you."

I lifted my glass to take a drink and stiffened. "Why would anything else be after me?"

Professor Pops came around and stuck out his hand.

"Come with me. I need to show you something."

I set down the glass and rose, hesitantly placing my hand in his. "What?" I asked, my nervousness easy to hear.

"You'll see. Consider this your Seven Magics Academy induction ceremony."

I snorted. "Can't wait."

He led me down the stairs to another door, which he unlocked.

Apprehension fluttered along my belly. "So, I'm going to take classes on staking vampires?"

"Afraid not, Snow." As he tucked the key to the basement door back inside his shirt, I realized in all the years I'd known Professor Pops and the guys, I'd been over to their house a lot, but never once had I thought about going into the basement. Never once had I been below the main floor. Had that been because of a spell? Was it magic?

Once he had the door open, he glanced at me. "Come," he said, going in.

I hesitated. It was dark and smelled muggy, like dirt and wet cement.

"You'll be fine." He flipped on a light.

I went in cautiously and immediately wished I hadn't.

My legs turned to jelly, and I found myself on my knees, though my first instinct was to bolt back up the stairs.

"Snow, it's okay," Pops said quietly. "Think about the Harvard Museum of Natural History. They have skeletons and animals stuffed

to make them look real and alive. The same applies here. Think of this as a museum for the supernatural."

He helped me stand.

What I really wanted was to take a Brillo pad to my brain.

As much as I wanted to run away, I wanted to move in for a closer look even more.

Sort of like when you see a car accident on the road. You feel revolted and drawn to it at the same time.

The room reminded me of a gallery, with so much to see I wasn't sure where to begin. Scanning the room, I went from one fairytale beast to another.

"Why? What? How did you get these down here?" I asked, trying not to sound afraid.

He chuckled. "It was easy. I'm a professor of religion at Harvard. I'm always studying strange phenomena. Or miracles, if you'd prefer. To the rest of the world, these creatures are miracles."

"Makes sense," I said, moving toward a creature that looked like a tiny angel, its feathery white wings pinned open to a corkboard.

Its skin sparkled like glitter, and it wore a white tunic and white sandals that laced up its very human-looking legs.

Its hair was long and blonde with streaks of red.

"A downy fairy," Professor Pops said, coming over and bending so that his face was even with mine.

"She died more than five hundred years ago. I haven't seen another like her."

I searched his face, having noted the sadness in his voice. "If you haven't seen another like her, how do you know she's a downy fairy?"

"Very perceptive you are, young one." He winked.

I snickered at the Yoda impersonation.

"We were friends. She told me about her kind and their extermination. She died in the service of our cause. I was there when

it happened."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Professor Pops." And I was. She was beautiful, and I felt her loss deep within though I didn't understand why.

"It's alright. I've had many years to mourn her. She was a good friend, a valiant warrior, and she died for what she believed in. It was honorable."

"How did she die?" I asked, intrigued.

"That is a story for another time," he said straightening.

Underneath the platform where the corkboard rested was a drawer.

Professor Pops touched a knob, and the latch released.

Inside was a leather-bound book.

He reached in and pulled it out.

In the center of the room stood a thick, plastic-looking pedestal.

Professor Pops walked over and set the book on it, then he waved me over.

When I stood in front of the book, the first page turned on its own.

"First lesson of the Seven Magics Academy," Pops said, eyeing me. "You must never touch any of the pages in the books in this room. Touching them will increase their speed of deterioration."

"Then, how?" I began, putting my hands at my sides so I wouldn't accidentally touch one.

"Like this." He smiled, then leaned in close to the book. "Chapter One," Professor Pops said.

The book instantly flicked to the page that said Chapter One.

"Page one hundred thirty-six," he said again.

Immediately, the pages flipped until they reached the said page.

"Wow," I uttered.

"Exactly. Inside this book is everything you'll ever want to know about fairies, including the downy fairy."

He motioned around the room.

"Under or beside each creature is a book that will teach you what you need to know about them, including how to help them, hunt them, and kill them."

I couldn't help the shiver that ran down my body.

I didn't want to kill anything.

"But some creatures are good, right?" I asked, nervous.

"Every creature can be good or evil. Just like with humans, they have their freedom to choose."

"Got it." But it was creepy.

At least a dozen make-believe creatures were enclosed in glass, on pedestals, or standing around the room.

Something called a locanis looked like a werewolf.

There was also a little sprite, a massive troll, a black unicorn, and an enormous dragon.

All of them were intriguing, and I wanted to study each one.

Most compelling was a very human-looking guy with glowing red eyes.

"A hunter," I said, enthralled.

OceanofPDF.com

STAKE CHRISTOPHER

"THAT'S RIGHT," Professor Pops agreed, placing the leather book back in the drawer under the downy fairy.

"Follow me," he said, moving to another door and unlocking it.

He went inside.

It was small compared to the room we'd come from and filled with weapons.

Professor Pops walked over to a pointy wooden stake.

"You mentioned staking a vampire." He picked the stick up and handed it to me.

It was heavier than I imagined it should be.

"Yes. Just jab it in the heart, right?" I held it, so the pointy end faced him and raised it above my head.

Professor Pops chortled. "These work if you have the element of surprise, or if you're skilled at hand to hand combat. But, tell me, could you stake Christopher?" His face was serious.

The idea repulsed me. I'd sooner stake myself, and that shocked me.

"No," I said, as comprehension filled my mind. "Are you saying he's got me under a spell or something?" Irritation started to build, but I pushed it down.

Professor Pops had said Christopher was a master manipulator.

"It's called compulsion, and it's what I would have done in his place." Professor Pops took a long, thin sword from where it sat on the wall.

He pulled off its sheath, revealing its glimmering metal.

Even from a few feet away, it looked sharp.

I dropped the hand, holding the stake, and went over to him. "So, how do I kill vampires?" I honestly didn't think I'd be able to do it, but we were in the weapons room.

It seemed he wanted to share.

"Hopefully, you won't ever have to, but a drone vampire must lose his head to be killed." He placed the knife at his neck.

A sliver of blood trickled.

When he moved it away, the slight cut healed instantaneously.

Wow.

"And a worker?" I asked.

"They can be killed by either a stake to the heart or having their heart removed altogether."

"So the sun doesn't hurt vampires? That's just fiction?" That seemed odd since books and movies showed vampires could be killed by the sun.

"Vampires aren't make-believe, but real. And these vampires were created with magic. That magic protects and fortifies them." He swung the sword.

"Stake or rip their heart out. Got it. But what if I chop off a female's head?" I imagined a writhing body searching for its head.

"The body and the head will reattach unless they can't find each other."

He shrugged. "It's rather disgusting to watch, but a fact nonetheless."

"Yeah, that's icky." I stepped away, heading over to the stake. "What about a hunter?"

He brought up his pointer finger and shook it.

"Hunters are more difficult because they possess a more significant portion of the queen's magic, which gives them the added bonus of the power of persuasion. Most female vampires don't have that power. In females, that ability is unique to Sharra and possibly you, since you're

marked."

"Great," I mumbled.

"Like the workers, the only way to kill a hunter is by removing his heart. It beats thanks to the queen's magic, so it must be cut from the body and separated from the other organs."

"That's gross," I muttered.

"It is, truly. With the queen's gifts, the hunter can change the color of his eyes and even shift his appearance slightly."

"Crazy. Can any of the vampires be destroyed by light?" I was still having a hard time believing sunlight had nothing to do with vampires in reality.

"No. Sunlight does nothing to vampires."

I took a deep breath. "How can she be killed, then?"

He knew I meant the queen.

Sharra.

"If you can get through her fifty thousand workers and drones - " He trailed off. "Honestly, we aren't sure, but we believe she can be killed during the moments she's shedding her old body and claiming the new one. We think that's when she's at her most vulnerable."

"You think? You believe? I gotta say, Professor, I'm not filled with confidence right now. I have one chance in fifty-five thousand. Those odds are seriously stacked and not in my favor."

I walked over to a gun. It appeared to be made of solid silver.

"For werewolves?" I asked, changing the subject as I wrapped my brain around what I was up against.

He shook his head, placing the sword back on the wall and picking up the gun. "This is for unicorns. A shot between the eyes will kill it."

"I didn't realize unicorns were hard to kill," I said, taking a step back.

"Unicorns are magical creatures, Snow. They don't die easily. There aren't many of them left, and most are in the service of the vampire

queen."

My throat went dry. "But they don't want me dead, right? If they work for her, then they'll want to keep my body safe."

"That isn't necessarily true. We've heard rumors of dissensions within her realm. Some believe the queen is too old and should step down. Others have stolen magic from other creatures and are trying to usurp her. Many believe if all of the marked are killed off, she'll die." He set the gun down and crossed his arms.

"Is that true? Would she die?" I walked over to some miscellaneous weapons: a club, an ax, some smaller knives, and a spiky looking ball with a chain attached to the end.

"In theory, yes, she would die when her body gave out."

"Couldn't she take any body? Why does it have to be the fairest? If it came down to it, if she has the magic, couldn't she use a dog, or a bee, or any living thing as her host?"

I turned when he didn't respond right away.

He appeared thoughtful. "Technically, yes, she could, but she's grown accustomed to humans. And in choosing an animal or an insect, she would lose the power she so desperately desires. In the time I spent in her service, her hunger for power was quite apparent. I believe she'd rather die than be diminished to something other than what she is, what she's become."

"Okay, so say those who want her power do kill all of the marked. Can't the hunters just mark more?" I picked up the ax and swung it a few times.

OceanofPDF.com

UNOFFICIAL LESSON

"Of course," Professor Pops said. "But they have marked the best of the best in this generation. If she has to choose a lesser human, her power will diminish. It isn't only about what's appealing on the outside. Just as important is what's on the inside. The purer the person's soul, the better."

It made some sense.

I couldn't help but wonder if Cindy had been marked as well.

Her beauty certainly far outweighed mine. "So, those who want the queen's power will come after me?"

My lesson with the professor was turning out to be more difficult than chemistry.

"It would seem logical now that you're marked, which is why you must train." He paused. "Though I do worry about your hemophilia."

"I don't think that'll be an issue anymore." I shrugged and returned the ax to its holder.

"Oh? How can you be sure?" He came toward me. "Have you noticed more changes?"

"Well, let's see. I threw a pillow at Gabe, sending him flying across the room. I broke a table for goodness' sake."

I glanced down at my shoes. "Yeah, I'm changing, all right."

He nodded. "That is why you must become familiar with all of the creatures in that room," he said, pointing out the doorway. "There isn't an official Seven Magics Academy, except here in my basement, but you must learn more about the world you now belong to. And you must learn how to defend yourself. A war is coming, Snow. I know you didn't ask to be part of it, and it seems unfair, but you're involved. And from what I can tell, the queen has put special emphasis on you."

A devastating weight seemed to sit on my shoulders. The word war felt too big, too overwhelming.

"Do you think the others know the vampire queen has singled me out?" I pressed the tip of a finger against one of the spikes.

"I'm not sure. I would think not." He moved back over to the sword, took it from its horizontal storage clamps on the wall, grabbed another, and handed it to me.

"Let me give you some background on these swords."

"Sure," I said taking the one he held out. The weapon was sheathed and lighter than I thought but Professor Pops always had a history lesson about something.

Still, my mind was elsewhere, and Professor Pops must have realized it.

"What are you thinking, Snow?" he asked, instead of sharing information.

"How do you kill a revenant?" I lowered the weapon to my side, questioning whether he thought about killing me.

I didn't want to die, but what if I hurt people?

It was there, within me.

The hunger.

The need.

"Snow," he said, his arms going around me.

I stepped into them.

Pops pulled me against his chest in a fatherly hug. "First, let's talk about the positives of what you're changing into."

Swallowing the strangled cry in my throat, I returned his embrace. It had been a long time since my dad had hugged me.

I hadn't realized how much I missed him.

"First, you are or will be, a lot stronger than a regular human. Most marked who are bitten say they feel like they have superpowers."

"So, I'll be less klutzy?" I sniffled.

Professor Pops chuckled, and I couldn't help the smile that curled up on my lips.

"Let's not count on it." He stroked my head with his free hand, and I drew in a deep breath, enjoying his smell: Old books, paper, and cigars.

After several minutes I pulled away and considered him. "I'll be stronger, which will make it more difficult for me to die, but I can be killed the same as any human." It was a statement. One that I knew, as I spoke, was correct.

"Exactly." He held the blade, still sheathed in a black cover, in both hands. "This is called a jokoto or katana, which is now the universal term."

From the wall, he took a smaller sword that rested under the long one. "This is a wakizashi." He moved into a fighting stance, showing me how to hold them.

"Samurai used these swords together during battle beginning in the seventh century." He indicated with his head that I should take a smaller one from off the wall.

I did, keeping them both in their covers, though he removed his.

Awkwardly I bent my knees and angled the swords.

He nodded and started to move, crossing his right foot over his left.

I mimicked as best I could.

"The long sword is for enemies at a distance. The shorter for when the enemy gets inside." He parried, maneuvering the blades as he battled an invisible foe. "Like this."

I tried to follow but ended up tangling my hands together.

"Very good."

I laughed. "Really?"

Professor Pops smiled and turned to put his weapons away.

"Samurai believed the katana held their soul and would only use them as a last resort. They would use the bow and arrow first, then a spear and, finally, if they had to, their swords."

He moved behind me and began adjusting my stance.

Several seconds later, he had me in the proper position.

I felt like a rag doll.

"Every day, after finishing your regular schooling and after track practice, you will attend the Seven Magics Academy. Either myself or one of the boys will train you. Dorian is excellent with the swords. Gabe is the best bowman, and Salvatore is brilliant at all of them. Though, if one of those three isn't available, any of them is more than exceptional."

I sighed. "Okay."

"After a couple of hours of training, you will spend an hour learning about the different creatures in the other room until you're acquainted with each one."

I stood. "What about homework? I'm struggling with chemistry."

He waved his hands dismissively. "You'll find your human studies will come much more easily, and you will breeze through them without much worry."

"I'll have to see it to believe." The prospect excited me.

I struggled with several subjects, especially English, Science, and Phys-Ed.

"I think you'll find many regular human activities will come easier, and you'll want to spend more and more time in your new world." Professor Pops took the swords from me and placed them back on the wall next to the other set.

"Are you sure I'll be okay going to school?" I thought about chemistry and what'd almost happened.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

"WE'LL GIVE you a double dose of the tea twice a day, then send you to school with a dose for emergencies." He walked out of the room, and I followed.

Then he locked the door.

While I waited, I stared at the female vampire behind the glass case. Her eyes were red and still seemed to glow.

"What happens if I do drink a human's blood?" The words came out without thinking about them first.

Professor Pops stood next to me. "I understand your needs, perhaps better than anyone. Human blood will increase your powers, making you stronger in every way except one."

He pointed at my heart.

"The more blood you drink, the more like a vampire you'll become. It's like anything in life; if you work to keep yourself as human as possible, that part of you will remain, will be the strongest. If you consume human blood the way a vampire does, that part of you will become the strongest."

I nodded. "I understand." I wanted to tell him I craved blood and that I'd almost drunk from Dorian today.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

Embarrassment over the almost erotic nature of my desires held me back.

They seemed overwhelming, and I wasn't sure how to control them.

Pops patted my shoulder. "Don't misunderstand me. Craving blood is part of who you are now. The time will come when you will drink."

He paused, and his eyes dilated, and I saw a flash of what he must've been like as a hunter.

The image scared me, but the look left his face almost as quickly as

it'd appeared.

"There are two things you must promise me," he said.

I swallowed and cleared my throat. "What?"

He held up a finger. "Promise me you won't drink from the same human twice."

A second finger went up. "And two, promise me you won't drink for more than ten seconds. Any more and there is a possibility you'll kill the human from blood loss or your blood lust. Can you do that for me, please?"

I suddenly felt parched. The idea of consuming blood caused my muscles to tense with need.

"Snow?"

"I promise," I agreed, though, at that moment, I would've agreed to anything.

He hadn't given me the green light to bite, but he said it was bound to happen.

I wanted it to happen sooner rather than later.

"And Snow?" I focused and was met with his piercing eyes.

"Yes?"

"Gabe - " he said, but was interrupted.

Again.

"I'm what?" Gabe stood in the doorway, looking smug.

I ground my teeth. Why were the guys constantly interrupting Professor Pops when he mentioned Gabe? It was almost as though they had a sixth sense or something.

"Hi, Gabe," I said shyly. It was weird seeing him in this room full of supernatural creatures.

Professor Pops cleared his throat, and I met his gaze. "Why don't you go home tonight, get caught up on your schoolwork, and rest? Come over tomorrow, after I've talked to the boys and your training

will begin."

I nodded.

Gabe gave Professor Pops an unreadable look. "Will she be safe?" he asked, his face tight with unspoken worry.

I wanted to be upset with Gabe for asking the question but I had to agree.

"I'm fairly certain no one will come after her until she turns sixteen." He raised a hand and rubbed it over his face. "Which reminds me, what's your favorite cake flavor?"

I blanked. I hadn't had a cake since my mother died. They served cake at her funeral.

Then and there, I decided I didn't like cake.

Plus, as a vegan, that meant no eggs, and most cakes were made with eggs.

"Um," I glanced at Gabe, though I had no idea why. "Can you make a cake without eggs?"

"Someone can. I intend to hire the best," Pops said, crossing his arms. "What'll it be? Chocolate? Vanilla?"

A twisted smile spread over my face. "Red velvet."

Gabe and Professor Pops laughed.

"Perfect. I'll get on it. And your favored color?"

I didn't have a favorite color. I'd always liked purple because of my mom.

Gabe answered for me. "Her favorite color is purple."

I glanced away briefly and then at Professor Pops. "Purple is fine, but I've always really liked glittering red."

"Excellent. See you tomorrow, Snow." Professor Pops waved us away as he went back toward the downy fairy.

"I'll walk you home," Gabe said, his smile tight.

I sensed his concern and something else.

Probably fear.

Gabe was afraid of me.

That made me sad, but I didn't know how to change his mind and help him see that I was still me - still his Snowflake.

"SINCE WHEN DID you start liking red?" Gabe asked as he headed down his massive driveway.

The sun was setting. Somehow, I could already see the stars. Like all these years I had bad eyesight but suddenly I was given glasses.

We walked side by side at a slow pace toward my house.

I offered him a sideways smile. It gave me butterflies to know that Gabe paid attention.

Glowy, tingly, happiness bloomed in my chest.

"Since the first time I saw Dorothy's shoes on The Wizard of Oz. Probably at age three or four." I stuffed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. "Then my mom died, and most of the stuff I kept of hers was purple, so I sort of adopted it as my favorite as well."

"Huh," Gabe grunted.

"I'd guess your favorite color is - " I considered what it might be, enjoying the mouth-watering scent of him as we went.

His car was silver.

His room looked like a shrine to the Celtics, but he wore a lot of white and blue.

"Either green or blue," I said.

He smirked. "You were thinking about my room, weren't you?"

I nodded.

"I guess it's green." He took my hand and stopped, so I faced him.

His heart pounded rapidly.

With gentle fingers, he caressed my cheek, stroked my hair.

"I've always loved the color of your hair," he whispered.

I looked away, kicking at nothing on the ground in front of me. "You have?"

OceanofPDF.com

I LIKE YOU

HE PLAYED with the ends of my dark hair, twirling a strand in his finger. "It changes color in the light. Sometimes it's black, other times there seem to be blond highlights. It's magical." He released my hair and lifted my chin. "Like you, Snowflake."

"I'm not." My cheeks burned at the compliment.

The bloodlust grew by a couple of degrees.

Would Gabe offer his blood to me the way Dorian had?

At the thought, my heart began to match Gabe's beat for beat.

"Snow," he said with hesitation.

Curious, I searched his face.

"I've liked you for a long time," he said.

"I know. I like you, too." I returned eagerly.

The final embers of sunlight gleamed through the thick trees, causing rays of light to streak onto a portion of Gabe's face.

Half of his face was shadowed, and the other half seemed to glow.

"No, I mean, like-like you," he said.

Comprehension dawned, and I nearly smacked myself in the forehead with the palm of my hand.

"I wasn't sure. I thought you thought of me as just a sister." The guys had mentioned I was Gabe's girlfriend at Kenmei's but Gabe and I hadn't talked about it officially.

Nervousness swirled in my stomach.

He took hold of my hands. "I think of you in ways much different than I would a sister." A mischievous gleam shone in his eyes.

I giggled nervously, glancing at my shoes.

He leaned in, and I realized he was about to kiss me - which

reminded me I'd kissed Christopher today, which reminded me I almost drank from Dorian today, which made me feel gross.

I was all for being a confident woman and taking what I wanted.

And I still wanted Gabe. But I wasn't sure it was a good idea to act on those wants.

"I've got to go." I turned and ran. Fast. And I didn't trip once.

With speeds faster than I was prepared for, I unlocked my front door.

Gatsby was there, weaving between my feet and meowing like he was mortally wounded.

"Hi, kitty. I know you're hungry. Sorry, boy." I scooped him up and scratched behind his ears the way he liked.

Today he squirmed in my arms, unhappy. I put him down. "Okay. Okay."

Grabbing his bowl, I filled it with kitty kibble and set it on the floor.

He rushed over and started eating.

I poured him some water, washed my hands, and snatched some almonds from the refrigerator to snack on while I did my homework.

In quick succession, I got my math assignments done, conjugated my Spanish verbs, and studied for my chemistry and social studies quizzes.

Then I made myself some whole-wheat pasta and watched the latest episode of Survivor.

Gatsby jumped on the couch and into my lap.

I was glad he'd forgiven me for ignoring him in the last few days.

Around ten o'clock, I went to my room, washed my face, and changed into my flowered flannel pajamas.

Once I was in bed, and Gatsby had situated himself near my feet, I turned off the light and closed my eyes.

Immediately I was whisked away into the other realm.

Her realm.

I stood on a balcony in a large white castle.

From my position, I could see the beautiful countryside.

It was dusk. The descending sun bathed the landscape in twinkling light.

I wore a long deep burgundy dress with dark grey ribbing, its skirts so abundant that they swished when I moved. The sleeves were short, and the bodice tight.

The shoes I wore pinched as I made my way into the room.

The first thing I noticed was a large headboard attached to an enormous bed. Lush gold bed coverings and pillows covered it.

The windows on either side were stained glass.

In one corner of the room was a large round mirror, and I gasped at its familiarity.

This was the mirror, the one the Wicked Queen used in Snow White.

I stepped in front of the glass, studying my reflection.

The person looking back was stunning. Her black hair piled high, her lips blood red and skin luminescent as the moon.

I turned, and she copied. I lifted my hand, and she did the same.

"It's me," I said, awed.

"My beautiful queen. You truly are the fairest in the land."

My hand froze in midair.

The voice was Christopher's.

I noticed him now, seated in a chair, dressed in lavish clothing: black pants, black boots that extended over his knees, and a burgundy jacket that matched my dress.

As before, a dark cloud blurred out his face.

No matter how many times I blinked or stared, the features of his

face wouldn't become clear.

And I remembered he'd said before that the queen's magic wouldn't allow me to know who he was until I drank his blood.

"Why am I here?" I asked, watching him through the mirror's reflection.

He rose, and my breath hitched. Because from within the mirror, I saw his face. He had blond hair that had been combed off his forehead, making his hazel eyes vibrant against his tanned skin.

We belonged together, a voice inside my head uttered.

Excitement fluttered along my skin.

Fireworks bombarded my heart.

"Why can I see your face?" I asked as I turned away from the mirror.

Immediately his features blurred behind thick darkness so I could only see his red eyes.

I returned my gaze to the mirror and his features were clear once again.

Christopher smiled. "The mirror reveals the truth, Snow." He came toward me, stalking me.

I wondered if there'd ever been more willing prey.

I wanted to taste him, try his blood.

Professor Pops' words came into my mind: "Never drink from the same human twice and never longer than ten seconds."

Christopher took my hands and led me to the bed. I didn't like that his face was hidden from me again, but my longing for him rocked strong enough in me that I dismissed it.

He laid me down, and then he lay down next to me.

"You want me, don't you?" It was a question, but he knew the answer.

OceanofPDF.com

YOU SAVED ME

I HEARD the confidence in Christopher's voice.

"Yes," I said, my voice shaking.

"Go ahead, then." He tilted his neck in my direction.

My fangs grew.

Running my tongue over the sharp ends, I moved closer, grabbing hold of him and pressing my lips against his warm throat. I sank my fangs into his skin, enjoying the sensation of his skin parting.

Tentative, I sucked.

When the first drops touched my tongue, I panted, sucking harder.

I had nothing to compare the pleasure I experienced as his blood filled my mouth, ran down my throat, and filled me in ways I never believed existed.

To my mind, there wasn't anything better than that moment, which was saying something, since I was a fruit and veggie girl.

After a time, Christopher spoke my name. "Snow."

I felt drunk with his bewitching blood as I lifted my lips from his neck.

He smiled, his hazel eyes shimmering with hunger.

"Do you recognize me now?" he asked.

I did. "You're not Christopher but Chace Charming? You saved me from an awful fall." It'd been him all along?

He smirked and pulled me on top of him. "My turn," he said.

I tilted my neck back, giving him full access, and let out a moan as his teeth parted my flesh, and he drank.

Uneasiness formed in my belly, knowing the hunter was none other than Chace Charming, Salem Academy's newest hottie.

Professor Pops had said Christopher was a master manipulator.

Plus, he'd mentioned that a hunter's magic could alter parts of himself, including how he looked.

Chace-slash-Christopher must've sensed my apprehension.

He rolled us, placing me under him, his lips never leaving my neck.

I sighed, giving in to the immeasurable pleasure of the moment.

I didn't care one way or the other.

In his arms, drinking from him and him drinking from me was bliss, and I never wanted it to end.

"Christopher," I whispered, running my fingers through his hair and raising my head so I could taste his blood while he drank mine.

AFTER A LONG TIME, we lay beside each other, my head resting against his chest. He played with my hair.

I tried to sleep, but I was too buzzed.

"Do good and evil exist?" Christopher asked.

That was out of the blue.

I lifted myself up and searched his face for a hint of humor.

He was serious.

"I believe so," I answered, nodding.

He kissed my forehead and sat up, crossing his well-defined legs.

I wasn't ready to be done, but I wanted to know where he was going with his question.

Reluctantly I positioned myself so that I sat opposite him on the bed.

We were still in the castle in another realm.

Lush throw pillows littered the floor and surrounded us like piranha swarming their food.

Until a few moments ago, I'd been too busy enjoying Chace, aka

Christopher, aka my hunter, and hadn't cared about anything else.

Now that he'd spoken, lots of unanswered questions surfaced, and guilt pounded within my breast.

Like, what was the name of this realm?

Why did he keep bringing me here, and where exactly was here?

Christopher seized my hand. "Sweet, beautiful Snow," he said, caressing my knuckles. "In my years serving the queen, I've learned one thing. Words like good and evil are relative terms."

"What do you mean? To kill someone is evil." I crossed my arms, waiting to hear how he'd BS his way out of that.

"What if that someone is the enemy in a war? It's kill or be killed. Would he be considered evil for protecting himself, his loved ones, his home, his country?" He grinned sweetly, running his fingers up my arm. It was distracting.

My mouth fell open at his question.

I wanted to say yes, but Professor Pops had explained I would be learning how to kill supernatural creatures, that we were on the brink of war.

If I killed to protect myself, would that make me evil?

"Ugh, okay. Where are you going with this?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

He chuckled and climbed off the bed, adjusting his clothes.

When he finished, he lifted me onto my feet.

"In Buddhism," he began, "good and evil don't exist, per se. Instead, there is kusala and akusala. Kusala is considered to be intelligence, contentment, beneficial, and a remover of affliction. Akusala is, quite simply, the opposite, or ignorance, causer of affliction, and so on. Which boils down to this: what is evil to one person may be good to another. Life and everything in it is about your perception."

Christopher's words stung my mind.

I wanted him to explain further, but a sudden and infuriating

beeping interrupted.

My alarm clock.

Upon opening my eyes, my hunter and the other realm vanished. With a sigh, I reached over, shut off the clock, and rolled onto my back.

I hadn't slept.

At least I didn't think so.

The entire night was spent with Christopher; we hadn't done more than talk, kiss, and bite each other's necks, but the experience left me breathless.

I tried to imagine bringing Christopher into my silly little girl's room and snorted.

Lavender walls held up posters of bunnies, kittens, and puppies.

Across from my bed was my chest of drawers, also lavender, and atop it sat unused perfume bottles.

Above them hung a corkboard filled with pictures of Cindy and me, as well as pictures of my best friends - the guys.

To the left of my dresser was my bathroom and, next to that, lived my closet.

"Ugh, I'm so over purple," I muttered, climbing out of bed and heading into the bathroom where bright purple towels hung on a rack next to a bright purple shower curtain.

I turned on the water and undressed while the water warmed.

Stepping in, I let the spray soothe away my tension.

I couldn't help thinking about the past four days.

In that time, I'd managed to become a revenant - not quite human, not quite a vampire.

I'd slept in the same bed with Gabe, one of my best friends on whom I'd developed a crush.

Nearly bitten Dorian.

And kissed, drank from, and kissed some more my hunter, Christopher.

Sheesh!

I wasn't that kind of girl; well, I hadn't been for the past fifteen years.

Sure, I'd had sleepovers with all seven brothers in the past, but still. I'd never felt such lustful cravings or been so wanton as I was with Chace, aka Christopher.

He brought out feelings in me, needs I hadn't realized I'd been missing.

At the thought of him touching me, kissing me, whispering tenderly to me, my belly fluttered.

"I don't have time for this," I grumbled, rinsing off and getting out of the shower.

OceanofPDF.com

I DON'T DO DRESSES

I DRESSED IN FADED JEANS, a red Ed Hardy tee shirt with a dragon slithering across the front, and my Converse.

In the full-length mirror near my closet, I noticed several bruises on my neck and stepped closer for a better look. In the center of the bruises were twin marks closed over by scar tissue.

It seemed I hadn't changed as much as I'd hoped.

No one had been able to see marks after Christopher bit me the first time, but I wasn't so sure about these bruises.

Going to my dresser, I pulled open the top drawer and took out a silk and cashmere scarf in baby blue.

My dad and stepmother had given it to me for Christmas last year because they said it matched my eyes.

After pulling off the tag, I wrapped it around my neck several times, so the bruises were hidden.

"Today is going to be a regular day," I grunted, catching my reflection in the full-length mirror beside my dresser.

It couldn't get any weirder.

I'd become a blood-drinking supernatural creature, for crying out loud.

"Ugh! Come on, kitty," I complained, opening my bedroom door.

Gatsby stretched, jumped off my bed, and followed me downstairs.

As soon as I entered the kitchen, a brief knock sounded at the back door, followed by Heathcliff, Bart, Gabe, and Dorian.

They were a breath of fresh air, full of exuberance, and raw energy.

"Hey, Snow," Dorian said, closing the door behind him.

Gabe carried a large book.

He held it like its contents were leprous, and I had to grin.

"Hi, guys."

Heathcliff and Bart returned my greeting as they made themselves at home, rummaging through my fridge and cupboards, grumbling about how I had nothing good to eat.

Bart started a pot of coffee, and Heathcliff, ever the responsible one, put some water on for my tea.

I quickly got Gatsby his kibble and some water.

When the cat was happily eating, I turned my attention to Gabe.

"What ya got there?" I sat on a barstool and swiveled closer to him.

He glanced around sheepishly before heaving the book on the counter.

Moments before I saw the cover up close, I'd imagined it to be a book from Professor Pops' Museum of the Supernatural, and worried Gabe stole it.

No one was to touch those pages.

Turned out the book was nothing mystical, just page after page of whimsical dresses by the designer Vera Wang.

I was most definitely not a fashionista.

On the contrary, I didn't even really know what the word meant, only that Cindy used it a lot when showing me clothes from her magazines; but I had heard of Vera Wang and knew she was a big-time designer.

Whoa!

"Professor Pops asked me to bring this to you so you could go through it and pick out a dress."

I laughed uncomfortably. "I don't do dresses."

The guys paused what they were doing, as though they were shocked I didn't want a dress by the incredibly talented Vera Wang.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. A dress for what?"

Everyone resumed what they were doing. Goofballs!

"Your birthday party, silly," Bart said, pulling my hair.

"Dude," Gabe yelled.

"Boys, chill," I said, putting a hand on each of their chests.

The individual thumping of their hearts momentarily distracted me.

It didn't make my mouth water, just caused me to pause.

That was an interesting new twist.

I focused my attention on Bart.

"Why do I need a fancy dress for my party?"

He snickered as he pulled an envelope from his back pocket and handed it to me.

"You've created a monster by allowing Pops to be in charge of your party, and there's no turning back. Salvatore is taking three hundred of these to the post office as we speak."

I took the envelope.

Glancing at each of the boys, my emotions spiraled from curious to concerned to downright freaked.

"What is it?" I asked though I figured it was an invitation to my birthday party.

My hands shook as I turned the envelope over.

Sealed with red wax with SW stamped in it. "Cool," I mumbled, breaking the seal and removing the thick white cardstock.

Embossed in black and lined with silver were these words:

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED to attend

A Masquerade Ball

Honoring the sixteenth birthday of

Snow White

November 17th, beginning at 7:30 pm.

There will be dinner and dancing.

Formal dress required.

MY MIND COULDN'T GET over how fancy the invite sounded.

"A masquerade ball. Is he serious?" I asked, suddenly wishing I'd told Pops no to a party.

See, I didn't dance.

The last time I tried, I tripped over my partner's feet and broke his wrist.

Needless to say, we still weren't speaking, and the not-so-graceful event happened in junior high.

At the idea of dancing in front of a bunch of people, terror caused my upper lip to tremble.

"What is Professor Pops thinking?"

"We tried to talk him out of it," Bart said, and I could tell by the looks on their faces that he was serious.

The rest muttered incoherent words that I took to mean they weren't excited about the party concept either.

With pouts and irritated glares, they shuffled around, getting mugs for the coffee along with creamer and sugar.

The kitchen smelled divine - not that I was ever a big coffee drinker, more of a hot cocoa girl.

But the aroma filled me with nostalgic memories of my mom, making me miss her all the more.

"Here you go," Heathcliff said, setting a mug of murky liquid in front of me.

I was about to decline but got a whiff of it. It wasn't coffee, but tea - my bloodlust tea.

"Thanks." I smiled.

Their blood wasn't a distraction this morning.

I wondered if that had something to do with me drinking Christopher's blood last night.

Self-consciously I tugged the scarf farther up my neck and caught Dorian watching me, his eyes flickering to my neck, the scarf, and my mouth.

His examination told me what he thought.

A slow tendril of heat started in my belly and worked its way up. I silently prayed he wouldn't say anything, at least not in front of his brothers.

OceanofPDF.com

LOVE YOUR SHIRT

"NO PROB, SNOW," Heathcliff said. He went over and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Gabe cleared his throat, and I turned my attention to him, taking a sip of tea.

"So you need to pick out a dress in the next couple of days and let Pops know," he said.

"If it's any consolation, we'll be wearing tuxes," Heathcliff said, irritated, reading the terrified look I was sure coated my face.

I giggled at his agitation, swallowed some tea.

"You'll look amazing in a tuxedo." I rotated to include Bart, Dorian, and Gabe. "You all will."

I pulled the book closer and flipped through the pages.

All of the dresses were beautiful, airy, and light.

I couldn't imagine trying to move around in something so elegant.

The guys crowded around, each commenting on which one they thought would suit me best. I cringed at wearing any of the dresses and considered speaking to Professor Pops.

Gatsby jumped onto a chair and onto the counter, rubbing his body along one of my arms.

"Hey, boy. What do you think of all this?" I set him on the ground.

The guys were still occupied with dresses - well, probably the models inside the dresses - and I smiled.

"I love you guys," I blurted. They looked over, each with various shades of amused expressions. I laughed, mortified by my sudden outburst.

"Love you too, Snow," Bart and Heathcliff returned.

Gabe gave me a curious look.

Dorian came over, and stage whispered as he tugged on my scarf: "Love you, too."

I shoved him away, trying to keep my heated cheeks from showing. His blood stuck out from the rest and seemed to sing me a sexy song.

Surprised and slightly mortified, I cleared my throat.

I didn't want Gabe thinking it was Dorian's comment that made me redden, and I certainly didn't want to tell them it was because of what I'd hidden under my scarf.

Casually I fixed it, so the soft blue scarf better covered my neck.

I'd sooner die than explain the bruises they would think were hickeys. And technically they were.

"Love your shirt, too," Dorian added, poking his pointer finger into my chest. I looked down, and he flicked me in the nose.

"You're such a - " I paused and watched his eyes dance. "You're a total tease," I finished.

Dorian grinned from ear to ear. "It's all part of my charm." He lifted his brows and winked playfully.

"We'd better get to school," Bart said, tugging my hair again.

"Right, you need another tardy like you need a punch in the face," Dorian said, slapping him upside the head.

Bart yelped, and they started play fighting, though after what Professor Pops had said about their training, I noticed it wasn't quite so much play as I first thought.

"Have you finished your tea?" Heathcliff asked.

I gulped down the last of it and nodded. "Yep," I answered. "Who's training me today?" I hoped Professor Pops had talked to them, and they knew what I meant.

"Me," Dorian said, rewarding me with a piercing stare.

My mouth went dry. "Good."

I'd have to train with these hickeys on my neck.

What would Dorian say?

Why hadn't Gabe volunteered?

Sneaking a glance at him, my heart sank.

Something was bothering him.

He wasn't teasing.

Had he already grown tired of me?

Not that I could blame him.

Even though he didn't know it, I certainly hadn't acted like he and I might be a couple, especially last night, when I made out with Chace.

"Great," I added, suppressing a sad sigh.

"We gotta go," Heathcliff said, grabbing Dorian by the arm.

"See ya later, Snow." Bart followed them out.

I waved, giving Gabe a questioning look.

"Did you get stuck taking me again?" I turned the pages of the book, but my eyes kept finding Gabe's.

"I volunteered," he answered, picking my hefty backpack off the table and lobbing it onto his shoulder. "Come on."

Following him out, I locked the door and shoved the house keys in my pocket.

"I think we should talk," Gabe said once we were buckled in his silver CRX.

"Sure," I said, eyeing him, comprehending the seriousness on his face.

My stomach clenched.

Did he somehow know about my escapade with Christopher?

Or Dorian?

"You and I," he paused, turning on the car. "You know I like you,

right, Snow?"

I gulped. He hadn't called me Snowflake.

"I hope so, Gabe. We've been friends for a long time. If you're pretending, then you deserve an Oscar." I hoped my teasing would lighten his mood.

He smirked. "You know what I mean."

I forced back a sigh. "I do." This conversation wasn't going to end well.

He pulled out of my driveway, heading toward school.

"Since your bite, and what occurred in your dream, and the note. Well, you have a lot going on." He glanced over.

I nodded, waiting for him to finish, my hands clenched into fists in my lap.

He let out a giant breath. "I think we should put whatever might be happening between us on hold." His hands gripped the steering wheel until they turned white.

Tears dampened my lashes.

Casually, I tried to wipe them away.

He was right.

I needed to focus on training.

Also, I had a situation with Christopher. A sensual situation.

But wow, hearing Gabe say the words hurt.

I deliberated whether he somehow knew what I'd been doing last night, if he could tell a hunter vampire kissed me thoroughly, drank from me multiple times, and that I liked it.

Actually, I more than liked it, I delighted in it.

Ugh!

Pushing my back into the black leather seat, I cleared my throat. "I agree. We'll still be friends, right?" The words sounded strained, not like me.

Gabe didn't seem to notice. "Right."

We rode in silence until we got to school.

As soon as he put the car in park, I bolted without saying goodbye.

I needed some fresh air and some space.

OceanofPDF.com

SYMPHONY OF HEART BEATS

MY BODY TEETERED between conflicting emotions: excitement and sadness.

Excitement because I'd see Christopher in a few minutes, though I had to call him Chace in school.

And sadness because I still had feelings for Gabe.

He'd promised he wouldn't leave.

Memories of the night he'd stayed with me surfaced, weighing down my heart. I missed that Gabe. He hadn't exactly left, but he didn't want me anymore either.

Sighing, I pulled open the front door to Salem Academy, home to more than sixteen hundred students, and realized I held my breath so I wouldn't smell blood.

Slowly I exhaled and snuck a timid breath.

A delicious blood-tinged aroma swirled with sweat and perfume.

A symphony of hearts beat all around me, but I didn't have the slightest twinge of a craving.

Something had changed.

Was it the double dose of bloodlust tea, or drinking Christopher's blood?

I'd have to ask him when we had a moment alone.

If I could look him in the eyes without turning red.

I made my way through the overflowing commons and to my burgundy locker.

After dialing in the combination, I opened it and switched books from my backpack to my locker and ran to chemistry, barely acknowledging the posters announcing the football game coming up

or the Halloween dance taking place soon.

Cindy and Chace were already in their seats, chatting like BFFs. Seeing Cindy being so flirty and Chace responding - well, it annoyed me.

I dropped my backpack and my pencil on the table in a huff.

Cindy gave me the eye, one of her perfectly plucked eyebrows arched in irritation. "Hey, Snow. In a mood?" She smacked her bare knee against my thigh.

"No," I grumbled, stealing a look at Chace.

He rolled his chair toward me.

"Hi." He had a tone that told me he was thinking about what we had done last night.

My cheeks burned hot.

"What's going on?" Cindy asked, tugging on my scarf.

That girl was way too intuitive.

She could read people from a hundred feet away, through concrete and twenty feet of dirt.

Sheesh! "Nothing," I said from behind my hands, jerking my scarf.

I realized we hadn't had a chance to really talk since she'd gone to the Cape. She said she needed to tell me something but still hadn't.

There was a lot I could tell her as well. But then how did I start a conversation revealing I was a revenant and might become a vampire?

"Hmmm-mmmm," Cindy responded, and I knew we'd be having a prickly discussion later. I debated what I should tell her. It wasn't like I could say, "Yeah, so last night, Chace took me to another realm where we made out and drank each other's blood for a few hours. It was awesome and so sexy. By the way, I'm halfway to becoming a vampire, so there's that. Ha ha."

Chace made a noise that sounded a lot like a groan, which caused my cheeks to burn brighter than fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Before Cindy or Chace said or did anything else, Mr. Wallace came

in and saved the day. I'd never been happier to see a teacher.

That gladness was short-lived.

"During today's lab," Mr. Wallace began. "We'll be determining the relative reactions of copper, magnesium, zinc, and hydrogen. You'll work with a partner, as usual."

Mr. Wallace glanced in our direction. "Mr. Charming, since you are without a partner, and," he searched the room, let out a grunt, and continued, "since Sheila is absent today, why don't you work with Missssss," he drew it out, like a snake debating which prey to devour.

Cindy sat up, straighter in her seat, and I knew she wanted him to pick her.

Finally, he continued, "White. Mr. Dooley, you and Miss Croswell will partner up. Everyone else, you have your partners, so get busy."

Cindy deflated and scowled. "I don't want to partner with Eddie. He smells like onion rings."

"Maybe that's because he works at Onion Ring Heaven," I whispered, stifling a nervous giggle. I stood as Eddie looked over, his braces-filled smile taking up most of his freckled face. "Be nice," I said in her ear.

Cindy harrumphed. "Merde! This isn't fair. And you owe me an explanation about what's going on between you and Charming. Lunchtime!"

"For sure," I said, wiggling my eyebrows and moving over to Chace.

Cindy laughed, and I felt better about leaving her with Onion Ring Eddie.

I picked up my chair and placed it next to Chace.

He already had the droppers and was in the process of organizing the test tubes.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" I asked.

He grunted. "Once or twice. Lovely scarf, by the way."

I fiddled with it, making sure it still covered my neck, and sat on the stool, watching him.

He looked seventeen or eighteen, but I was curious about his real age.

I didn't know much about vampires, but I did know they weren't supposed to age.

At least that was part of the myth.

Would I age as a revenant? I wanted to ask Chace, but chemistry class wasn't the place. I supposed I could ask Professor Pops.

"Well, you'd better let me do something," I hissed as Mr. Wallace made his way around the room.

"I can think of several somethings I'd like you to do." Chace's voice had gone low and was filled with sensual implications.

I colored. "Knock it off. Cindy already smells a story. The girl is like a Bassett Hound on the trail of her favorite bone. She's probably already figured out we kissed and is planning our wedding, including the cake and my wedding dress." I moved one of the beakers, put a droplet of iodine in it, and scrawled the results in my notebook.

He sat on the stool next to me, fixing me with an amused gaze. "Wow, she's impressive."

I tried to scowl. He didn't know her the way I did. That was how her mind worked. "We haven't even been on a date," I whispered.

"I suppose we can't consider what we did last night a date?" He wore his signature smirk.

OceanofPDF.com

MY QUEEN

MY INSIDES QUIVERED at his question. "No!" I mean our making out and blood swapping could be considered a date, I guess.

"Are you embarrassed by me, Snowflake?" Chace asked.

"Don't call me that," I growled, smacking him on the arm.

Only Gabe was allowed to call me that.

Besides, what did he think was going on?

Were we an item?

"Whatever you command, my queen," he inclined his head slightly.

Self-conscious, I searched the room and caught hold of Cindy's perceptive glare. "What the hell?" she mouthed.

I shrugged and turned back to Chace. His words, "my queen," made me think of another question. I, technically, wouldn't be his queen. My body would, but her spirit would be inside mine. Right? I filed the question in the thickening folder labeled Seriously Wacky Stuff.

"You need to stop."

Chace laughed. "Fine. I will. For now." Then he winked. "Can I call you Frosty?"

I lifted my brow. "You can call me Frosty when Hell freezes over, m-kay?" I gave him a sinister look but laughed too.

The whole conversation was silly.

"Snow," he spoke my name like we were lovers. "Want to hang out after school today? We can see what sort of skills you've developed." He gave me a conspiratorial look. "The way we've been trading blood, I've no doubt you'll be as strong as I am in no time."

"Will I?" I nudged his shoulder with mine.

"You'll be amazing."

I really did want to hang out with him, but I had track practice, revenant training, and then homework. "Hey, didn't you make the track team? I'll see you at practice."

"I'll come only if you promise to run. I want to see if you can manage once around the track without tripping." He laughed.

"Harsh," I murmured. But I wanted to see if it were possible, too. "I have - " I paused. Would he know what hemophilia was? Not that my blood issue would matter once I became a vampire.

"What?"

"Well, after track, I have to do stuff." I couldn't say supernatural training. Professor Pops wanted me to go over to his house after practice.

I'd be learning how to kill different supernatural creatures, including hunter vampires like him.

Did I want to tell Christopher aka Chace aka the hunter?

Something told me I shouldn't, mainly since he worked for the vampire queen.

And that's when the lightbulb went on.

Holy apple butter on toast!

Christopher worked for the vampire queen!

Why hadn't that really sunk in before now?

I hadn't asked Professor Pops what would happen if I drank the blood of a hunter.

Chace glanced over, his gaze unreadable. "You're training with Adam Henry after practice."

"Yes," I nodded, unable to say any more.

How did he know? So many questions.

"Don't you want to see me again tonight?" His words sounded hollow, sad.

"Of course," I said, touching his arm and regretting the maneuver

immediately.

Professor Pops mentioned Christopher possessed the ability to put me under a spell.

Did he have me under one? If he did, did I care?

I really wanted to see him alone again - to kiss him and taste him.

Gabe was out of the romantic picture.

He said we should just be friends.

No reason to feel guilty.

Lips red as rubies, hair dark as night. Drink your true love's blood. Become the Vampire, Snow White.

The words filtered across my mind like they came from me. But I hadn't thought of them.

I shuddered.

My true love?

It wasn't Christopher.

At least I didn't think so.

But did I lust after him?

Yes. Yes. Yes. I cleared my throat.

"Want to come over to my house after training, around nine-thirty?" My heart sped up faster in anticipation. "In this realm," I added in a soft voice.

"We could talk. Watch a movie. Hang out." It'd be fun.

He smiled, and the movement reached his eyes, filling my stomach with giddy joy.

"Great idea," he said.

"Charming is a name that suits you. Did the queen give you the name?"

He chuckled. "No, it's the one I was born with."

I searched his face, checking to see if he was joking. It didn't look like it.

"Hmmm," I said, dropping iodine in another beaker.

LUNCHTIME fiNALLY ROLLED AROUND, and I briefly considered evasive maneuvers, like hiding in the girls' bathroom.

I hadn't decided what to say to Cindy about Christopher - Chace - and me.

Deny. Deny. Deny.

I searched the Commons area for her, but she hadn't arrived.

Shrugging, I grabbed a greyish lunch tray, placed a salad on it along with a juice, paid the cashier, and headed over to our usual table near the windows.

The sun shone through them, bright and cheery, and I squinted. Beyond grateful vampires and even revenants weren't affected by the sun.

"Hey, Frosty."

I jumped and spun around.

My gorgeous blond-haired hunter towered over me, a playful grin lighting his features.

"Rude," I squealed very girlishly and much more loudly than I anticipated.

Several heads swung in our direction.

They were probably stunned that klutzy, boyish Snow White could act girly, or that the handsome Chace Charming would choose to grace me with his presence.

At those thoughts, my whole body heated.

They had no idea what I'd done with the incredibly hot hunter.

Chace's eyes narrowed.

"Let's sit," he said, walking over to my table.

I obeyed, letting my hair fall into my face.

Once we were sitting, I scanned the room for Cindy.

A part of me hoped she wouldn't show.

Another part of me worried.

If Cindy was one thing, she was a creature of habit. If she had a change of plans, she would've told me.

Salvatore and Sebastian walked in, both sporting sour expressions when they saw me.

I waved enthusiastically.

They returned my welcome, but it wasn't with any excitement.

"They're upset that I'm sitting here," Christopher said, his voice filled with humor.

OceanofPDF.com

CHEMISTRY TOGETHER

"OH, WELL, THEY SHOULDN'T CARE." I signaled them to come over, casually tightening my scarf.

They nodded.

A thought struck me, and I started to panic. "They don't know who you are, do they?" I hissed, keeping my eyes glued on the guys' movements.

"No. At least I don't think so." He shrugged. "But then they are Adam Henry's sons, so anything's possible."

I heard what sounded like a note of awe in his words and wondered why.

The guys picked up their food and headed over. I searched their faces, trying to discern whether they knew.

I didn't think so. If they had, they probably would've been a lot more hostile.

"Hi, guys," I said, feeling suddenly nervous. Thankfully we were still in the lunchroom at school. If the guys wanted to punch out Chace, at least they wouldn't do it here.

"Hey, Snow," Salvatore said.

"Heyah," Sebastian added, taking a huge bite of pizza. "Aren't you going to eat?"

I glanced at the unappetizing salad sitting in front of me. "Not hungry," I responded, keeping my eyes fixed on a wilted carrot. I was, in fact, hungry, but it wasn't for the tasteless salad.

I wanted Christopher's blood.

I gave him a sideways glance, and he smiled meaningfully.

"You should eat. You need your strength for - " Salvatore paused and glanced over at Chace. "Later," he finished.

I opened the juice and took a drink to appease him.

"How do you two know each other?" Salvatore asked between bites of food, indicating Chace and me with a pointer finger.

"Oh," I said, unsure about how to respond.

Chace saved me. "We're in chemistry together. Plus, the track team."

Salvatore and Sebastian swapped comical looks.

"Have you seen Snow run?" Salvatore asked.

"Not yet. Maybe today." Chace grinned slightly; a secret smile I knew was meant for me.

The guys busted out laughing.

Dorian and Bart joined us at the table.

"What's so funny?" Bart asked.

Dorian wore an angry frown.

I watched his eyes linger on my lips, move to my neck, and glance at Christopher.

Did he know? "Charming," he nodded. "What brings you to our table today? I believe there are ten or fifteen girls desperate for your attention. No sense hanging with us guys."

Christopher smiled. "There's one girl at this table. The only girl I'm interested in." He glanced at me, and I was sure my face turned the color of ripened cherries.

Salvatore sputtered out his milk.

"You're in dangerous territory here," Dorian growled.

I watched the way each guy tensed with animosity and decided an intervention was necessary.

"Has anyone seen Cindy?"

"I haven't seen her since math class," Dorian said, shifting his gaze from Chace to me.

"Not since chemistry," Chace added.

The other brothers agreed they hadn't seen her since morning.

"Great. Why don't I have a cell phone?" I grumbled, picking up my juice and taking another sip.

Almost as one, all the guys whipped out their phones.

"May I?" I took Dorian's as a way to appease him, giving him a look.

"Fine," he hissed in mock sarcasm, and I smiled.

Unlocking his phone, I dialed Cindy's number.

It went straight to voice mail, and I left a message after the beep. "Hey, Cin. Just wondering if you're okay. Call me. Oh, I'm on Dorian's phone because, as you know, my dad and stepmother won't give me one. So call him, 'kay?"

After I hung up, I texted a similar message to her number and handed Dorian back his phone.

"Thanks, Dorian."

"I'm sure she's fine. Probably just got hung up talking to some guy," he said, then took a bite of pizza.

I nodded, trying to act convinced.

The guys finished their lunch and took off, leaving Christopher and me alone once again.

"You don't need to worry about your neck." He sounded nonchalant and a little smug.

"Really?" I touched my scarf.

He pulled on it, tugging it away. "Yep, the bruises are gone," he said, giving me a half-smile.

I yanked the scarf from his fingers. "Do I even want to know how you knew they'd be gone?"

"Doubtful." He tossed a couple of fries in his mouth.

I noticed he ate several bites of cheeseburger along with more fries. "How can you stand to eat that?" I asked, scrunching my nose in

disgust.

He laughed. "You get used to it. I need to pretend to be a normal human boy." He smirked and bit into another fry.

I looked around. "It's so gross. I think it tastes like ash. I haven't been able to enjoy food since right after you bit me." I tried to look frustrated and angry, but thoughts about how it'd felt the first time, his lips on my neck, and each time since, only filled me with longing.

His eyebrows pinched together but just as quickly relaxed. "You really are exquisite, Snow. I knew you were extraordinary from the moment I first saw you, but I never realized how much until these past few days."

"You could tell just from biting me the other day?" I was confused.

"No, I'm talking about the very first time. When you were young."

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.

Had he been the one?

"You're the hunter who marked me?" I didn't know how I felt about that.

It was his fault I was on this path but the vampire queen's. He just did her bidding.

Chace dipped his head and took a large bite of burger.

I watched him chew, biting the inside of my cheek, nervous.

But there wasn't any reason to be.

I knew the answer. It was him, which meant several things.

He was older than seventeen or eighteen, and he'd been watching me for a long time.

"Do you know how my mother died?" I blurted.

If he'd been around that long, surely he must've seen her.

At that moment, the bell rang. He stood.

"I'll see you at practice," he said, not answering my question.

Before I could ask again, he took his tray, merging into the thick

student traffic, and was gone.

OceanofPDF.com

FAILED HIM

I WATCHED my classmates exit the commons area, doing my best to be okay with mine and Chace's history. The hunter was new to me but I wasn't to him. Pops said hunters marked us when we were young.

Since Christopher/Chace marked me, how long had he been around? Or had he just recently returned to bite me?

So many questions. None of them could be answered right now.

Should I consider him a stalker? Not that I could call the police. And Pops was aware of him. He'd told me to be careful.

As I walked over to dump my tray, I decided I had no idea what I was getting myself into with him.

THE fiNAL THREE classes of the day were torture. Not because I wanted to drink the blood of my fellow classmates.

No.

I was agitated and couldn't stop thinking about Cindy, about revenant training, and about Christopher coming over. My thoughts made it hard to focus on schoolwork.

I had a feeling if Professor Pops knew what I'd been doing, he'd be upset, or at least concerned.

But he'd fallen in love with his marked.

Now that I was spending time with Christopher, I wondered what that meant. Had Professor Pops bitten her, and she him?

Had she died because of their love?

I knew Professor Pops would tell me, but raising the subject would be difficult.

I felt like I'd already failed him.

Christopher would have the answers, but would he be honest?

I sighed. I had to at least try.

In the girls' locker room, I changed out of my jeans and tee-shirt and into black shorts and a burgundy shirt.

After tying my shoes, I headed out to the field.

So far, it'd been an unseasonably hot fall with little rain.

It looked like that was about to change.

Thick storm clouds filled the sky, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

The rest of the team appeared oblivious and stretched on the field. They never waited for me, probably because I never participated.

Christopher sat in the front, a pretty girl on either side, his legs extended in front of him, his hands touching his toes as the team captain counted slowly.

I stopped, admiring him, trying to see any of the telltale signs proving he was a vampire. He had angular features, his body muscled, especially his arms. I suddenly remembered Kenmei showing me the blade tattooed on his arm - the mark of a hunter.

Where was Christopher's? I stepped closer, trying to see it.

Christopher wore a black tank, so it should be easily visible. He glanced up, giving me a smirk.

I smirked right back.

"Hey, Snow, move out of the way." It was Jackie, the team captain. Apparently, I was blocking her view of Salem Academy's newest hottie. Blerg.

I stepped to the side and around to his back. I couldn't see it on either arm near the shoulder.

"Looking for something?" Christopher asked, laughter in his voice.

"Where is it?" I crouched down and touched his arm in the vicinity of the place I'd seen the tattooed blade on Kenmei.

At my touch, the blade appeared on his shoulder like magic.

I jumped back, falling on my butt.

Everyone laughed.

"What a surprise. She just tripped over nothing and fell," someone said.

Jackie gave me a wicked smile. "Shocker."

Christopher leaped up and pulled me into his arms. I buried my face in his chest, ashamed of my less than graceful fall.

"Knock it off," he shouted.

Rage radiated from his body so that he was practically pulsating.

So close to him, my heart started beating rapidly.

He smelled divine, and I knew he tasted even better.

"How dare you?" he roared at my teammates, his breathing heavy.

"Chill," one of the guys said.

"Yeah, Chace. She's used to it," Jackie added.

They were right.

I looked up and placed my hands on either side of his face. "Christopher," I whispered. "It's okay. I'm fine." My voice trembled at the depth of his emotions.

After several seconds, his features softened, and he looked at me. "I'm sorry you were startled. I should've known something like that would happen."

"It's no problem. A brisk enough wind can trip me up." I smiled softly, hoping to ease his temper with a reminder of my klutziness.

It worked.

He beamed a glorious, heavenly smile, causing my breath to hitch in my throat.

"Maybe you should wait a few more days to run; give your abilities more time to kick in." He sported an amused expression.

"Are you questioning your earlier assessment that I'm exceptional?"

He snorted, and I decided to show him, show them all.

"I'm going to run, and I'll be fantastic." I jogged backward a few steps, heading over to the coach.

The coach got out of his chair. Ran a hand over his rugged face. He was probably preparing for a serious injury.

"Hi, coach," I said lightly and kept going.

"Ms. White. What's going on in that head of yours?" He crossed his arms, waiting.

"I'm running today. Just wanted to give you a heads up. Figured you might have a coronary otherwise."

He gasped in mock disdain. "I appreciate your concern, though I'm more worried about you."

"Eh, I'll be fine. You'll see. I might even surprise you." I wriggled my eyebrows, and he laughed, shaking his head.

"Guess it's a good thing I've got 911 on speed dial." Coach pulled his cell from the front of his burgundy polyester shorts and showed it to me to prove he was serious. "Be careful," he added.

"I will," I replied and headed back over to Christopher, jogging in place. Our eyes met, and he looked like he wanted to say something.

"All right, everyone, four times around the track. Go!" Coach's voice rang loud.

"Ready?" Christopher asked, his voice low, pleased.

"Oh yeah."

At that moment, the sky opened up and proceeded to soak me, Christopher, and the rest of the team.

OceanofPDF.com

CATCH CHRISTOPHER

I YELPED, covering my head with my hands as my shoulders rose to my ears. Water dripped from my bangs onto my nose and cheeks.

The air smelled wet and of peppermint.

An eerie gloom gathered around the field in the form of fog.

"Coach, are we going in?" someone shouted.

"Yeah, coach, we can't run in this."

"Are you men and women, or mice?" Coach roared over the rain, tipping his burgundy cap lower on his head.

There was collective grumbling as we all made our way to the track.

Christopher touched my arm lightly. "Catch me if you can, Frosty." He grinned and took off.

I watched him, his fluid body moving in perfect strides.

As I watched Chace run, it was like his feet barely skimmed the ground. Wiping the hair off my face, I started to run.

One foot in front of the other. I could do this.

This time I knew it. I sensed the changes.

When I'd run in the past, my body would tense, my knees would freeze, and, according to Cindy, it looked like I had a board shoved up my derriere.

It felt wrong, and I had no doubt, it looked wrong.

But as I ran now, the crisp rain slapping against my skin, my body seemed to relax as though it were settling in for the first time - ever.

It felt good! I felt good.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up speed, trying to catch Christopher.

Each person I ran past gasped or made a snide comment.

I ignored them. I was on a mission.

Catch Christopher. He was the prey, and I was the hunter now.

That was the refrain I chanted with each step.

Catch Christopher. Catch Christopher. Catch Christopher.

When I was within ten feet of him, a sharp prickling sensation struck me in the back of my left knee, and then the right. I paid it no attention.

But seconds later, a tingling heat spread from my knees, up to my thighs and down my calves. Seconds after that, my legs stopped working altogether.

My right cheek and forehead smacked the track.

An explosion of stars writhed before my eyes, and there was a loud pop.

Nothing from the waist down worked, but damn my face stung.

"Ouch." I pushed up on my hands, lifting my upper body off the ground and shaking my head.

Red liquid spilled into my right eye and splashed onto the asphalt before diluting with the rain.

For most of my life, I'd been trained to worry at the sight of my blood. Now wasn't any different.

"Snow! Snow!" Christopher came up to me and stopped, kneeling in front of me. Through the pouring rain, I heard his fear. "What happened? Can you stand?"

A sob escaped my throat. "I can't feel my legs."

It didn't make sense.

What had happened?

"I'm going to check your spine. Hold still."

I tried to do as he said, but I started shaking uncontrollably.

Whether from the chill of the rain or the fall, I didn't know.

I heard him curse. "Your spine is fine. I'm going to turn you over and lift you. Ready?" He ripped off his soaking tank. "Hold this against your forehead. You're bleeding."

"Duh," I said, but nodded, taking his drenched shirt and pressing it against my head.

With incredible gentleness, he turned me onto my back. "All good?" he asked.

"I think so."

He lifted me, and I wrapped one arm around his neck. "I've never been so grateful for rain in all my life, Frosty. Hang on. I'm going to get you someplace dry and safe."

I closed my eyes, tucking my head into his chest.

And he ran. Super-fast.

I heard Coach shout after us but Christopher didn't stop.

And that's when I figured out what he meant about the rain.

It distorted things, which meant he could play dumb when and if someone questioned how he could run so quickly.

The rain beat against my body like icy pebbles, and it hurt.

I pressed my eyes shut tighter.

I couldn't help but wonder where he would take me.

Maybe to my house.

He obviously knew where I lived. Or his.

I had no idea where he lived.

Did he go to the other realm every day after school?

It was so weird to think about another dimension.

I had so many questions.

After several seconds - or minutes - the rain stopped, and I felt the sun warming my skin. Birds sang, their song bouncing back and forth above us.

I opened my eyes.

Christopher's gaze bore into me, filled with concern.

"I'm going to lay you down."

"Okay," I answered, feeling unexpectedly shy.

He squatted, and I felt my back brush against something soft. Gently, he moved his damp shirt from my forehead. "Healed already." He grunted approvingly.

"I'm going to roll you onto your stomach." One of his hands touched my shoulder. "Ready?"

"Yes," I whispered, trying to gauge from his expression how bad off I was.

Tenderly, he turned me.

I moved my arms upward so that I could rest my chin on my hands.

He'd laid me in some mossy grass.

Running my fingers over it, I was amazed at how soft it felt. In front of me sat a small brown cottage built of wooden logs.

The front door was closed.

A medium-sized glass window sat on either side of it.

The roof looked to be made of tree branches and steepled along the top, so it looked like an upside-down V.

On either side of the cottage was a lush forest filled with trees, ferns, and colorful flowers.

I could hear the rush of a stream nearby and guessed he must've brought me to the other realm.

"I'm going to check the backs of your thighs. You felt a sting behind your knees?"

"Yes, I did." Had I told him about the stinging sensation right before I fell?

OceanofPDF.com

I DIDN'T THINK SO.

After several moments I heard him suck in a breath.

"What? What's wrong?" I asked, trying to turn my head so that I could see him.

One of his large hands appeared. Something was pinched between his thumb and first finger.

I squinted, and suddenly my eyes adjusted like the lens on a microscope. A tiny arrow, no bigger than a sliver. "What. Is. That?"

"It's a pixie's arrow. The tip has been dipped in a toxin. I need to make a poultice to draw out the poison. The ingredients are nearby, but I'll be out of sight."

"Don't go," I cried.

He ran his hands through my wet hair. "You'll be safe here. Only a creature whose heart is pure can pass through the enchantments I've put around this place." He came near so that I could see him. "You'll be fine," he added.

"Where are we?" I asked, changing the subject, trying to keep him with me a little longer.

Christopher's eyebrows furrowed in a way I was beginning to understand meant he was anxious.

"We are in Sharra, the realm of the vampire queen." He quickly kissed the top of my head and rushed away.

"Hurry," I called after him softly. I turned my head, resting my uninjured cheek on my hands. He'd answered one of my questions.

The name of this place was Sharra.

"Sharra," I mouthed. Then repeated it a little louder.

"Sharra." I liked the sound of it.

One question down, one hundred twenty-three more to go, I thought as I stared into the forest.

A beautiful bush, filled with all different pastel-colored flowers, grew directly in my line of vision.

The leaves seemed to be moving.

I took a deep cleansing breath, knowing Christopher would do all in his power to fix me up.

But how did I know that?

I thought about it.

He was my hunter, which meant he had to keep my body safe at all costs. It wouldn't do if I died.

"He will come back," I whispered, focusing on the colorful bush.

Something strange happened.

The flowers separated and began to flutter upward, like butterflies taking flight.

It was beautiful.

Once all of the flowers left the bush, the branches looked stark, empty, like a barren tree in the deep of winter.

Alarmed, I wondered why the flowers had abandoned it.

The petals continued rising and headed toward me.

Astonished, I tilted my head to keep watching.

A bubble-gum pink flower fell onto my arm. I shook it, trying to get it to drop, but it wouldn't budge.

Then a periwinkle blue flower landed farther down my arm, near my elbow, followed by a mint green one.

I peered closer, and the flowers moved. Under the petals were little bodies attached to little heads.

Surprised, I gasped and shook my arm wildly. The creatures stayed in place, their little arms and legs tickling my skin.

Finally, I gave up.

"What do you want? I asked, trying not to sound as afraid as I felt.

There was a slight tinkling sound, and I peered closer. Two female and one male creatures peered back. Their bodies the color of the petals or, I guessed, their wings, and they were dressed in matching clothes.

Both girls wore shimmering dresses, and the guy wore pants and a shirt.

"You look like Peter Pan," I said.

He placed his hands on his hips, also reminding me of Peter Pan, and I laughed. "What are you? Fairies?" I asked.

"We're pixilettes," one of the females said in an elevated, barely audible voice and proceeded to shake her tiny finger at me.

"Pixil-ettes," I repeated, admiring how cute they were, but also slightly worried about why they were standing on my arm.

"That's right. We're in charge of the changing seasons in Sharra, as well as reseeding in the spring and the fall."

The same female bowed, placing one hand over her chest and the other out behind her before flying and landing on my nose. "I'm Arianna."

The periwinkle and mint colored pixilettes fluttered onto my nose next to her.

My eyes started to cross, and the tinkling sounded again.

The male slapped his knee.

"What? Are-are you laughing at me?" I asked, trying to be upset, but they were too cute.

The male bowed. "Apologies. My name is Eon."

"And I am Pava."

"Nice to meet you. My name is Snow." I stacked one hand on top of the other, and rested my chin on top of them both, working desperately not to shake my head and uncross my eyes.

Seemingly all at once, hundreds of pixilettes hovered behind the three I'd met.

Pava turned her toes in. "We'd like to help you. Would that be alright?" she asked timidly.

"You know what's wrong with me?" I asked, stunned.

"We do. And between us, we have enough to reverse the effects of the poison," Eon said.

"I'd be most grateful. Thank you!"

The three pixilettes on my nose flew off and backward.

With relief, I closed my eyes, giving them a chance to realign before opening them.

"Christopher - the guy that was here with me - he left," I sucked in a sad breath and cleared my throat. "He went to get ingredients for a poultice. Should someone tell him?"

"We know Christopher," Eon said, turning and flicking his arm.

The way he moved made me think that he might be someone of great importance.

Three pixilettes flew off in the direction Christopher had gone.

"Right," I agreed, feeling tears prick the backs of my eyes.

I was so new to all of this.

My life had shifted radically in the last few days, and I felt overwhelmed.

Inches from my nose fluttered little creatures with bodies the size of moths.

Until a few minutes ago, I hadn't known they existed.

Arianna's pointy features softened. She flew over and lifted a tear from my lashes, balancing it in her hand.

She placed her other hand on my forehead and patted. "Hold very still, and keep your eyes closed until I tell you," she said kindly.

OceanofPDF.com

EAT YOU FOR DINNER

I BIT MY CHEEK.

Christopher told me nothing could pass through the enchantments unless they had a pure heart.

That meant these pixilettes wouldn't hurt me, didn't it?

I nodded at Arianna and closed my eyes.

For what seemed like hours, I couldn't feel anything, only heard the occasional tinkling, which I now knew was the pixilettes laughing.

I also smelled oregano.

They are seasoning you and intend to eat you for dinner, I thought sourly.

The sensation started to come back into my legs.

It felt like pins and needles were doing a tap dance on my thighs.

I wanted to rub them or shake them to get rid of the pain, but Arianna told me to hold still. Gritting my teeth, I stayed steady, and my mind drifted until I was someplace else.

"CHRISTOPHER CHARMING, GET IN HERE!" The voice sounded muffled.

I looked down at myself and saw I was transparent, like mist.

Reaching out to touch my arm, my fingers went right through me.

Gasping, I swung in a circle, trying to figure out where I'd gone.

I stood in a garage, which I guessed meant this ghostly part of myself was no longer in Sharra.

The garage door looked rusty and unused. The room was cluttered with boxes stacked to the grungy ceiling, a couch covered in a dusty sheet, and other odds and ends.

The walls were aluminum and rippled.

On one wall hung a pegboard with tools, including hammers, a handsaw, drills, and more. Piles of different sized wood rested against the garage door and lay on the concrete floor next to strange-looking steel machines.

Sitting at one of the machines cutting a small piece of wood was Christopher, wearing a striped shirt with a wide collar and brown corduroy pants that belled out at the bottom.

"Charming," I called out, my voice hesitant.

He didn't acknowledge me, but then he hadn't acknowledged the woman who'd yelled at him a moment ago, either.

"I'm going to count to three, and then I'll add on to your chores," the muffled female voice hollered.

Christopher growled. "Coming." Tucking whatever he worked on in his pocket, he started to walk toward me.

"Christopher," I said again.

He didn't stop but went right through me.

I didn't feel a thing.

Freaky!

I turned and watched him open a warped brown door and go through.

"What?" I heard him call before he slammed it.

Alone, I stared after him. "What am I doing here?" I slowly spun in a circle, searching for answers.

Stepping up to the door, I tried to wrap a hand around the knob, but I couldn't grab it.

"Argh." I put a flattened hand against the door.

It disappeared.

So, I stuck my arm, followed by my head, through the door.

Yep, going through objects wasn't a problem for me.

On the other side, I looked around.

The house was small, run-down.

Empty of pictures or any sort of decoration.

I headed into the kitchen.

The decor was retro seventies at its most elegant - orange cupboards, a pea-green refrigerator and stove, and white linoleum flooring.

There was a half-eaten sandwich on the counter next to an empty marbled green glass.

No one was in the kitchen, but I heard talking to my left, so I followed the sound through a wall and into the living room.

I'd never seen so much plaid.

Christopher stood at the foot of a woman lounging on a faded orange recliner.

She handed him some money, which he stuffed in his back pocket.

"Get me a pound of ground beef and a pack of cigarettes - whichever ones are on sale. Don't dawdle." The woman speaking had medium length blonde feathered hair, a heap of blue eye shadow on her lids, and wore a mustard yellow sundress.

She must have been beautiful at one point.

Now she seemed hardened and wrinkled.

"Well, don't just stand there! Go!"

"Yes, ma'am." Christopher's shoulders slumped as he turned and walked past a large front window, plaid curtains pulled back to let in the dying daylight, and opened the front door.

Once it closed, I went through it and stopped at the top of a small concrete landing with three steps leading to a cracked pathway that turned into the sidewalk.

The grass was yellowed, the color of dried hay.

Random toys were scattered about making me wonder if Christopher had younger siblings. He picked up a bike and pedaled so fast, he was nearly at the end of the street before I realized he'd left.

"Christopher, wait!" I called.

I didn't need to worry, though.

My body floated after him as though I was a balloon tied to a string attached to his wrist.

As I glided along, I watched the cookie-cutter houses pass by.

A group of kids played baseball in a park, their banter easy to hear.

Then Christopher turned a corner and houses disappeared, making way for stores, including a 7-Eleven and a liquor store.

He rode across a large parking lot toward what I guessed was a small grocery store called The Apple Store.

Christopher jumped off his bike, letting it fall with a clang to the ground, and ran in.

He went toward the back, past a group of guys in black leather jackets.

For the first time, I was glad no one could see me.

Christopher gave them a wide berth, but I was mesmerized and watched as they pointed at Christopher and began to laugh.

My heart skipped several beats, and warning bells went off in my head.

"Be careful."

Christopher already had the meat and moved on.

The guys sauntered along after him, pushing each other and scaring customers they walked past.

Christopher picked out a pack of cigarettes from a stocked shelf - not a shelf behind a counter or locked glass, the way cigarettes were stored now, but out in the open where anyone could grab them - then made his way down an aisle filled with magazines and books.

I cringed slightly, thinking he'd head for the comics or worse, naked women.

I so didn't want to see that.

Instead, he picked up a woodworking magazine and flipped through the pages.

When he came to the page he wanted, he set the opened magazine on top of the meat and cigarettes and pulled out the piece of wood he'd been working on.

I leaned over his shoulder and noticed it was a carving of a bear. The one in his hand looked almost exactly the same as the one on the page.

Wow, I was impressed.

Christopher had talent.

OceanofPDF.com

NEW BORN VAMPIRE

SUDDENLY THE MAGAZINE flew out of his hand with a thwack, followed by the sounds of voracious laughter.

Christopher's shoulders tensed, and he turned.

"What's the big idea?" he asked, and I perceived his barely contained rage.

The large guy in the middle stepped forward, the others flanking him.

There were five.

Even in ghost form, my heart started pounding in my throat, making it difficult to understand what was said, but I gathered they wanted a fight.

That didn't seem fair, five against one.

The leader shoved Christopher, causing his shoulder to smack against the magazine rack. He righted himself and adjusted his shirt.

The muscles in his shoulders relaxed, and he smirked.

I knew that smirk.

"You'll pay for that," Christopher said quietly.

The leader's mouth dropped. "I doubt it, dickhead."

"How about we step outside and find out." Christopher's tone was smooth, in control. Did he understand what was happening? Did he want to fight them?

Christopher looked seventeen or eighteen but the guys picking the fight were older. Maybe in their twenties.

"Ooooh, he's got balls," one of them said.

The rest laughed, playfully shoving their leader.

A look of surprise skimmed across the leader's face before he

hardened his jaw. "Let's go."

"I've got to pay for these first. Meet you outside in five?" Christopher held up his hand, his fingers spread wide.

Did Christopher want to die?

He acted like they were meeting to hang out, not like they were about to fight.

"We'll be waiting," the leader said.

"Yeah, and don't try to run away. We'll find you," a guy with a missing front tooth said.

"Oh, I won't be running away, but you're going to wish you had." Christopher stepped past them and got in line to pay.

The jerky guys loudly made their way outside and disappeared into the parking lot.

I was terrified for Charming.

What was his plan?

Would he try to sneak out the back?

Once he'd paid and the meat and cigarettes were bagged, he walked out the front door.

It was almost dark, and I didn't see the leather-clad guys immediately.

For a split second, I thought they'd left.

Not the case.

Christopher set the bag next to his bike and made his way over to them.

The leader took off his jacket, removed the cigarette sitting behind his right ear, and handed it to one of the other guys, then put his arms up, his hands in fists.

Christopher shook his head and chuckled but didn't move.

He just stood there with his irritatingly handsome smirk.

"Move," I shouted, fear causing my voice to raise two octaves.

Large overhead lights flicked on.

The leader circled Christopher. "Come on, dweeb, you talked the talk inside. Let's see you walk the walk." As the leader spoke, he moved to punch Christopher in the kidneys.

Quicker than lightning, Christopher spun around, grabbed the leader's hand, and flipped him over, so he landed on his back.

The move knocked the wind out of the guy, and he grabbed his chest, trying to suck in some air.

His friends let out shouts of outrage and surprise, and then they all went after Christopher as one.

A barrage of punching and kicking, swearing and spinning, followed by the cracking of bones and howls of pain.

Everything happened so fast I couldn't keep up, but it looked as though Christopher was winning.

He obviously knew how to take care of himself.

Relief washed over me until I saw a flash of steel.

One of them had a gun.

"You think you're a badass," the guy holding the gun said, his breath coming in ragged gasps, the arm not holding the firearm cradled against his stomach and blood streaming from his nose.

Everyone froze, including Christopher.

Sickness wound through my belly.

"C'mon, don't," another guy said. "That's going too far, man. Put it away."

"Yeah, we can't kill the kid," the leader added. Blood dripped from his left eye.

"Don't hurt him," I shouted, my hands wringing against my sides. "Help!" I cried, even though it was useless.

If anyone was in the parking lot, they already left or were hiding.

"Who says?" the guy holding the gun whispered, his voice filled

with seething fury.

The gun went off with a loud pop like the cork of a champagne bottle, and Christopher dropped.

"You idiot!" the leader shouted.

"Let's get out of here," the guy with the gun said, kicking Christopher in the shins.

They took off running, and I floated, helpless, as a large pool of Christopher's blood emptied onto the asphalt.

"No. No. No," I wailed, tears streaming down my cheeks.

I'd never felt so useless in all my life. I closed my eyes, shaking my head.

"If I'm dreaming, let me wake up," I choked out between sobs.

When I opened my eyes, I hadn't moved.

Sirens sounded in the distance. "Yes, hurry. Maybe he's still alive."

"There, there, young one," a soft, musical voice soothed.

She seemed to appear out of thin air.

She and two others wore black cloaks, large hoods covering their heads.

As one, they glided over to Christopher and me. Frantic, I placed my body in front of him to block her, but she went right through me and knelt beside Christopher.

"Leave him alone!" I cried and was rewarded by a glare from the woman.

She was breathtaking.

Her lips were red as blood, her long hair black as a starless night sky, and her skin glowed the color of moonbeams.

"Come. We must turn him quickly," she ordered, and the other two figures knelt beside Christopher.

The first one gently gathered Christopher's head in her arms, tilted him so that his neck was exposed, and bit.

Vampires, I thought.

The other two sank their canines into each of his wrists.

A moan escaped Christopher, and he arched further toward the first vampire's mouth.

I understood. I'd done the same thing when Christopher first bit me.

A vampire's bite was sensual regardless of whether or not the person was love-starved.

Seconds later, they withdrew, and the first spoke. "Rise!"

Christopher's eyes opened, and I inhaled. His irises glowed red.

"We must go," the first commanded, taking one of his hands.

Right then, I knew who or what she was.

The vampire queen.

OceanofPDF.com

STAINED WITH HIS BLOOD

A CONFUSED LOOK clouded Christopher's features, but he nodded, and they all vanished into the night.

I expected to be pulled along after him, but that didn't happen. My ghostly body remained near the blood. The vampire queen, the other two women - probably worker vampires - left.

And I remained.

Alone.

For some reason, kusala and akusala, those strange words Christopher spoke to me last night, came to mind.

Had those boys been evil, and the vampire queen good?

Did she really save him?

Sure, he still walked and talked and breathed.

But at what cost?

Had he become an empty shell?

A plaything for the queen?

Is that what I would become.

No!

I was more than what my body would become.

Christopher was too.

He cared about me, didn't he?

Frustrated, I crossed my arms, wondering why I was still there.

I was about to take my misty carcass back to Christopher's house when I noticed something familiar in Christopher's blood.

The wooden bear he'd carved.

Hovering so that my nose almost touched the statue, I peered at it

carefully.

It was stunning work, so precise, right down to its claws and the pupils in its eyes.

Deep down, I knew that was the reason I witnessed what happened.

Christopher needed the carving for some reason.

I reached with one hand and grabbed for it. My fingers went right through. I tried again. Again. Again. And again.

"Ugh, please. What do I need to do?" I pleaded.

A tiny thought budded in my heart.

Relax.

I snorted and tried again, with both hands this time.

My hands floated through.

"Awwwww!"

I'd never been so frustrated in all my life.

Relax.

"Fine."

I breathed through my nose, held it a second, and let it out through my mouth.

Relax.

I breathed in, held, and blew out.

The muscles in my shoulders loosened.

The tension left my stomach.

I reached for the carved bear, the buttery wood stained red with Christopher's blood, and picked it up.

"Yes!"

A LIGHT, irritating tapping repeated between my eyebrows near the bridge of my nose.

"Snow. Snow White. You can move now. We have removed the toxins."

Arianna.

I was back in Sharra.

"Christopher," I gasped, and stood, searching urgently for him.

I needed to see him for myself.

A flurry of pixilettes pulsated around me, my quick movements startling them.

"Sorry," I said, breathing heavily.

I stepped forward, and a wave of nausea rocked my body, making me dizzy.

"Easy, Frosty." Warm hands encircled my waist, and his soft chuckle tickled my ear. "I'm here."

I sank into him, pushing down a fearful cry.

Christopher.

My mind still clung to the awful experience I'd just witnessed.

"I saw you," I said, my voice hushed.

"Saw me?" he repeated, touching his fingers to my forehead.

I turned in his arms and put a hand on his neck.

The ache for his blood burned in my throat.

"I watched you fight those awful men, and one shot you."

His hands tightened, but I kept going. "I watched you become a vampire."

He winced and pushed my head against his chest. "Shush. You've had a traumatizing day."

I forced my head up. "No. Don't shush me. I'm telling you I saw her. The vampire queen. She's the one who changed you."

I wasn't sure how I knew, but there wasn't a doubt in my mind I'd seen the face of the vampire queen.

He dismissively shook his head, his gorgeous hazel eyes hooded,

and his lips pursed in a smirk.

His attitude angered me and aroused my hunger.

I wanted him, his blood, the way the queen took it.

And before I could think further, I lunged at him, sinking my now extended, needle-sharp teeth into his warm, inviting throat.

His arms circled me more tightly, holding me while I drank his blood.

When I'd had my fill, I pulled back.

"Better?" he asked.

"Sorry," I said, knowing I'd taken without asking.

"Don't be. Feeling better?" He held me at arm's length, looking me over.

"Yes." I felt great. His blood did something to me. "But what I saw - "

He held up a hand, looking around. "We can discuss it later. Right now, you're supposed to be at Adam Henry's." My face was cupped between his hands. He kissed me gently. "I'll wait here until you get back, okay?"

"But how?" I paused, searching our surroundings, and realized we were standing in my kitchen. My head whirled, and I nodded. "You'd better be," I returned.

Christopher's eyes flicked to my throat.

"It'll be my turn when you get back," he said, his voice low, husky, his thumbs stroking my skin, sending tingles all over my body.

My stomach quivered in anticipation.

"I'd like that." I turned to leave but remembered the wooden bear.

Opening my hand, I was slightly shocked to see I still had it.

Most of it was covered in burgundy so dark it was almost black.

His dried blood.

"What are you doing? Why aren't you - " He stopped, touching my

hand. When he saw what I held, he sucked in a breath. "Where did you get that?"

"I told you I was there."

He crumbled, sagging to his knees. "How?"

I kneeled in front of him. "I don't know how or why, or even where I was, only that you were there, and, after she and the others left with you, I saw this lying in your blood and picked it up." I held my hand out. "For you."

He took it between his first finger and his thumb. "Thank you," he said, his eyes watery. Seconds later, he pulled me into an embrace, his arms crushing me to him. "You have no idea what this means," he whispered against my hair.

The force of his words, the ache, and urgency gave me some idea and caused me to tremble. "You're welcome, Christopher."

As quickly as he hugged me, he released me. "Go. We have a lot to talk about when you get back." He stood and pulled me with him.

"Okay, but stay down here. No snooping." I didn't want him to see my childish room.

"What don't you want me to find?" he asked, planting a swift kiss on my mouth.

Gatsby made an appearance and started howling, winding between Christopher's legs and then mine.

OceanofPDF.com

BOSSY PANTS

"MAKE yourself useful and feed my cat," I said in mock irritation.

He quirked a brow.

"Just don't go in my room," I added.

"Fine. No snooping." He playfully swatted my butt. "Hurry. The sooner you get there, the sooner you'll be back."

I yelped my cheeks hot. "Dude." I left, running at lightning speed over to Professor Pops' house without tripping once.

WHEN I KNOCKED on the door to Professor Pops' house, Daniel answered immediately. "Bout time, Snow. Gabe's been chomping at the bit."

"Gabe?" I asked. Fear raced through me. "I-I thought Dorian was training me today."

"Change of plans. You better get down there."

"Right, thanks, Daniel." I hurried, jogging down the stairs and past the Museum of the Supernatural, into the room filled with weapons. Gabe's angry gaze found mine and slammed my feet to a stop.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"Hey, chill, bossy pants. I'm here now," I said, releasing some nervous energy.

His expression softened. "Sorry. I was worried."

He held the longer sword - what had Professor Pops called it? A katana? - in one hand.

Then came around and stood extra close so that his body hugged mine.

"Let's begin." He took my right hand and placed the sword in it.

I bit my cheek, suddenly nervous.

He doesn't want you. He doesn't want you. He doesn't want you.

The words sounded over and over in my mind.

"Your heart is beating so fast. Are you craving my blood?" His face was so close to mine; I could feel his five o'clock shadow, not to mention the pounding of his pulse.

And I realized he was scared.

Of me.

That knowledge hurt.

"No, I'm nervous about being so close to the blade," I lied.

He swallowed, a loud gulping of his fear.

Why choose to train me if he was afraid?

Gabe might as well shove that pointy stake into my heart.

Stepping away, I turned. "How about you demonstrate the correct way to hold it, and I'll copy you?"

I watched his jaws clench. He nodded.

"Spread your feet shoulder's width apart."

I did as he said.

"Now, bend your knees."

As I bent them, he walked over, set the sword on the counter, and then came over to me.

Yeah, it's still just me. Your best friend. Sheesh!

"Like this?" I asked scowling.

He pressed a hand against one of my butt cheeks. "Tuck that under and hold in your lower abdomen."

I tried to do as he said, but it felt weird. What was up with two guys touching my butt within a few minutes.

"Come on, Snow. It's not that difficult," he said, his voice harsh.

Anger snapped to attention and bloomed like a rose in my chest.

Why was he acting so rude? "I've never done anything like this before, so forgive me if I'm not a pro in two point five seconds, Gabriel."

"Well, hello there, Snowflake." He smirked, and I realized he'd been goading me on purpose.

He picked up his sword and took another off the wall, handing it to me. I took it and glared.

"During battle, anger is good, necessary in fact, but it must be controlled." He started to circle me, and my senses heightened.

I copied the way he held his blade and followed him.

"If you can learn to control your anger, you'll be a force to reckon with," he said.

I snorted. "What about tripping over my feet?"

He stopped. "C'mon, Snow. This is serious. You've got to be prepared. The hunter is working to make sure you become the next queen. And others," he waved his unarmed hand upward, "are planning your demise. Either way, your life could end soon - unless you fight for it."

The poisonous arrow Christopher pulled from my leg crossed my thoughts.

Gabe was right.

"Ugh. Fine," I snapped. "Stop chitchatting and show me what to do!"

WE TRAINED for an hour and a half before I finally started to get the hang of how to stand with my butt and stomach tucked in.

I figured out how to hold the blade correctly - not too tight, not too soft, and move with more agility. I didn't stumble or cut myself once.

Even Gabe was impressed.

By the time we finished, Gabe lightened up, and though the training was intense, I felt like, on a personal level, he and I were

better.

Maybe back to being friends.

"Good job, Snowflake," he said, placing the blades on the wall when we finished. "You surprise me."

"Gee, thanks," I replied, my voice thick with sarcasm, but the compliment made me happy.

He tossed a white hand towel at me.

I caught it and patted my forehead.

The front of Gabe's grey shirt clung to his flat stomach.

His arms and neck glistened with sweat.

I'd worked just as hard as he had, but I hardly perspired.

You're a revenant now, that's why.

For some reason, the thought made me smile.

Yes. I. Am!

Gabe lifted a brow, questioning my sudden silly grin.

He draped the towel around his neck and hung on.

Even sweaty, he was handsome.

"I've got to hit the books, so I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

My smile deflated. "Oh, okay. Later."

As he walked by, he patted my arm.

Great, we're back to awkward.

I followed him out, and Gabe locked the door.

"I'll be by to take you to school in the morning," he said, sounding odd.

I wanted to shake him, forcefully require him to get over his weirdness, and bring back my best friend.

Instead, I waved to his retreating back.

After he left, I browsed around the Museum of the Supernatural, casually checking out each creature, but I'd already decided which one

I wanted to research first.

The hunter.

I hadn't forgotten the look on Christopher's face when he saw the carved bear. It'd been a mixture of excitement, fear, and joy.

That had to mean something, didn't it?

I wanted to see if the answers to my questions, including why finding something belonging to Christopher before he'd turned, could be valuable.

I opened the drawer next to the statue of the hunter vampire, pulled out the book, and placed it on the strange podium in the center of the room.

"Chapter one," I said, and the pages flipped until they reached the correct page.

OceanofPDF.com

ORIGINAL VAMPIRES

ON THE FACING page was a full-color picture of a young man.

He looked to be of Asian descent, with deep olive skin, black eyes, and long black hair.

He posed regally in a navy-blue robe decorated with intricate designs.

He seemed familiar.

Something about the eyes.

Under the picture was a caption: Kenmei Yamata.

"Kenmei," I murmured, and started to read aloud:

"Before the time of man, vampires ruled the earth. They lived in harmony with all creatures, great and small: the trolls, and the goblins, the pixies, and the pixilettes. The dragons of the air and of the sea.

"The griffin and the mermaid. The elf and the dwarf.

"After a thousand years, one vampire rose up from the rest, her magic more potent than all others. She was beautiful, the most beautiful in the land.

"Creatures fell at her feet to worship her. She was also greedy, hungry for power, her heart filled with enmity for all.

"She subjected others to her authority and became the vampire queen.

"But some resisted, and war broke out. Both sides suffered abundant losses.

"In the end, the vampire queen and her followers were forced into hiding.

"Then came the time of man.

"Discovering their usefulness, the queen created the first hunter." I paused, mulling over what I had learned.

"Kenmei was the first hunter," I whispered, remembering the conversation between Professor Pops, Kenmei, and me.

"That's right," Professor Pops said, and I jumped.

I hadn't heard him come down.

Recovering, I closed the book. "So, vampires lived before humans?" I asked swallowing. "They didn't start out human?"

"If by human, you mean like we are now, then no." He shook his head, moving closer to the book.

"Appendix A," he said.

The book quietly flipped toward the back, its pages stirring the air with the smell of old paper.

When it stopped, I unconsciously recoiled from the pictures on the page, finding it difficult to grasp what I saw.

"What are those things?" I finally asked.

The creatures had dark and hairy bodies.

Their arms and legs were the same lengths, similar in proportion to an ape.

Large pointy claws extended from their appendages, and spreading from their backs were sets of glittering web-like wings.

That wasn't even the oddest part.

Their heads were human, covered in smooth skin the color of a baby fawn.

Cherubic, I thought.

The faces of angels.

Each one seemed more attractive, more exquisite than the one before.

The eye colors ranged from blue to violet, to yellow, to orange. The hair growing from their heads matched their eye color, as did

their lips.

"Those, Snow, are what vampires looked like in the beginning."

"They're creepy, yet somehow regal. It's weird." I crossed my arms, desperate to hold in my emotions.

Professor Pops chuckled, and the warmth of his laugh calmed me. "I understand." He placed a hand on my shoulder.

"That's enough for today. Why don't you head on home? Gabe said you did well during training."

"He did?" Maybe he was more comfortable with me than I thought.

"Yes, he did. Now get some rest, and I'll see you after school tomorrow."

"Okay. Plus, I've got a lot of homework to do." Christopher flashed across my mind, and my legs turned to mush.

Jogging toward the bottom of the stairs, I stopped before going up. "See ya, Professor Pops."

"Actually, one more thing."

"Yes," I said, turning. Maybe he decided to share more.

His countenance changed to sadness, or maybe concern. "As your protector, I'm here for you. No matter what. You understand that, right?"

Did he somehow know what I was doing with my hunter? I hoped not.

How humiliating.

I didn't want to discuss that - my feelings for Christopher - with Pops or anyone else.

Thankful for the low lighting in the room, I gulped. "Yes, thank you. It's good to hear the words. I'll remember."

His tense face calmed. "Good." He rubbed his fingers against his jawline, making a scratching sound. "And - " he paused, and I stopped breathing.

Did he expect us to talk now? I couldn't. No way.

But I didn't need to worry.

His features softened, and whatever he'd been about to say died before he spoke.

"Have you had a chance to look through the book of dresses I sent over with the boys? Did you notice the red one near the back? That's the one I'd pick for you."

Confused, I racked my brain a moment until I followed.

He was talking about my birthday party. I hadn't spotted a red dress, but then I hadn't gone through the entire book yet. I

wanted to tell him the red dress would be perfect just to get the whole ordeal over with. I did not understand fashion.

But, if Cindy found out I had an exclusive book full of couture dresses and hadn't let her look through it? My life would be over.

"Near the back?" I repeated, placing a foot on the bottom step.

"That's right."

"I'll be sure to check it out and let you know in the next couple of days. Will that be okay?"

"Of course." Professor Pops waved me away, and I took the remaining stairs two at a time.

On my way out of the house, I said good-bye to five of the seven brothers.

Dorian and Gabe weren't around, which reminded me that I hadn't heard from Cindy since chemistry.

I really hoped she was okay.

Outside, I glanced at the stars, each one so bright, like the moon. Inhaling the crisp night air, I tried to calm myself.

The thought of being alone with Christopher did things to me - to my heart and low in my belly.

I crossed through our yards, hurrying through the thick trees and

brush.

When I reached the stairs leading up to my back porch, I noticed several lights in the house turned on - upstairs, too.

He'd snooped.

My heart skipped several beats as I flung the door open.

"I'm back, Chri - "

For a moment, I think my heart stopped.

Sitting at the dining room table were my dad and stepmother.

"Hello, dear," my stepmother said, a cruel smile lifting her lips. "Surprise."

OceanofPDF.com

TWICE A DAY

"DAD. VIVIANNE. YOU'RE HOME." I wanted to rush over and hug my dad, but my stepmother's scowl held me in place.

Where was Christopher? Had he heard them come home and left? I hoped so.

"Hi, Snow-Angel," Dad said slowly, clearing his throat.

He looked good, more in shape, though he still dressed like an undercover TV cop - Hawaiian shirt, cargo shorts, and socks with sandals. He was tan with natural blond streaks in his otherwise dark hair.

His face crinkled near his eyes from smiling. He and my stepmother sat across the dining table from each other, dozens of bags piled between them.

Apparently, there'd been shopping on their trip.

Gatsby darted from under the table and wound around my legs, yowling for his dinner.

"Don't you feed him? He's too skinny," Vivianne said.

She wore a pair of white shorts and a light blue tank. One tanned leg was crossed over the other, and her wedge-sandaled foot bounced rhythmically.

She was a lot younger than my dad, closer to my age than his. Not a single wrinkle marred her perfect complexion.

Each platinum blond hair on her head rested in place.

"Of course I do. Twice a day, every day." I grabbed Gatsby's kibble from under the sink, poured some into his bowl, and then refilled his water.

Finished, I went to my dad, who rose from the table and shuffled his feet awkwardly near the counter.

"How was your trip?" I asked, hugging him and inhaling his sandalwood aftershave. The scent filled me with comfort and reminded me of a time before my stepmother entered the picture.

Vivianne placed a hand on my shoulder. "Good. We're only here a short time. Then it's back to work." She hooked a finger in my shirt. "Why do you insist on wearing boy clothes?"

She said boy as though it tasted like acid on her tongue.

I pulled away. "They're comfortable."

She balked, walking over to the table. As she dug through the bags, I eyed my dad.

"You have to leave again so soon?" I asked.

"Not for a few weeks. By the time we go, you'll be sick of us." He hugged me again, and I held him tightly.

Our house didn't show it, but my dad was sort of a business mogul.

Cindy said our family had more money than God.

I'd done an Internet search on my dad once and discovered he owned a private jet, kept a building in Boston, and owned more than a dozen vacation resorts all over the world.

But I'd never seen his offices, been to his resorts, flown on one of his planes, or, well felt rich.

Dad didn't act like a wealthy man.

Didn't dress like one either.

Even though our house was small and hidden by trees, it had been built in a pretentious neighborhood in the early eighteen hundreds.

The smallest on the block, most people around us, like Professor Pops, had purchased the land, torn down what stood on it, and rebuilt, which meant that mansions surrounded our little house.

And then there was my stepmother's strange love of all things fairytale.

The décor inside our house could be mistaken for a gift shop rather than a multimillionaire tycoon's residence.

Dad had been around more before my mom died. Now he rarely stayed home longer than a few weeks at a time.

"I could never get sick of you. I miss you when you're gone," I whispered. No doubt I'd be sick of Vivianne, but certainly not my dad. I loved him. When he was around, I felt content and happy. Hugging him tighter, I swallowed a sigh.

Vivianne cleared her throat. "How's Track going? Won any races yet?" Her expression was one of amusement, and I bit back a retort.

"Not yet, maybe soon." I shrugged. My dad and stepmother weren't around enough to know if I'd grown less klutzy, so I had no problem letting them believe that their insistence that I be on the track team was paying off.

"Really? You've figured out how to put one foot in front of the other without tripping?" she asked, giving my body a once over.

"I - " I didn't know how to respond.

It wasn't like I could spill about becoming a revenant.

Viv especially would freak and talk my dad into sending me to an asylum.

Don't get me wrong.

Dad had a backbone.

For some reason, though, he always bent to her will.

"Leave her be," my dad growled, his eyes flashing with anger.

I would've cheered except he immediately turned contrite.

"I'm sure Snow is doing a fine job in Track. Aren't you, Snow-Angel?"

I brushed my bangs out of my eyes. "It's getting better," I replied, nodding to my dad.

"Happy birthday, Snow."

Her words surprised me. It wasn't my birthday for a while still.

"Thanks," I said, glancing at my dad again. His smile was tight.

Viv held a formal lavender dress in her hands.

I had no idea what the materials were called, but the spaghetti strapped bodice was shiny, and the bottom half reminded me of a fluffy lavender cloud. T

he dress sparkled as though diamonds frolicked within the layers. A broad grin spread over her face.

"What do you think?"

Tentatively I stepped forward, touching the little lavender rose belt cinched around the waist.

"It's beautiful." I didn't want to overly encourage Viv. "Where am I going to wear this?"

She huffed, exasperated. "Mr. Henry told us about the birthday party he's planned for you." She turned and walked back to the table.

From a bag, she pulled out something wrapped in tissue paper.

"Hold this," she said, handing my dad the dress.

After he took it, Viv carefully removed the white paper, producing a stunning mask, decorated in glittering beads of lilac, teal, and fuchsia the same shades as several soft-looking feathers that protruded from one side. The beading around the eyes was black.

"Mr. Henry said the party theme was a masked ball." She touched a delicate feather. "This mask is from Milan and cost more than most people make in a year."

OceanofPDF.com

KEEP YOUR HAIR ON

MY DAD GRUMBLED, uncomfortable. He didn't like to talk about money.

"You'll look lovely. The black beading will bring out your stunning blue eyes," Viv added, ignoring him.

I reached out, drawn to the colorful beading.

Viv slapped my hand away. "Wash your hands first." She took the dress from my dad. "I hope this fits you. It's hard to tell under all those baggy clothes."

"What size is it?" I asked, drying my wet hands on a towel.

"Tut-tut. Go try it on."

I took the dress and went upstairs. There wasn't a tag or a size in the dress.

Viv probably didn't know.

When I entered my room, I casually peeked around before closing my door.

"Christopher. Charming, are you here?"

I checked my bathroom, the shower, my closet, even under my bed. He wasn't there. My stomach sank.

He must've left. I hoped he'd come back later - after they went to bed.

"Snow! Hurry up," Viv shouted from below.

"Okay." I tore off my clothes and cautiously stepped into the dress, zipping up the side. I went to the full-length mirror and twirled side to side, watching the dress glimmer.

It fit perfectly.

"Snow!" Viv hollered again.

"Keep your hair on," I muttered, opening the door.

At the top of the stairs, I paused.

Viv noticed me first.

"Snow, you look amazing." She clutched her hands together.

"Yes, you do. Like royalty," Dad chimed in.

Viv gave him a dark glance. Then she scowled in my direction.

"Come down. Let me see you close up."

I walked down the stairs.

Before I reached the bottom, her hands were on me, pulling and tugging.

I hoped she didn't rip any of the material.

"It isn't perfect, but you'll do," she said when she finished. "I wouldn't want anyone at the party thinking we're cheap."

I wiped the grin off my face and nodded. I didn't bother mentioning that Professor Pops had brought me a book filled with Vera Wang designs and that I would be wearing one of those dresses if any dress at all.

"Well, I'm tired. I'm going to bed." I gave Viv an awkward hug. "Thank you for the dress. It's gorgeous. I love it."

I wasn't completely lying. If it had been another color, it would've been perfect.

She patted my arm. "Of course." She moved back over to the bags, rifling through them again.

Dad pressed me to him.

"Thank you, Dad."

"You're welcome, Snow-Angel. Good night."

"Night." Before I started up, Viv brought over a hanger nestled in a garment bag along with the bag that held the mask.

"Put the dress in here and make sure the mask is somewhere safe." She pressed them into my outstretched hands.

"I will."

Gatsby followed me upstairs and jumped on my bed. He curled himself into a ball, his blue-grey eyes watching me.

"Do you think you're underfed?"

He licked his mouth.

"Definitely not," I answered for him. "You're a perfect size. Quite handsome."

I hung up the garment bag and placed the sack holding the mask on the shelf above my clothes.

Carefully I stepped out of the dress and hung it up inside the garment bag.

After pulling on a cherry tank and a black pair of PJ pants, I brushed my teeth, washed my face, and climbed into bed. I tucked my hands under my pillow.

My fingers brushed against something.

Rolling to my stomach, I lifted the pillow.

There was a red gem in the shape of a teardrop attached to a long silver chain. It was about the size of my thumb.

Under the necklace rested a piece of paper with a note scrawled on it. I flipped on the lamp next to my bed.

I read it:

Frosty, I'd intended to wait until your birthday party to give you the necklace, but I may not be able to make it. So, I'm giving it to you now. The gem is filled with magic, like you. Wear it always, please. It'll keep you safe. I'll see you soon.

Your hunter,

Christopher.

I READ the note several times. Each pass caused my heart to constrict in pain.

He wouldn't be able to make it to my party?

It was more than a month away.

Would he be gone that long? I eased the delicate chain over my head, watching the gem glint against the filtered light.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

Gatsby came over and rubbed his head against my hand, purring.

I scratched him behind the ears.

"I'll be fine, kitty."

Folding the note, I tucked it under the lampstand and turned off the light.

Gatsby nudged me, a not so subtle hint that he still wanted to be petted.

With a sigh, I accommodated and thought about the last time I'd seen Christopher.

We'd been in my kitchen.

He was excited, stunned, and happy about the wooden bear.

"What's going on?" Weary after a long day, I closed my eyes.

My mind wandered back through all I'd done. School. Track. Going to Sharra. Meeting the pixilettes, weapons training, and then my dad and stepmother.

It felt like I'd lived a week in one day.

I hadn't done any homework, though.

Not good.

Hopefully, I'd be able to get it done tomorrow during classes.

"SNOW WHITE, COME CLOSER." Her voice seemed to whisper inside my mind.

The room was round with walls made of rectangular rocks.

A darkened window prevented any light from entering.

The vampire queen sat on a large throne decorated in jewels that twinkled in the light from the candelabras.

All around the room sat others - all women.

They seemed angry. Their rage barely contained. Their eyes gleamed a golden yellow like the sun.

Had she brought me here?

"Is this Sharra?" I asked, working to keep my focus on her and not the others. They frightened me, their gazes following my every move.

The queen smiled, flashing her sharpened canines.

She was so beautiful it hurt.

The images I saw in the book at the Museum of the Supernatural invaded my mind - ape bodies and bat-like wings with their faces human-looking.

She'd looked like that at one point.

I wondered if those kinds of vampires still existed or if they all died.

OceanofPDF.com

REVEALING THEIR FANGS

"I SEE Christopher has been enlightening you. Yes, this is Sharra, a realm of my creation," the vampire queen answered.

A long, old-fashioned gown hugged her curvy body and spread out around her in tones of emerald and pine. Black ribbing crisscrossed the bodice.

Her raven-black hair was done up in hundreds of curls, a diamond tiara peeking out in front. An emerald choker captured her neck.

Thick black lashes framed iridescent blue eyes, and her lips shone red as blood, as did her long manicured nails.

"Come closer so I can look at you."

My body responded to her alluring voice, and I moved forward.

Would she take me now?

Had my time run out already?

I wasn't prepared.

At least, according to Professor Pops, I still needed to drink my true love's blood.

As one of the marked, that was how I was to change.

Gathering confidence, I lifted my chin.

"What do you want?"

My question infuriated the other vampires.

They launched out of their chairs, hissing and revealing their fangs as they stalked toward me.

There was no escape.

I was surrounded.

A quick look at the queen revealed she was smiling.

Did that mean she was through with me?

She wanted her vampires to tear me to shreds? To drink me dry?

But I wasn't ready to die. Not even close.

"No. Stop," I shouted, glaring at her with determination.

It dawned on me suddenly that I was still in my PJs, but I didn't have time to be self-conscious.

The vampires closed in, circling me.

They were so close I caught their cloying, too-sweet scent, but they didn't attack.

It was like they were trying to scare me, not actually eat me.

Their tactics were working. I was scared, and I crossed my arms over my face.

In that same instant, a red light exploded from my palms into the vampire nearest me. She burst into flames.

"Whoa!"

Those closest to her screamed and ran when some of the flames touched them, their bodies blackening.

The others froze, their beautifully fanged faces filled with apprehension.

"No, don't hurt them!" the vampire queen shrieked.

I almost laughed though nothing about the situation was funny.

She had been bluffing.

I BOLTED UPRIGHT, throwing off the covers and frightening Gatsby.

"Sorry, boy," I whispered, trying to calm my racing heart.

Heading into the bathroom, I filled a cup with water and chugged it down.

A movement from behind startled me, and my heart pulsed.

Something was in my room, near the window.

And like an idiot, I moved closer.

It was a squat creature, like a big blob of mud with yellow cat eyes.

"Are you real?"

It opened its mouth. A bright pink tongue licked two slits that I figured could be its nose.

"She sees me," it said in a raspy voice.

"Yes, I see you. Is there someone else here?" I quickly scanned the room.

Gatsby stood on my bed, his back arched, and hissed.

"Magic, my queen. The girl possesses magic." Moving more rapidly than I believed possible, it opened my window and jumped.

"Wait!" I called going to the window.

The creature bounded across my back lawn like a giant toad and disappeared into the thick brush that lined the property.

THE NEXT MORNING after getting ready, I went downstairs and was surprised to find Vivianne in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. She had on a pair of sweatpants with the word SEXY in bold letters across her butt and a matching hot pink hoodie.

Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

"Pancakes sound okay?" she asked, smiling. She seemed so young.

"Um, sure." I'd been vegan since Viv and my dad married.

I wondered if she'd made the pancakes vegan friendly. Something told me she'd fixed them her way.

And, really, did it matter anymore?

All I wanted was blood. Christopher's blood.

Regular food no longer appealed to me in any form.

At the thought of Christopher, I touched the gem teardrop under my shirt.

A dark expression darted across Vivianne's features as she gave my

clothes the once over. Faded jeans and a sky-blue tee shirt.

The Pillsbury Dough Boy winked from my chest.

It took an enormous effort not to ask her what her problem was.

This was one of my favorite shirts.

"Have a seat." She indicated a stool under the counter with the spatula in her hand.

"Thanks, Viv. You didn't need to do this. I could've made myself something."

Like my tea. I'd put the bloodlust mixture in a white stoneware canister with the words Brown Sugar across the front and left it on the counter.

I moved a loaf of bread, and a mustard yellow bowl filled with red apples and sat.

"Have you seen the brown sugar canister?" I asked, opening the cupboards.

She didn't answer, and I turned to catch her watching me, her face unreadable.

"Yes, dear. I threw the contents in the sink and tossed out the canister. It stank." Viv shrugged.

"Whatever you had in there couldn't have been any good. I know you're a health nut, and I'm fine with that, but I won't have you doing drugs in this house."

How did she get to drugs?

"They were herbs. For a tea I need." I ran over to the sink, but it was empty.

Fear swallowed me.

I didn't know if my lack of lust for blood was because I drank from Christopher or the tea, and I didn't want to find out.

Come to think of it, I hadn't had any of his blood or the drink in over twenty-four hours.

I breathed in and was relieved to realize that, though I could smell her blood, it didn't cause a craving.

"Sure, whatever you say. I know how the kids are now. They think because that stuff is legal, it's okay to do whatever you want. But not in this house. Not while I'm around." She gave me her signature, wicked smile. "Sorry, Snow." She indicated a plate where she'd just put a pancake. "Why don't you sit and eat?"

OceanofPDF.com

IGNORE HIS BEATING HEART

I WAS furious and ground my hands into fists, forcing back the words I wanted to say.

"No, thanks. I've got to get to school." I grabbed my backpack from the dining table and ran out the back door.

At the bottom of the stairs, I remembered I hadn't fed Gatsby.

No way was I going back in there, though. He'd be okay.

Maybe my dad was right. I'd be glad to see him go because it meant he'd take Viv with him.

I crossed the yard, making my way to Professor Pops' house. I hoped he was home. I needed to explain the tea situation.

Hopefully, he could get some more from Kenmei. Seconds after I knocked on the door,

Bart answered.

He wore dark jeans and a white button-down shirt. His blond hair was still a little damp, probably from a shower.

"Hey, Snow. Come on in."

"Thanks." I stepped into the high-ceilinged foyer, admiring the enormous sparkling chandelier while he closed the door.

"Is Professor Pops around? I need to talk to him."

"Yep, in the kitchen. Don't freak out, but there's a meat extravaganza in there. We didn't know you were coming." He looked guilty.

I laughed. My veganism was moot at this point anyway.

"It's okay. I know you guys eat meat." Then I leaned away, trying to ignore his beating heart. "Besides, with me being a revenant and everything, I probably shouldn't worry about the whole vegan thing

anymore, ya know?"

"True. I forgot." He sauntered into the kitchen, and I followed him.

The smell of cooking meat - bacon, sausage, and eggs - pummeled my senses, and I bit back nausea. Maybe I was still Vegan after all.

"Look who it is," Bart said, taking a seat at the sleek table filled with food.

Eight sets of eyes bored into me, each man in various stages of consuming their breakfast.

"Hi, guys." I raised my hand, giving them an embarrassed wave.

"Snow," Professor Pops rose, placing his napkin on the table. "Is everything okay?"

I shook my head. It wasn't, for several reasons, many of which had to do with my stepmother.

"Can I talk to you privately a second?" I didn't want to worry the guys, have them think I'd become a blood-sucking crazy pants who would try to bite them, or worse.

"Sure," he said, glancing back at the boys. "There'd better be two slices of bacon left when I get back."

He was a vampire. How could he like the taste of food? Didn't he still need blood? Oh, the questions. My head hurt.

"Let's go into my study."

I followed him down the airy hall and into his office. "What's happened?" he asked, closing the door.

"Nothing. Yet." I absently stroked the old wooden desk next to my leg. "It's just my dad and stepmother came home last night."

That wasn't how I meant to open. I'd planned on getting right to the point. I needed bloodlust tea.

Professor Pops let out a frustrated huff. "How is that going?"

"Viv threw away my bloodlust tea," I blurted, worried he would be mad.

Warmth soothed his features though there was some irritation.

Vivianne tended to cause that reaction in people.

"That woman." Pops went around to the business side of his desk and sat in a sizeable camel-colored leather chair.

"Have a seat," he said.

I obeyed and watched him dial a number on his cell phone.

"Kenmei-sensei. It's Adam." There was a pause, and a smile flitted across his lips. "I'm well, old friend." Another pause. "It seems we require some more of your special tea." Pause.

His lips pressed together in a thin line. "Yes." Pause. "Great. I'll send one of the boys by to pick it up later today."

A longer pause. "Are you sure?" Pause. "Great, I'll see you then." He hung up the phone, rested his hands on the large calendar on his desk, and gave me a wary look.

"Kenmei-sensei will bring the tea by later today. He's also asked that he be the one to train you this afternoon."

Nervous flutters pirouetted across my tummy. The man was scary, but my fear came from more than knowing the oldest hunter would be training me.

I was also worried about school.

"Great," I said, knowing I should go, but I wasn't ready.

"Will you be alright at school?" His intense gaze bored into me.

"Yes. I think so. Thank you, Professor Pops." I forced myself not to fidget under his contemplation.

For some reason, Christopher's face appeared in my mind.

He wouldn't be in chemistry or at lunch or track practice.

I swallowed sadly.

In the past few days, he'd become my ally, my friend, the only person I wanted to be around.

"Excellent." He came around to the door. "Take care."

I readjusted my backpack. "I will." My voice belied the apprehension I harbored.

He smiled kindly. "Don't worry. You'll be fine. I'm sure of it."

We made our way back into the kitchen.

The guys were mostly done eating and were packing up to leave.

I searched for Gabe, but he'd gone.

"Dorian, will you give Snow a ride to school?" Professor Pops asked.

"I'd love to." Mischief twinkled in his eyes.

That was how Gabe used to act.

I thought of the night Gabe helped me up after I fell in the parking lot at Warehouse Video.

That wasn't very many days ago - maybe five?

It felt like a lifetime.

As I followed Dorian to the garage and got in his beefy black Mustang, my thoughts turned to Cindy.

"Did you ever hear back from Cindy?" I asked as he started the car, and it roared to life.

Distress or sorrow crossed his face but was gone immediately.

"Yes. She's fine. I believe a dude was involved like everyone thought. No biggie."

Dorian was lying.

Why?

The teardrop gem warmed under my shirt, and I grabbed hold of it.

"Really?" I asked, not sure how to call him on the lie.

"You heard from her, her actual voice?"

OceanofPDF.com

I WANT YOU

"I'VE TALKED TO HER, SNOW." Dorian's voice betrayed the sarcasm oozing over his words.

His heart pounded - steady, but was it faster than usual? I wasn't sure.

Taking a deep breath, I caught a whiff of his aftershave.

He smelled good. Clean. Appealing.

His blood sang me a sultry song.

My mouth watered.

I'll be fine, I told myself, covering my nose and mouth with my hand.

"You alright, Snow?" He glanced at me. His eyes full of concern.

"Sure. I rest my hand over my nose and mouth all the time," I mumbled, irritated.

Illumination dilated his eyes. He knew what I needed, what I wanted.

The way the muscles in his thighs and shoulders tensed told me as much.

My face heated and I looked away, out the window at the houses and trees zipping by.

"Snow, I told you if you ever needed blood, I'd gladly let you take from me." The car slowed, and he pulled over to the side of the road.

He shut off the engine and scooted beside me.

"Go ahead," he said, his voice soft.

Shocked, I watched him, studying his face, my eyes lingering on his lips.

He swallowed, and my gaze shifted to his fully exposed neck. His

pulse beat loudly, begging me to take what I wanted.

Mesmerized, I took hold of his arms, and my canines grew.

"Dorian." I heard the word leave my mouth but didn't recognize my voice.

In answer, he placed his hands on either side of my face.

"Please. I want you to," he said, his words heavy with emotion.

I inhaled through my nose, enjoying the appealing scent of his skin.

He smelled different than Christopher.

Simple.

Earthy.

It was more than that, but I couldn't place the smell.

I just knew it had my mouth watering.

Before I realized what I was doing, I slowly licked his neck.

Tasting his skin.

Dorian pressed his neck against my tongue, his pulse beating faster. His movements sent a lightning bolt of lust low in my belly.

My teeth lightly grazed his neck, and Dorian's fingers moved to my hair, tangling in the strands.

"Yes. Oh, please. Yes."

He tugged me onto his lap, and my lust grew.

His scent was heady, intoxicating.

Professor Pops said I'd drink from a human, and Dorian was begging me to.

How could I resist? Why?

At that moment, I made a decision. I

would taste Dorian's blood.

I ran my fangs along his neck, ready to sink them in -

A red light shot between us like a flash of lightning.

We both jumped, and I screamed.

Dorian's eyes remained glazed a moment longer before he snapped out of it. He cleared his throat, shaking his head.

"What was that?"

"I'm not sure," I responded, pressing my back into the seat, clutching my hands into fists. "We'd better get to school. We don't want to be late."

I worked to calm my desires.

He glanced at the clock. "You're right, but remember, I'm here if you need me."

He slid back over to his side of the car, turning on the engine before pulling back onto the road.

"Thank you, Dorian." I leaned my head against the window and caught sight of someone in the side view mirror.

Dressed like a hunter in fairytales - brown trousers, brown leather boots, a forest green shirt opened at the collar.

Around his hips was cinched a leather belt, another strapped over his shoulder.

The face was hidden in the shadows, but the way he held himself seemed vaguely familiar.

My first thought was of Christopher, but I brushed it aside.

It couldn't be him.

Had the man seen what I'd almost done?

Would he have tried to stop me?

Panic glided up my spine.

Dorian gave me a sidelong glance. "I'll be training you after school today."

"Cool," I said, forcing my lips into a smile.

No sense telling him I'd actually be training with Kenmei.

He'd find out soon enough.

OceanofPDF.com

DORIAN EYED MY FORK

DORIAN HAD BEEN RIGHT about Cindy.

She was already in chemistry, sitting in her seat.

She glanced up as I ambled past our table.

"Konnichiwa," she said.

My eyebrows lifted in question, though for some reason I understood she'd said hello - good afternoon specifically - in Japanese.

Ohayo gozaimasu meant good morning.

My heart lurched with anxiety.

Maybe the pendant?

"That means hello in Japanese," she said, her face filled with pride. "I'm soooooo over French. The language is," she paused and shrugged before continuing, "boring."

I hid a smile.

Once the newness of a language wore off and started to get tricky, she moved on.

"Hey, yourself," I responded. "What happened to you yesterday? I was worried." I sat on my stool.

She looked irritated a moment but waved it off. "I had some stuff to do."

I snorted, only slightly irritated.

"Flirting with a boy kind of stuff?" I asked, pulling out my binder and book and flopping them on the table.

She twirled some of her blond hair in her fingers and winked. "So, what's going on with you and Charming?" She nodded toward his empty chair, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

He was gone.

I didn't know where, but he'd said he wasn't coming back for a while.

"Nothing." That was true enough now that he was gone.

Cindy let out an exasperated grunt and rolled her eyes. The girl was way too perceptive.

"Fine, I like him, but it's nothing big." I felt for the gem hanging under my shirt and wrapped my fingers over it.

I crave his blood, but that's it. Really.

"Wait, I thought you liked Gabe," I said, confused by her jealousy. She was giving me whiplash worse than I was giving it to myself.

Annoyance squished her features for the briefest moment. "I'm over him, too." She opened her notebook.

I laughed nervously. "Oh, well, have you seen Chri - Chace?" I might as well pretend I didn't know he left.

"No." She shook her head for emphasis. "Haven't seen him." Her voice caught as she spoke the words.

She was lying.

Before I could control my expression, my eyes scrunched together, accusing.

"What?' she said. "I haven't seen him since yesterday." Cindy turned away, fiddling with the ragged edges of her notebook paper.

The bell rang, and Mr. Wallace, ever the timely teacher, walked in and started class.

He passed out an assignment and began talking, but I wasn't listening.

When the bell rang to end the class, Cindy was out of her seat and at the door before I'd picked up my backpack.

Taking a deep breath, I walked out of the room alone.

AT LUNCH, I sat in my usual spot. The guys made their way over.

Gabe and Cindy entered the cafeteria together and got in the lunch line.

They were talking, their words and gestures animated.

Cindy reddened.

I gripped my plastic fork so tight it snapped in two.

It sure as hell didn't look like she was over him.

The guys, who'd been talking randomly, glanced at me.

Dorian eyed my broken fork.

"What's up, Snow?"

When I didn't answer, he turned to see what made me so upset.

"Don't worry about them," he said, clearing his throat. "It's nothing."

I nodded and tried to focus on the mandarin orange cup I'd chosen for lunch.

It wasn't right to be jealous.

I knew that.

Christopher - even thinking his name punched a hole in my gut - and I were secretly doing things that didn't make it right for me to be green-eyed, but I was.

Gabe brushed Cindy's hair from her face, and that was the last straw.

My mind zeroed in on Gabe like a stalker with binoculars.

Adjusting my senses, I listened to his rapidly beating heart.

Smelled the scent of his body wash, the decadent aroma of his blood, his skin.

I heard him talking.

"Want to come with me to Warehouse Video after school? We could grab a coffee and talk," he said to Cindy.

Cindy laughed. The one she used when she flirted. "Okay. My shift

at Bertilini's ends at seven. Can we meet after that?"

He smiled.

My heart broke.

"Sure. I'll pick you up."

Cindy nodded. "Great." She selected some food and scanned the room, her eyes finding mine.

I heard the intake of her breath and could only imagine the emotion plastered on my face. Anger. Fury. Possibly avocado - the shade of sick jealousy.

Gabe must've heard her because he glanced up before following her gaze.

"Snow, chill. Really. You don't understand," Dorian said, squeezing my hand.

I yanked my hand away. "No. I understand completely. And it hurts." I picked up my tray. "See you later."

I heard Cindy call my name but couldn't answer.

Fury like I'd never experienced boiled in my veins.

The lunchroom turned hazy.

Every heartbeat pounded through me, hundreds of harmonized drums.

The intoxicating scent of every person's blood in that room packed my veins, but most especially Cindy's.

I somehow knew which was hers, and I wanted to drain her - not in the way I'd thought about drinking from Dorian.

Not even close.

I wanted her blood to be mine.

I wanted her dead.

That knowledge rocked me with guilt, with fear, but mostly with exhilaration.

Professor Pops' words entered my thoughts: "The more blood you

drink, the more like a vampire you'll become. It's like anything in life; if you work to keep yourself as human as possible, that part of you will remain, will be the strongest. If you consume human blood, the way a vampire does, that part of you will become the strongest."

I knew if I drank from Cindy, I'd kill her.

The way I was fuming, I wouldn't stop until she was dead. It didn't matter that she was my best friend.

I had to get out of there.

Someplace quiet.

The library.

I hurried inside, searching for a place to hide in the back.

There was a lone free table, and I dropped my backpack on it before falling into the chair. The haze still blurred my vision.

I took several deep breaths, filling my nose with the scent of dusty books.

Another breath.

I rested my arms on the table and dropped my forehead onto them as hot tears spilled from my eyes.

I couldn't do this.

I didn't want to.

Maybe it would be better if the vampire queen took my body now.

All I had to do was drink my true love's blood. And kill him. There was that, too.

"No!" I whispered fiercely.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed away the desires for Cindy's blood, my desire to hurt her.

She'd told me she liked Gabe.

Plus, she'd been my best friend for a long time, and she was a good person.

If my anger should be directed at anyone, it was Gabe.

He'd caved, broken his promise because I'd been bitten.

That wasn't my fault.

How could he be so cruel? I needed him - at least his friendship.

Not the cold shoulder he gave me.

And Christopher.

Seeing Cindy with Gabe would've been a lot easier if he'd been there.

If he hadn't left.

Everyone leaves, my inner voice scolded, and I swallowed a sob.

A high-pitched cough erupted nearby.

Lifting my head, I saw Pava, the periwinkle blue pixilette I'd met in Sharra.

"Pava?" I whispered.

She fluttered to my arm and bowed. "Snow. You are in danger. Watch the shadows and tell no one you have the pendant Christopher gave you. Never take it off. Promise." She fell to her knees.

She looked paler than usual.

Actually, it looked like she was turning the color of dried cement.

"What's wrong?" I cried, concerned, but I didn't touch her.

I didn't want to hurt her.

"Promise," she wheezed, falling forward.

"I promise." Carefully I lifted her into my hand.

No longer blue, she'd become dingy grey, like a dirty wet sock.

A wing fell off.

Paper-thin, I watched the veins turn from blue to grey to white.

She patted my hand.

"Pava," I cried softly, desperation filling my voice. I didn't know what to do. "What can I do? How can I help?"

A smile touched her lips as she began to shimmer. A reddish glow

emanated from her, and then she was gone.

"Pava?" I shouted, standing.

The librarian came around the corner. "Everything alright?"

I searched, frantic, a second longer, but she'd literally vanished.

"Y-yes. Sorry." I swiped my backpack, brushed away a tear, then left the library.

I needed to talk to someone, but who? Professor Pops? No, I couldn't speak to him.

If I did, I'd have to tell him about Christopher and the pendant, and I wasn't ready to do that.

The Museum of the Supernatural.

Since Pava mentioned it specifically, there might be something about the necklace in the book on pixilettes.

I'd check it out tonight, right after school.

Skip Track and head over to his house.

I could do some reading before training.

My insides froze at the thought of practicing with Kenmei, the wise old hunter.

OceanofPDF.com

MY CANINES GREW

AFTER SCHOOL, I went over to Dorian's locker to wait.

Out of everyone, he was the one I felt most comfortable with, even with thoughts of sinking my teeth in his neck.

He allowed me to be myself.

He accepted me, liked me.

And he wanted me to drink from him.

My knees trembled.

"Snow. Can we talk?"

My body tightened.

The hall blurred.

The angry craving for Cindy's blood once again boiled through my veins.

I had to get out of there.

"Go away, Cindy. I-I can't be around you right now."

I took off down the hall, through the front commons area and out into the crisp fall air. I knew she followed. I'd zoned in on her heartbeat, the aroma of her blood.

My canines pressed against my lips. I searched the parking lot for Dorian's car. The Mustang still sat in the same spot he'd parked in that morning.

Relieved, I rushed over, hoping Dorian would come soon.

When I arrived at the passenger door, I stopped. Trapped.

Cindy stood a few feet away, her face screwed up with sadness.

My heart sank. "What do you want?"

"I miss you," she whispered, her bottom lip trembling. "Ever since I went to the Cape, you've been weird. Different. Did I do something to

make you mad?" She stepped closer.

The pounding of her heart, forcing blood through her body, made the back of my throat ache. "No. You didn't do anything. I - " This wasn't her fault.

Gabe chose Cindy.

Plus, I didn't deserve Gabe.

I'd been making out with Christopher.

I breathed through my mouth, closing my eyes, thinking about anything but her blood.

An image of the necklace came to mind, and I thought of Christopher, followed by the pixilette who died.

Being jealous of Cindy was the least of my worries.

Taking another breath, I opened my eyes.

Her face was inches from mine, and I screamed.

How had she done that? "Cindy?" I gulped, pressing my back against the doorframe.

"I've changed too, you know. We should talk." A glint of humorous annoyance flickered in her eyes.

"O-Okay," I sputtered. Now that she mentioned it, her face seemed slightly different, more angular. Her cheeks hollow, her eyes a more dazzling blue.

"Cindy," Dorian barked. "Get away from her."

Cindy seemed to move back faster than humanly possible. She turned on her heel and started to walk off. A moment later, she paused and looked back. "Tomorrow night? Let's get together, 'kay?"

"Sure," I agreed, swallowing the strange panic that'd crept in.

After she'd gone, Dorian pushed a button to unlock the door. I climbed in and waited for him.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. What's up with her?" I indicated Cindy's retreating

form.

He seemed about ready to tell me, but then he changed his mind. "I don't know."

"You're lying, Dorian." He was a terrible liar. "I can tell, and I don't like it. Tell me what the hell is going on."

He faced me, his eyes serious. "You're right. I am lying, but I can't tell you. Professor Pops asked me not to. Not yet." He turned over the engine.

My mouth hung open. "Why? Does he really think anything can shock me at this point?"

Dorian pulled out of the parking lot.

When we were headed toward home, he rolled his shoulders.

"There's still a lot that can surprise you. Trust me." He gave me a look that said he was serious. "And be careful."

OceanofPDF.com

MUSEUM OF THE SUPERNATURAL

DORIAN DROPPED me off at my front door.

I figured I should probably let my dad know I'd be at Professor Pops', so he didn't worry. It seemed like the responsible thing to do.

Tossing my backpack on the table, I went to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottled water.

"I'm home," I called out after taking a sip.

The cool liquid soothed my parched throat.

No one answered, so I went into the living room, then upstairs, where I knocked on their bedroom door.

They weren't home.

I made my way back downstairs.

On the kitchen counter leaned a folded piece of paper. It just said they'd gone out and would be back later.

"Fine. Two can play this game."

If I had a phone, they could've left me a message or texted me. I'd at least know when they were coming home.

Grabbing a pen, I flipped the paper over.

Next door at Mr. Henry's. I'll be back around nine, I wrote.

Up in my bedroom, I changed into a pair of black sweats, brushed through my hair, and walked over to Professor Pops' house.

Salvatore answered the door.

"You're early." By the look on his face, he'd expected me.

Dorian probably filled him in.

"Yep, I wanted to do some research first down in the Museum of the Supernatural. Okay?"

"Sure." He followed me through the house, down the stairs, and

into the room, I still wasn't used to. "How are you doing with all this?" He motioned with his hands around the room.

"Fine. A lot to learn." I swallowed.

"I've had years to learn about all the creatures, and it still blows my mind." He eyed the dragon near the back.

I was stunned by what he'd said even though I shouldn't have been. Until that moment, I'd believed they learned about the Museum at the same time I did.

But that wasn't right.

Professor Pops said the guys had been trained.

"How old were you when you found out about these creatures?" I walked over to a lemon yellow pixilette. This creature was in a case near the dragon.

At the sight of her - dead - I thought about Pava.

My eyes stung - poor thing.

Salvatore followed closely behind.

"I learned about the supernaturals, and trained with swords, arrows, and such from the time I was twelve."

"Really? Wow. What did you think?"

Salvatore laughed. "The truth is most of us came from - " he paused and ran a hand through his shiny black hair. "We came from less than perfect households. We lived in horrible foster homes or facilities that kept us like prisoners."

He touched the werewolf, shifting his gaze from me to it.

"Training with Pops, the things he taught us about life, about respect for others and ourselves, the world," he shrugged. "I don't know about the others, but I'd do just about anything for Pops. So when he brought me down here, it didn't bother me like it did some of the others. It's hard to explain, but it was like I already knew these creatures existed, and Pops just confirmed what I believed." He laughed.

"Silly, right?" He looked embarrassed.

"Not at all." I could certainly understand why this room freaked some of the brothers out. If I hadn't been bitten, I probably would've been a basket case.

As it was, I kept meeting new supernatural beings and dealt with them as it happened, which reminded me of the beast I'd seen in my room last night.

"Have you ever seen a creature about this tall?" I indicated my leg at the knee. "Its entire body is brown, like mud. It sort of looks like a frog, but the eyes are more like those of a cat. Plus, it can talk."

Salvatore's face paled. "You saw one?"

I nodded. "Last night. In my room."

"Did you tell Professor Pops?" He looked utterly freaked out.

"No. I forgot."

"How could you forget? Sheesh, Snow. He needs to know that stuff." He crossed his arms.

"A lot's happened lately." I had no excuse except I really had forgotten about it.

He exhaled. "They are despicable creatures called changelings." He clucked his tongue. "I've encountered one before. Evil and vile, but easy to kill." He walked past the pixies.

"They can morph into anything, hence the name, or they can be invisible. All are loyal to the vampire queen, but only a select few can see the creatures when they are in their true form."

He stopped in front of a small case. It was only about eight inches square. Inside was what looked like a moth, only it had two yellow eyes, like a cat. Salvatore pulled out the book and took it to the pedestal used for reading. "Appendix D."

The old pages flipped to the back of the book.

When it stopped, I gazed at the pictures.

On the left page sat the changeling in its true form, and on the

facing page were pictures of a wasp, an elephant, a beautiful woman, and a small puppy.

The one telltale feature was the eyes - in all its forms, it retained the cat's yellow eyes.

"What did it say to you?" Salvatore asked.

"Hmm." I paused, scared. "He seemed to be talking to someone else and stated that I had magic." I shrugged, peering into Salvatore's keen eyes. They were dark chocolate in color.

"We'd better tell Pops for sure. Come on." He put the book back in its drawer and grabbed my hand, pulling me up the stairs.

My stomach tightened in knots.

Kenmei would be here soon if he wasn't already, and I had a feeling our conversation would be about more than my fighting stance.

I touched the necklace beneath my shirt. Its warmth enfolded me.

Where are you, Christopher? I thought, wishing he was here.

OceanofPDF.com

INNATE GOODNESS

WHEN KENMEI ARRIVED, he took one look at me and directed me into Professor Pops' office. "You've changed, Shiryo-san," he said as soon as the door closed behind him.

I gulped down my fear. "Have I?"

"No sense playing coy, revenant." His voice sounded harsh, his eyes hard with anger. "If you intend to survive another month, you've got to trust Adam Henry, the brothers, and me. We are on your side."

He sat in the chair next to mine and took my trembling hands. His eyes softened. "I can help, Shiryo-san. Talk to me."

I nodded, pushing back tears as heat spread from his hands into my skin.

With my new abilities, I listened for his heartbeat. He didn't have one, though I sensed his innate goodness.

"Start at the beginning," he ordered quietly.

I did. I told him everything. The more I talked, the more relieved I became. I hadn't realized how much of a burden I carried, keeping all that happened - and there was a lot - a secret.

As I spoke, Kenmei nodded occasionally but kept quiet.

He didn't ask questions - he didn't seem to need to - and he didn't interject.

He listened.

When I finished, I pulled the pendant from beneath my shirt.

"This is what Christopher left me," I said. "He told me not to take it off, as did Pava, the pixilette I saw in the library today before she died."

He released my hand and took the gem between his fingers.

It flared red, the essence permeating his fingers, so they glowed.

From the light of the pendant, I watched his eyes fill with admiration.

So close, I could smell the spicy scent of my bloodlust tea on him and guessed he still carried it on his person, somewhere within his royal blue robe.

After several moments, he released the jewel and sat back. "I'll bet you feel like you've lived a lifetime these past days," he said quietly.

I nodded, overcome with emotion. "I do."

"Let's see how you feel after you've lived a century or two." A sad smile, almost more of an echo of a smile, formed on his lips.

"After seven thousand years, I'm tired, Shiryo-san." His voice was filled with melancholy, his eyes glassed over like he was far away in another time.

I swallowed, unsure of how to respond.

After a time, he cleared his throat. "Now then, thank you for your honesty."

"You're welcome." My fingers fidgeted in my lap.

"Christopher is right. No harm will come to you while you wear the pendant. It gives the possessor strong magic. Perhaps there is more to your hunter than I first believed. He seems to care for you; otherwise, he wouldn't have parted with such great magic."

"Oh?" I asked, sitting up. For some reason, his words made me feel better. I was glad Christopher cared for me.

"There is only one of these in all the world, Shiryo-san. May I tell you a story?"

"Of course," I replied, knowing he would even if I didn't want to hear it, but I totally did.

"When the world began, vampires ruled."

I nodded.

That piece of information I already knew.

"Ah, so you've seen the pictures then, heard the story?" Kenmei asked.

"Yes. Professor Pops told me they lived before humans. I've seen the pictures. He told me how the vampire queen was the fairest, and about the war."

"Excellent. Did he mention who the first vampire was?"

I racked my brain. "No, I don't think so."

"The first vampire was a female by the name of Silindra. She and Sharra - the now vampire queen - were close friends, but they were also so much more. Sharra and Silindra were sisters. Twins."

I gasped, recognizing the name as that of the realm Christopher took me to.

Kenmei nodded. "Yes, that is why her realm is called Sharra. Now she is known only as the vampire queen, though she allows a select few to call her by her real name."

He waved his hand, dismissing that fact. "Before Sharra's rise, Silindra ruled Earth. She did so with kindness and equality. Her nature was such that everyone loved her, revered her, and even worshipped her above all other creatures."

"Silindra." I'd said her name without meaning to.

When I did, the gem began to glow.

"She was the most powerful being in the world, and that made Sharra jealous. In time, a male vampire named Gabriel, doing the bidding of Sharra, captured Silindra and took her deep within the earth where he tortured her for many days." Darkness crossed Kenmei's face, rippling with pain. "He was cruel beyond measure."

I almost reached out to comfort him but resisted, caressing the gem within my fingers instead.

"On the tenth day of her imprisonment - when Silindra hovered between life and death, Gabriel raised a dagger above his head, preparing to slay her. But before he could, Silindra raised her hand

and said - " Kenmei's voice trailed off as though he'd been whisked away in the story and couldn't bear it any longer.

"What did she say?" I asked, my voice hoarse with emotion.

"She said one word," he finally continued.

"Which was?"

"Wait." His voice broke, and I leaned closer, thinking I'd misunderstood.

"Wait?" That word didn't need a dramatic pause.

His dark eyes captured mine and held me. "You see, Shiryo-san, even near death, the love she harbored for all other creatures was foremost on her mind."

At his words, my throat constricted with sadness. Such love, I couldn't understand it.

"Gabriel paused, asking what she wanted. Silindra begged Gabriel to place one of her tears in the golden gem around her neck, and then, after she was dead, requested he give the gem to a pixilette called Ryden.

"At her words, Gabriel's heart softened, and he agreed. He didn't realize that the gem around her neck already contained five magical properties - the courageous soul of a dragon, the eternal sight of an elf, the healing horn of a unicorn, the strength of a troll, and the giving heart of a fairy. Gabriel added her tear, stowed it in one of his pockets, and then killed Silindra immediately. He left Silindra's body in the earth, found the pixilette Ryden, and gave her the necklace, thus fulfilling his end of the bargain.

"Within moments of the gem being in Ryden's possession, she used its magic to take the final component needed to seal the magic within the gem - the blood of a hunter - Gabriel's blood. With all seven magical components contained within, the gem changed from golden to red."

I considered the pendant around my neck. Without a doubt, I knew

it was the same one Silindra had worn.

"It's called the Seal of Gabriel because, without his blood, the magic would've been lost."

Kenmei's words brought home the weight of the power I carried. "Why would she create this?"

"Ah, Shiryo-san. An excellent question. She created that necklace for you."

I looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "Impossible."

"With everything that's happened to you over the last several days, how can you say that?" He took my hand and squeezed. "The magic contained within the pendant is powerful, and anyone who understands magic can use it, increasing their power at least ten-fold, but you Shiryo-san, you can restore balance, bring peace back to Earth by destroying the vampire queen." He studied me with awe. I didn't like it.

I snorted. Very unladylike, I know.

Super disrespectful too, but I wasn't buying it.

"I bet you say that to all the girls." I rolled my eyes.

He jumped from his seat, fury flashing in his eyes.

Like a cobra strike, he grabbed my collar and lifted me in the air so that my feet dangled.

"No, Shiryo-san! Never in seven thousand years has the gem worked for others the way it works for you now." As if to prove his point, a red ball of light shot from the pendant and into Kenmei.

He dropped me and went flying backward into the bookcase.

Books tumbled onto his head, and he groaned. "Don't you see?"

Fear, hot and thick, filled my throat. "No, I don't." I ran to the door. "You're crazy. Leave me alone." I threw open the door, startling the seven brothers and Professor Pops who hovered in the hallway.

Startled, I yelped before regaining my wrath.

Methodically I found each set of eyes.

"I don't want to see any of you ever again. Stay the hell away from me, all of you!" I stormed from the house, my body moving like the wind.

At home, I ran up to my room and threw myself on my bed.

Gatsby appeared in the window and jumped up, nudging me with his furry forehead. Rolling over, I picked him up and hugged him.

He hissed and let out a pained yowl.

In the same instant, I smelled burning flesh.

I released him and noticed the scorched fur surrounding a red welt on his side.

"I'm so sorry." Furious tears poured from my eyes and leaked into my ears. "I don't want any of this. I didn't ask for any of this."

In the dark recesses of my mind, I knew I was freaking out.

Honestly, it was about time.

I'd been handling everything so well.

But this was all too much.

Sitting, I reached around and pulled the necklace off, then chucked it at my dresser. I'd been aiming for Gabe's picture - his stunning smile seemed to leer at me - but I missed, and it smacked against a perfume bottle before skidding off behind my dresser.

"Good riddance." I flipped onto my stomach and fell asleep, hoping when I woke, this last week would be a bad dream.

OceanofPDF.com

PATCH THINGS UP

WHEN MY ALARM went off the next morning, I noticed my mother's blanket covered me. I knew I hadn't set the alarm, which meant either Dad or Vivianne had.

They'd come back at least.

After dressing, I went downstairs and noticed two significant items sitting on the counter.

One was a cell phone.

The other was a laptop.

On top sat a note.

Freaking notes!

It was from my dad and said the phone was already programmed, and they'd downloaded some necessary programs to the laptop. Then he said they'd gone out to breakfast and he hoped to see me after school.

I snorted before grabbing Gatsby's food and water. I hadn't seen him yet this morning and wondered if he was still mad.

A pang of loneliness washed through me.

The brothers wouldn't be coming over today. I knew they'd abide by my wishes.

Christopher was gone.

My dad had Viv, and I had - Cindy!

If she would forgive me.

Time to patch things up. Unlocking my new phone, I dialed her number.

"Who the hell is this?" she answered.

I laughed, enjoying the sound of her voice. "Guess who got a cell

phone? Come on, guess."

"Snow? Is that you?" I could hear her happy relief.

I sighed happily. "Yes, it's me. Dad and Viv got me a laptop, too, so no more track practice. Woohoo!"

"They must feel really guilty about something. What'd they do?"

I grabbed a water from the fridge and opened it. As I drank, an overwhelming need for blood scorched my throat.

No. No. No.

I grabbed a soy yogurt, pulled off the top, and put a spoonful in my mouth.

The yogurt tasted ashy, but I ignored it.

Act human. That's what Pops said.

Another pang of guilt hit me, and I ignored that too.

"Snow, you still there?"

"Yep. So you still want to get together after school?"

"Hells to the yeah. We can hang at my place if you want."

The note my dad and stepmother left said they wanted to see me tonight. "How about we hang out at my house?"

"Okay. Are you genki?"

I giggled. "What is gen-ki?"

She laughed. "Basically, the word means happy."

"Oh, well, sure. It's been a while since my dad's been home. I'm glad he's back." I didn't tell her that I'd seen him all of half an hour the night before. And I definitely wasn't happy, though I was happy to hear her voice. I just needed to roll with the punches of life, and that's what I was going to do.

"Cool. So I'll see you at school in a few."

"Yep."

After we hung up, she texted me. U hav a cell. U so awesum!

I smiled at the way she abbreviated the words. I had no idea how

to text on my pretty new phone, but I figured it was probably easy. I'd go through it later.

Plus, since I had to ride my bike, I needed to hurry.

Carefully placing the laptop and phone between my math and chemistry books, I put my backpack on and rode to school on my purple Schwinn.

"WILL YOU SET THE TABLE, SNOW?" Vivianne was at the sink, draining the spiral noodles.

The chicken cacciatore already sat in a serving dish, as did a green salad and some dinner rolls.

"Sure." I took four plates from the cupboard and set them on the counter.

"I'll help, Viv," Cindy added, sneaking a caramelized onion drenched in red sauce.

She pulled placemats from the drawer and set them on the table, and I followed her, setting the plates on top.

"What's up with Viv and cooking? This is new," she whispered.

I shrugged. "Got me."

Cindy pulled two wine glasses and two regular glasses from the cupboard. "Viv, did you want me to open a bottle of wine?"

Vivianne put the noodles in a ceramic serving bowl and took it over to the table. "That's alright. I'll get the wine."

Cindy crinkled her nose. "Okay."

I grabbed the silverware. Cindy folded the napkins.

Just as we finished setting the table, my dad walked in.

"Hello, beautiful ladies. Mind if I join you?" He wore crisp tan pants and a white linen shirt, his thick hair combed just so.

I discreetly checked out Viv.

She had on a red cashmere sweater and gray pants.

Cindy looked good too, in a black mini with black leggings, black boots that came to her knees, and a fuchsia cable-knit sweater.

I had on my standard - jeans and a tee shirt.

Fashionista extraordinaire.

"Of course, dear." Viv gave him a sly smile, and I wondered what was going on with those two.

Cindy and I finished putting everything on the table. Once we were all seated, Viv uncorked a bottle of wine and poured a glass for her and dad.

While we ate, I couldn't stop thinking about school.

The guys tried to talk to me at lunch and after school, but I wasn't giving them the opportunity.

Cindy sat with me at lunch in a different section of the cafeteria.

When she asked why we weren't sitting with the guys, I told her it was so I could concentrate on learning how to text.

Another reason was I didn't want to see Cindy and Gabe together.

At the moment, Cindy was my only friend, and I didn't want to be mad at her too. She'd obviously given the guys my cell number because I recognized their numbers when they called and texted throughout the day.

I ignored them, deleting their messages and texts without reading or listening.

I was acting childish, but I needed time away from them, apart from the vampire drama. I couldn't be what they wanted.

Me, klutzy Snow White. I wasn't super smart, nor was I incredibly pretty, like Cindy.

I was average.

You are so much more than that, a male voice whispered in my mind.

It sounded like Christopher, but I shook the thought away.

He'd left without giving me a reason, and that was fine.

I wanted things to go back to the way they were.

Sure, people laughed at my clumsiness and made up jokes about me, but in the scheme of things, I wanted to be okay with that because at least I knew where I fit in.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Viv asked, interrupting my thoughts.

Her eyes appeared sad, as though I hurt her feelings by not eating.

I glanced at the salad on my plate. Picking up my fork, I stabbed a cucumber and shoved it in my mouth. "Thanks for dinner," I said as soon as I swallowed.

"Yes, thanks," Cindy added. "The cacciatore is delicious."

My dad grabbed Viv's hand and squeezed. "You've outdone yourself, dear." He kissed her cheek, then cleared his throat. "Snow, we have some news."

I was in the process of putting another cucumber in my mouth and stopped. "You do?" Anxiety twisted in my stomach.

Were they leaving again so soon? I thought I had a few weeks with him.

He cleared his throat again. "Your mother and I have to leave for Tahiti tonight, right after dinner. There's an emergency, and I've got to go help out."

I dropped my fork. "But you just got here. I-I haven't even had a chance to spend time with you." I glared at Viv. "And she is not my mother." Grabbing my plate, I pushed back my chair and placed the plate in the sink.

"Snow," my dad said, shocked.

Why didn't he ever ask me to go with him?

I could homeschool, or he could get me a tutor.

"Can I come with you?" I asked, working to control my trembling bottom lip.

Cindy gasped. "Don't leave me." Tears made her eyes shiny.

I hadn't thought about how my going would affect her, but she had Gabe and the guys. She'd be fine.

"What about school?" Viv asked, her voice too syrupy.

My dad stood and came over. He placed a hand on each of my shoulders, and I dove into him, hugging him tightly.

"Dad, I need you. Please take me with you." I knew I sounded like a child, but I couldn't help myself.

He was my dad and all the family I had left.

I didn't want him to leave me again.

He returned my hug briefly before pushing me back.

I saw the worry in his eyes and the way his forehead scrunched together. "Snow, I can't. You have your school here, your life. I won't take you from the only place you've ever known."

His words sounded sincere, but I felt him bristle. He didn't want me around.

I listened to the rapid beating of his heart, smelled the fear overpowering his aftershave.

Didn't he love me anymore?

Part of me wanted to shout that my life could be wherever he was if he would just love me, treat me as his daughter - but I stepped back.

My shoulders slumped, and I thought I might fall over. Small, warm hands wrapped around my shoulders.

"I'll take good care of her." Cindy's words were filled to the brim with protection and something else I was starting to recognize.

Magic, I thought but pushed that aside, working to stop the tears falling onto my cheeks. At this point, I had no shame.

I heard Vivianne heave an annoyed sigh. "I guess dinner is over."

Had I not been so heartbroken, I might've flashed my fangs and shown Viv that dinner had just begun at least for me.

Instead, I pulled away from Cindy and ran upstairs.

That was why they'd bought me the laptop and phone.

They thought they could buy my happiness and my forgiveness.

I hated them both!

OceanofPDF.com

ABERNATHY'S SPELLS

CINDY CLOSED the door as Gatsby jumped up on my bed.

"Man, your stepmother can be kind of a bitch."

"I know, right?" I sat on my bed and pulled my pillow into my arms.

A part of me always believed Viv liked Cindy more than me, and I thought Cindy liked Viv.

Her relationship with her mom and dad was good, but they were older, and Cindy was their youngest, so her parents didn't do much by way of relating.

A naughty gleam lit Cindy's face. "I could cast a spell, cover her face in boils. What do you think?" She sat down next to me, pushing a strand of hair away from my wet cheek.

I laughed. "Might be fun," I said noncommittally, not really feeling it.

She picked up her backpack before sitting beside me, crossing her legs. Unzipping the front pocket, she removed a book.

As soon as I saw it, the air in the room changed.

It hummed as though alive.

The book possessed some serious energy. "I'm not kidding. I totally will."

My attention remained on the book. Bound by a leather cord, most of the jacket was covered in a rusty red material. Cindy held it out and nodded for me to take it.

"What is this?" I asked, feeling hesitant.

Creepy or weird didn't adequately describe the tome.

Bizarre was close. I

n the center of the cover was an eye.

It looked real, like a lizard's.

A scaly face in a combination of violets and reds surrounded the eye. It blinked then seemed to focus on me.

"Can the eye see me?"

Cindy laughed. "Probably. The book is known as the Eye of Abernathy, the first and most powerful dragon ever to have lived on Earth."

"A dragon?" I rubbed my thumbs over the edges of the cover, staying clear of the eye. Soft, sleek, and smooth like a lizard's skin. "What's inside?"

Cindy gave me one of her famous looks. This one saying, Duh! "Abernathy's spells. This is the oldest, most powerful book on the planet, and it's mine now."

I snorted, though I could feel the book's power. "Really? Why do you have it?" Immediately after the words left my mouth, I regretted them.

"Harsh," she said, hurt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it came out." I scooted closer and hit her knee with mine.

I didn't know how to ask her where the book came from or when she got it.

Something told me the book was related to the pendant.

I was still ignoring that part of my new life and didn't want to tell Cindy any of it, so I waited.

Cindy took the book from me and slowly started turning pages.

A sweet stench rose from them, like dried flowers.

"Remember the other day when I left school?" Her voice was soft, filled with wonder.

"Yes. You scared me. The guys said it was about a guy, but I didn't believe them." Dorian had also alluded to more. I hoped she'd tell me

the truth.

"Sorry." She looked at me, sorrow on her face.

I smacked her knee with mine again.

It was no big deal now that I knew she was safe.

"Anyway, my mother's aunt showed up at school and said we needed to talk."

"Oh?" I didn't know much about Cindy's family.

"Yeah, it was weird. She said - " Her voice trailed off. "Don't freak out, okay? Promise?"

"How can I freak out if I don't even know what you're going to tell me?" My pulse quickened anyway.

Cindy laughed nervously and brushed her hair off her neck. "It's just - " She drew in a deep breath. "You know how I'm a descendent of the Towne sisters?"

"Yeah," I said slowly.

"Well, apparently, they really were witches and powerful ones too." She crossed her legs.

"I thought we decided if the sisters were real witches, they would've kicked some serious townspeople butt and escaped or turned the accusers into frogs."

That was the story Cindy and I told each other since second grade when we first found out she was a descendant.

Our teacher, Miss Field, taught us about the Salem Witch Trials and the Salem Hysteria in social studies.

We knew most of the craziness happened in the town now known as Danvers, not in Salem, but the name stuck anyway.

Cindy cleared her throat. "It turns out when the town accused them, the sisters made a pact to fake their own deaths, if necessary, and allow the townspeople to think they died so they could move on and live their lives elsewhere. My aunt says she believes they may still be alive."

"Wait, so did they hurt those people? Make them crazy?"

Cindy huffed. "Of course not. They were too important, their magic too special for such inconsequential nonsense." The words sounded rehearsed. "The sisters used their magic more subtly, for a greater cause."

"Oh, okay." My mind went back to Kenmei's words.

He'd said the pendant never worked for anyone the way it worked for me, and now I was curious what the greater cause was.

"The book is passed down to the next closest female descendant in their sixteenth year. She doesn't have any daughters, so she gave it to me." Cindy's hand stopped flipping pages, and I read the words across the top.

"Locator spell," I said aloud.

"Yes, it's so cool. If you lose anything, even a person, you can use this spell to find it or them."

For some reason, the fact she chose that particular spell made the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

What did she hope to find?

"R-Really?" I closed my eyes and quickly opened them.

She wants the Eye of Abernathy, a voice in my mind whispered. Don't let her find it.

I certainly didn't want the responsibility of the necklace, but every bone in my body told me it would be bad, very bad if Cindy got her hands on it.

Tomorrow I'd give it to Professor Pops. Surely there was another marked who could restore balance and destroy the vampire queen.

"Want to help me give the spell a shot?" Cindy pulled a candle from her backpack.

"Um, yes. Okay," I said, only slightly worried about what might happen.

No part of me doubted her words.

I sensed the book's power.

If she said she could do a spell, I believed her.

I wondered briefly if that was what Dorian meant at school earlier.

Did the guys know something about the sisters?

About Cindy's family?

About the Eye of Abernathy?

"What should we try to locate?" Cindy asked, smiling.

Before I answered, Viv, poked her head in. Her eyes zeroed in on the candle and the spellbook simultaneously.

"We're leaving, Snow. You should come down and say goodbye to your father."

Resentment - at her, and for my dad. Professor Pops and the brothers. Kenmei, and even at Cindy - overwhelmed my body. I felt my canines grow, and, without thought, I was at the door and grabbed Viv, her neck and shoulder exposed.

Viv gasped. "What evil is this? Put me down this instant!"

That's right, I thought.

I'm not some little kid you can push around anymore.

As suddenly as I thought the words, darkness began to creep through my mind.

I shook it off, releasing her.

"Fine," I said, pushing past her.

I glanced back at Cindy. Her eyes were wide, and her mouth hung open.

I tried to smile, but nothing happened, and I went down to say goodbye.

My dad and Viv left quickly. After locking the door behind them, I went back upstairs.

Cindy had returned the book to her bag and was waiting.

"I should go," she said.

"Fine. Leave," I growled.

She looked at me like she felt sorry for me but didn't say more. When I heard the door shut, I flung myself back on my bed, ramming the pillow over my head. I just wanted it all to go away.

A soft voice chanted sounds in a strange language, and peace enveloped me. I snuggled into my covers and closed my eyes.

"Sleep, young one," the voice said. "You're almost ready."

OceanofPDF.com

DID CINDY TAKE IT

WHEN I CAME TO, I felt different. Stronger. More relaxed with what I was - a revenant and nothing more.

Sure, my dad left as had Cindy, and I'd pushed away from the people most important to me, namely my seven best friends and their adoptive father, Professor Pops.

But whatever. I could handle the situation. I just wanted to feel like myself again. A normal teenager.

Certainly not some deliverer for the supernatural.

The gem wasn't created for me by one of the original vampires because she knew she would be killed.

That was impossible.

I refused to believe that in a sea of billions, the gem was meant for me.

"No way!"

It was morning, and I was determined to go about my life as though I were just another teenager. I got ready and studied myself in my mirror.

"Normal."

The only thing left to do was return the Seal of Gabriel to Professor Pops.

He could deal with it.

Reaching behind my lavender dresser, I searched for it but couldn't find it. So, I pulled the furniture away from the wall. There were a few dust bunnies and a pencil, but the necklace wasn't there.

"What the hell?" I went over in my mind exactly how I'd thrown it.

For sure, the chain hit a perfume bottle.

I shifted all five of the pretty bottles, their scents mingling in the air as I moved them.

Then, thinking maybe I was mistaken, I rummaged around in my closet, checked under my bed, in my covers, and behind my window curtains.

By the time I finished, I was sweaty and still empty-handed.

"Ugh! Where could it be?"

Had Cindy taken it?

It seemed the most likely solution.

She hadn't come over to be my friend again.

She was a witch, and she knew about the necklace. Kenmei said it would bring power. That had been what she was after.

The realization hurt, and my rage grew by the second.

I found my phone and texted her.

Did u take my necklace?

I went to hit send but changed my mind. If she wanted it, she could have it. I would be ordinary. I wanted nothing more to do with vampires and the supernatural. I was out.

Hurriedly I ran downstairs, fed Gatsby, and got on my bike.

It was getting easier to pedal.

Easier to move, period.

With each turn of the wheels, as I moved closer to the academy, my worry for the necklace dissipated.

With the necklace gone, that meant I wasn't accountable for ending the vampire queen and restoring balance. Right?

See, everything leaves you, I thought, and shrugged.

"Good."

OceanofPDF.com

COOL YOU'RE A WITCH

THE NEXT FEW days were pretty routine. I went to the school, did my homework, fed my cat, watched reality TV, and pretended I wasn't craving blood so severely my stomach always hurt.

I also did a pretty good job ignoring the brothers and Cindy's phone calls and texts.

But on Monday morning of the following week, I woke thinking I was going to die.

Blood! Blood! Blood!

The word pounded through my body over and over like a frenzied crowd at a fight club.

I went downstairs, desperate for food, and saw a package sitting on the counter with a damn note.

Remember, twice a day. That was all it said.

By the smell, I knew it contained my bloodlust tea.

Peeling back the wrapping, I quickly made myself a double dose and drank it with relief. The hunger was still there, but now it was bearable.

I knew it'd come from Professor Pops. I thought about thanking him but couldn't bring myself to dial his number.

Just speaking with him would pull me back into that life, and I didn't want it anymore.

But I needed to let Cindy back into my life.

I texted her before school, and it was like there had never been an awkward moment between us.

After school, we drove to Warehouse Video and got a coffee and talked.

"I'm sorry," I said first, staring into the steaming cup.

"I'm sorry too." She reached for my hand, and I squeezed.

"That's cool about you being a witch," I said quietly, lifting my eyes to watch her expression.

"Thanks." She took a sip of her drink. "Want to tell me about you?"

I swallowed back a desire to tell her about everything.

I just couldn't. It was bad enough the guys knew. I didn't want her to know too.

"It's a lot," I said.

"Worse than being a witch?" She lifted one perfectly formed brow.

"Maybe." I told her about liking Gabe and maybe Dorian and how my feelings were weird toward all of the brothers, which was why I needed some space.

She listened and offered great advice.

Chatting with her was wonderful.

It was also fun to hang out while she performed her magic.

Sometimes she would do it on me. One day, a couple of weeks later, I went to school with a red streak in my hair. The next a yellow one.

She became a pro at changing her nail polish and even "painted" mine red during lunch.

Finally, almost a month later, Cindy gave me the push I needed to make up with the guys.

She drove past my house and pulled into Professor Pops' driveway.

After putting the car in park, she shushed all of my lame excuses.

"Look, it's like a bandage. Just rip the sucker off. It might hurt, but only for a few seconds."

I wanted to be upset, but all seven guys and Professor Pops immediately came outside and were waving and smiling like goofballs, like they'd been waiting for me.

I couldn't leave them hanging any longer.

I didn't want to.

"You're right," I agreed, and got out of her car.

OceanofPDF.com

GLASS FELL LIKE RAIN

OUR REUNION WENT BETTER than expected.

Hanging out with them again felt like putting on my favorite shoes.

They were comfortable.

Even Gabe seemed less tense than before my meltdown.

After several hours of chatting, dinner, and a movie screening of the latest Marvel movie in their oversized theater room, Gabe suggested some training.

"You want to take a revenant on at midnight? You're brave." I playfully punched him in the arm and rose from the supple leather couch.

He'd sat next to me when the movie started.

At first, it was uncomfortable but, as the film progressed and we laughed at our favorite parts together, I relaxed, and so did he.

"Training is an excellent idea, Snow. Not for too long, though. After an hour, you should head home and get some rest. We'll be here in the morning for some breakfast if you'd like." Professor Pops' eyes twinkled with happiness, and I was sure my expression matched his.

I'd been away from eight of my most favorite people on the planet for far too long. "I'd like that."

Gabe stood, and I followed him down the stairs.

When we entered the Museum of the Supernatural, it was like coming home.

I'd missed the place more than I realized.

After Gabe unlocked the door to the training room, I followed him in.

He grabbed the long sword, the katana, and the shorter one - I couldn't remember what it was called - and handed them to me.

"Ready?" he asked as he crouched and started to circle.

"Bring it, Gabriel." I'd started to laugh, but the noise caught in my throat as I said his full name, and I froze as thoughts and memories filled my mind.

Before I shut him out, Professor Pops had tried to tell me about Gabe.

My talk with Kenmei, his story about Silindra and the vampire who'd killed her.

His name had been Gabriel too.

It couldn't mean anything, right? I shook my head.

That they shared the same name was a complete coincidence. It had to be.

Gabe definitely wasn't a hunter. I was sure of that.

Gabe smacked me on the arm with the flat of his blade.

"Concentrate, Snowflake. These weapons aren't pretend. They're real."

I jumped. "Right." I copied his stance, feeling my body find its position as I moved with a grace I hadn't realized I possessed.

Even Gabe was impressed. He raised an eyebrow. "Have you been practicing?"

I shook my head. "Maybe," I lied, just to throw him off.

We circled a few more times, and then he lunged.

I blocked the blow and spun around.

"Aren't you, Little Miss Kickass!" He smirked.

"You know it," I responded, smirking back.

After that, we were a blur of blades, an orchestra of clanging metal, breathing, and synchronized heartbeats.

We moved in time to the music of our own creation.

Sweat mingled with the warmth of his skin, the delicious bouquet of his blood.

He tripped me, and I fell, landing on my butt.

Before I could react, he took my swords and put them away.

When he finished, he came over and stuck out a hand.

I grabbed hold.

He yanked, but I had a better idea.

I jerked back, hard.

Surprised, he fell down toward me but caught himself before our bodies touched.

"Nice move," he said with a smile, trapping me under him, his arms on either side of my shoulders.

I was mesmerized by his bright green eyes.

They danced with a happiness I hadn't seen in weeks, not since that night in my bedroom.

Our faces were close, and I kept checking out his lips, so soft and full.

What had changed? Why was he friendly again?

I didn't have time for an internal debate because his lips were suddenly on mine.

I gasped in surprise and gladly reciprocated, twining my fingers in his hair.

Gabe moaned, grabbing my hips and rolling us, so I was on top.

He pulled back, releasing my lips.

I let out a sound like a pouting kitten, upset he wasn't kissing me.

He smirked and brushed some hair out of my face.

"I'm sorry I've been a jerk. I promised I wouldn't leave, and that's exactly what happened. Can you forgive me?" His voice was hoarse, full of emotion, full of sincerity.

I responded by claiming his lips with mine, hungry for more.

I needed this Gabe.

Sweet and kind Gabe.

His tongue flicked inside my mouth, and I felt it low in my belly, a fiery desire.

Sensual Gabe, I thought hungrily.

My heart raced, keeping time with his.

"Snow," he murmured, foraging a trail of hot kisses along my jaw, down my neck, and collarbone.

My lips found his neck, and I kissed him there, once, twice.

He smelled like sweat, soap, and more.

The scent of his blood sang to me.

I kissed him again, directly on the quickly beating vein on his neck.

An unquenchable ache slammed into me so hard I was unprepared to fight it.

"Yes," his voice pleaded. Urgent. Needy.

He wanted me to bite him.

I sensed it.

He wasn't being subtle either as he pressed his neck to my lips.

It seemed fitting that Gabe should be the first human I tasted.

My canines grew, and I sank them into his flesh.

He shuddered.

The first taste of his blood was something I'll never forget, like lust and honey combined, a heady combination.

All my life, I had struggled with food and settled on being strictly vegan, but at that moment - the instant I tasted Gabe's blood - I knew I'd never crave anything else ever again.

It was exactness, precision, completeness.

And I couldn't get enough.

I sucked harder, yanking his neck closer.

The more I drank, the more I needed.

"Stop!" Professor Pops' voice sounded far away.

He tried to force me off Gabe, but I was stronger.

I withdrew my fangs momentarily and sat up, sending the palm of my hand smashing into Professor Pops' sternum.

He let out a grunt as he smacked against the wall with a crack.

There were others in the room. From the edges of my blood-filled vision, I saw them and heard their cries of concern.

"I told you something like this would happen." That was Heathcliff.

"We shouldn't have left her alone," Bart said.

I closed my eyes to clear my head.

Who were they talking about? It couldn't be me.

Someone gently pulled me off Gabe, and I opened my eyes and saw Dorian's concerned face.

"Snow. Can you hear me?" he asked.

"What happened? Gabe and I were training and - " I followed Dorian's gaze.

On the floor lay Gabe, his body twisted at an unusual angle. Part of his neck ripped open. He was covered in blood. So much blood.

And so were my hands.

My body began to shake.

Not Gabe. No!

"Is he - ?" I couldn't finish. Please, no.

"Tell me," I shouted., but I knew the truth.

No one moved.

An unbearable agony crawled up my stomach and into my chest and settled in my throat.

I screamed. The sound was unearthly.

Most of the brothers and Professor Pops covered their ears. But I couldn't stop.

"Snow." Dorian sounded more pained than he looked, and he looked utterly broken.

I pulled out of his grasp.

Gabe is dead. Gabe is dead.

I killed Gabe.

I wanted to die.

"Kill me," I cried. "Do it."

The brothers and Professor Pops regarded me like I was an untamed animal - a monster, but they didn't move.

I couldn't stand to be in their presence another second, and I bolted.

As I went through the Museum of the Supernatural, I screamed again, causing the glass cases to shatter, but I didn't stop.

I went faster, floating like an apparition, up the stairs, and out the back door.

My scream grew louder.

I'd killed Gabe.

Become a monster.

The vampire queen could have me now.

My life was over.

Windows broke.

The glass fell like rain.

Still, I couldn't stop screaming.

Death was too good for me. I deserved something far worse.

I didn't know what, but I knew I wouldn't find my answers here.

Without a backward glance, I ran.

Away from all that I loved, all that I'd known.

I didn't deserve them.

OceanofPDF.com

FATE AND MAGIC

OceanofPDF.com

KISS ME

AFTER LOSING EVERYTHING, there was only one option.

Jump.

Go all in.

With both fangs.

It was the punishment I deserved after what I'd done.

Before a few months ago, I didn't eat meat.

Now I craved blood.

As a full-fledged vampire, I couldn't get enough, and I'd decided to embrace it.

Accept my new lot in life as a wicked supernatural creature.

I'd become something I hadn't believed possible, but now that I'd changed, the truth was, I liked it.

At least while I partook.

Afterward, when the blood haze faded, guilt would edge its way in.

I hadn't killed another human, not since Gabe, but killing him was horror enough.

It ate at my heart.

I remembered the grotesque way his body lay on the floor. The way Professor Pops and the guys looked at me with loathing, disgust, and fear.

But I deserved it.

I'd become a monster and killed a boy I thought I might love.

A brother.

A son.

He'd kissed me, and I'd repaid him in blood.

Lots of it.

Maybe even all of it.

My vampire need enveloped me, and I let myself give in, even relished the sensation.

At those thoughts, my mind grew darker, and I shrank further away from everything that had to do with my former life.

I kept running.

Where didn't matter as long as I was further from where I'd been, the kind of life I lived before - my ordinary life.

I blocked memories of my father, my wicked stepmother, the amazing boys who were my neighbors, and the man who loved them. I buried thoughts of Cindy, my cat Gatsby, and Christopher. None of them mattered anymore.

Not to the new me.

Even the name of my home town was forgotten.

All I cared about was blood.

How I could get it and how much I wanted it.

No longer an in-between - part human and part revenant.

I was a bloodthirsty fiend with an unquenchable thirst.

I had become a vampire.

With interest, I fixed my gaze on the night sky.

Inhaling deeply, I smelled the air. Tasted it. Searching for the coppery fragrance I wanted.

It was there.

Past the rushing wind, through the woodland filled with fir and eucalyptus trees, and down on the sandy shore.

The distinct smell of the ocean. And blood.

Pulsing.

Pounding strong in the veins of two humans.

Fast.

Tantalizing.

I let out an unearthly scream and sprinted forward.

Toward my fix. My drug of choice.

When I was only a few feet away, I slowed down, each silent stride closing the gap between me and my prey.

The humans were in the throes of passion.

They were on a blanket, kissing and losing themselves in each other.

The sight burned my eyes, and my heart as unbidden memories of Gabe cut through me.

I needed to forget.

Drinking the humans' blood would help, would fill me up in ways nothing else ever could.

I stepped closer, the edges of my dirty black Converse touching their blanket while my heels sank into the soft sand.

The girl opened her eyes and stopped kissing the boy. "Some skanky girl is watching us. What a perv." She glared before rolling her eyes.

The boy swiveled his head. "Get out of here," he hollered. "She smells," he said to the girl under him.

She giggled again, probably grateful the guy on top of her didn't find me attractive.

Since my change, I discovered it didn't matter what I looked like.

With ease, I could change a human's feelings, compel them to come to me, desire me, and even lust after me until I drained them into unconsciousness.

I knelt beside them. "Look at me," I demanded, my voice silky-smooth.

The boy whipped his head around, a sliver of fear shading his brown eyes.

He was handsome and lean, and his blood smelled slightly like Gabe's.

I swallowed.

"Get the hell away from us!"

He tried to shove me, but I didn't budge.

The angry fear in his eyes grew.

"Look into my eyes," I ordered, enjoying the rush, the adrenaline.

Knowing I possessed all the power.

He did as I said.

"You smell delicious," I said.

Fear left his eyes as they dilated.

The change in his demeanor was swift.

He got off the girl, who let out an annoyed huff, and came to kneel beside me.

While he stared at me like a good puppy dog, I took the girl's chin.

"Do you like the color of my eyes?" I'd discovered with girls that they couldn't resist such a simple question despite whether they sensed danger or not.

I think it stemmed from the innate need to compare one's self to another.

"Such a pretty thing." I watched her blush in the moonlight, the crimson of her blood rushing into her plump cheeks.

"Th-thank you," she stammered. Her dilated cinnamon eyes were no longer interested in the boy next to her but totally focused on me.

"What are your names?"

As one they spoke.

"Ashley."

"Kevin."

Hunger pulsed in my veins.

My fangs fought for release, and my mouth watered.

"You won't remember meeting me. Understand?"

They nodded.

"Good. Now, Ashley, lie down and go to sleep."

Immediately she obeyed.

She closed her eyes, and I watched her breathing deepen.

Kevin still kneeled. His large eyes desperate to please. He had a babyface. Sweet.

Probably seduced a lot of girls with that face.

He wasn't wearing a shirt, and I absently noticed his chiseled abs, the way his faded jeans rested low on his hips, and his finely manicured hands.

I swallowed again. The monster in me wanted to pounce and make him scream. But I resisted. "Kiss me, Kevin."

He licked his lips before pressing them against mine.

At his touch, I closed my eyes and pretended I was in Professor Pops' basement, kissing Gabe.

The boy deepened the kiss, grabbing my shoulders, pulling me on top of him, just like Gabe.

My pulse pounded rapidly. My need was strong.

I wanted to take this boy's blood - all of it.

I straddled Kevin, tilting his chin up with one hand.

OceanofPDF.com

THE VAMPIRE QUEEN

THE GUY WHIMPERED AS THOUGH he knew what I wanted.

I allowed my fangs to grow.

His eyes got wide with fear.

I liked that - the horror in them. Bending down, I took in his scent before sinking my teeth into his tender flesh.

His blood filled my mouth, and I swallowed the coppery warmth hungrily. Professor Pops' words strutted across my mind: "Promise me you won't drink from a human for more than ten seconds."

Internally I counted to ten. But didn't stop. Eleven. Twelve.

I finally released Kevin.

He lay unconscious, his breathing weak but there.

The bite marks would heal quickly.

The venom I released with my bite was like a liquid cure. Only a bruise would remain. He tasted good, but I wanted more.

Dissatisfaction sat on my tongue.

Quickly I moved to Ashley.

I lifted her into my arms, and she stirred.

"Kevin." Her eyes fluttered open and then widened momentarily.

"It's okay, Ashley."

Her pupils dilated, and I knew she was mine to do with as I pleased.

"Let me see your neck."

She lifted her head, exposing her milky skin.

When my fangs sank into her, she gasped and grabbed my head, pulling me closer.

I drank greedily until her arms went lax.

Eleven.

Twelve.

I had to push the ten-count limit. It was hard enough to stop at twelve.

Releasing Ashley, I laid her on the blanket next to Kevin.

They seemed so peaceful.

Ashley and Kevin wouldn't remember me, but I would remember them.

"You're outstanding," a woman's voice purred. "Most of the marked don't have the strength to pull back before the human dies."

At being caught, I flinched and backed up at the sound of her voice. All of the newfound power and grace I recently obtained vanished.

Did she know what I was?

What I'd done?

She must.

She said I was marked.

That meant she had to know something.

Her face was hidden in the shadow of a large hood.

Gingerly standing, I wiped the sand off my pants and moved in front of the unconscious bodies.

"Wh-what?" That was all I could eke out.

It felt like some of the sand from the beach had been poured down my throat.

"Don't be demure, Snow White." She took a step forward.

The moonlight caught her blood-red lips.

They were curled into a smile.

Before me stood the vampire queen.

"I'm not. I wasn't. I mean, I don't know what you're talking about," I said, crossing my arms.

Her laugh was low and creepy. Flicking the hood off her head and exposing her jet-black hair, she sighed. "Yes, you do."

For some reason, knowing who she was - the vampire queen - made me relax, made me feel more human and less of a monster.

It was as though a heavy burden lifted from my soul.

She wouldn't judge me.

With her, I had nothing to fear, at least not right now.

I was drawn to her.

If anyone could understand what I'd done to Gabe and what I'd just done to the humans, it was her. "You're right. I do."

At my words, she glided to me, quicker than a blink, placing an icy cold hand around my wrist. "Come, I have much to show you."

"Okay," I responded, though I didn't need to.

We were already in her realm. Sharra.

The domain she'd named after herself.

Not only were we in her kingdom, but inside the castle, specifically, in the room where Christopher and I spent the night together.

My hand went to my throat, searching aimlessly for the necklace he left me - the one I tossed away like garbage.

The one I was told was meant to destroy the vampire queen and restore balance.

I shivered, afraid.

The room looked exactly the same: Lush, golden bedding. Even the magical mirror.

Fragrant air filled my lungs.

This was where I belonged.

The vampire queen released me. "Why don't you freshen up?" She

indicated a bathroom I hadn't noticed before.

"Are you leaving?" I'd been alone for days, maybe even weeks.

I wasn't sure, but it felt like an eternity.

Her presence seemed to chase away the memories, the guilt.

"As soon as you've cleaned up, I'll be back. I promise." She walked out of the door and was gone.

I went into the bathroom, which was big as my house, and sat on a golden chair in front of a gilded mirror.

The reflection staring back was scary, and I cringed.

My short, black hair was longer, tangled, and matted.

Dirt streaked my face.

My clothes were dingy and caked with blood and other things I didn't want to think about. "How long have I been gone?"

"In Sharra, the Winter Solstice has begun. In the world of humans, it is the fifth day of November." The voice was deep and resonated within my chest.

It seemed to come from the proximity of the mirror.

I was too tired to freak out.

Leaning forward, I searched for a body to go with the voice.

"My name is Zenny. I reside in all of the mirrors within the castle." As he spoke, a funny looking man with lemon yellow hair and skin the color of a copper pot strolled across the middle of the mirror.

He wore forest green and navy-blue checkered pants, a red shirt, a white vest, and white shoes. I would've thought he was a clown, except for the seriousness of his features.

Deep grooves etched creases between his eyebrows.

His honey eyes held mine with a stern demeanor.

"Oh. That means it's been more than two weeks since I left." I bit back a sob as memories of my loved ones broke through the wall I'd built up against my pain, shame, and sorrow.

Swallowing, I forced the wall back together with my anger and lust for blood.

Zenny sniffed, bringing me out of my reverie.

"I would guess at least that long by the smell of you. Peel off those clothes and throw them into the fire." The hearth on my right suddenly roared to life.

OceanofPDF.com

YOU'RE A MESS

"WHEN YOU'VE DISPOSED of your filthy clothes, step into the shower, and I'll send Fina and Trina to assist you in scrubbing off all the debris." He sniffed again.

"No, thank you, Zenny." I untied my shoelaces. "I can take care of myself. I don't need Fina and what was her name? Treeny."

"Trina, dear. And I think you should reconsider." He walked across my reflection to my left cheek, licked his thumb, and pretended to wipe off a dirt streak.

"Funny," I said, sarcastic.

He wrinkled his nose. "I'm not trying to be funny. Really, you're a mess."

"Fine, I get it. Now can you leave so I can shower in peace?"

"Humph," he snorted and walked to the edge of the mirror.

Before he was gone, I remembered my manners. "Thank you, Zenny."

He turned to me, his face ablaze with happiness. "Of course, Snow." Then he was gone.

I quickly stripped and, doing as Zenny commanded, tossed my clothes into the fire.

The shower was steaming as I stepped in, allowing the water to wash away layers of grime. There was some lemon-scented soap, and I lathered it up before scrubbing my skin.

My mental wall melted and thoughts of Gabe, Professor Pops, the brothers, Cindy, my dad, stepmother, and Gatsby - hopefully, someone fed my poor cat - filled my mind and stung my heart.

Had Professor Pops held a funeral for Gabe?

Images of Professor Pops and the brothers all dressed in dark suits,

white shirts, and ties mocked me.

The brothers walked somberly, three on each side of Gabe's cherry wood casket, toward Professor Pops and the gravesite where they would lower Gabe's cold, dead body into the ground.

Tears, hot with hurt and devastation, trickled down my cheeks.

"What have I done?"

Unable to keep myself standing, I curled into a ball on the shower floor, and that's where I stayed as I wondered if my dad looked for me, if he knew what I'd done.

Probably not.

Did anyone even care?

Not that they should.

I'd committed the ultimate sin.

Murdered a fantastic person.

I didn't deserve anyone's love or support. I deserved to die. That's what it said in the Bible: an eye for an eye.

If anyone was searching for me, it was probably to find me and punish me. I shouldn't have run. I should've stayed and suffered the consequences of my actions.

A part of me still struggled to believe what I'd done.

It was easier to pretend he lived - that somehow, he'd survived my vicious attack and was only wounded.

Was it possible?

How could I find out without returning?

Should I go back?

A wave of determination washed over me.

I would go home and face the consequences. If that meant death, then so be it.

Standing, I quickly washed my hair before getting out of the shower and drying off. Now that I'd decided, I was in a hurry.

Though, I had no way of getting back.

I was in Sharra, not the human realm.

I wrapped myself in a large red bath towel and sat in a golden chair.

A pearlized brush with soft white bristles appeared near my right hand.

Absently I picked it up and began the arduous process of removing the tangles from my hair.

How would I get back? In the past, when I'd come to Sharra, I went back without trying. Someone or something always pulled me between the two realms.

"Zenny," I said quietly and waited.

He shuffled to the side of the mirror. "How may I be of service?"

I tightened the towel closer around my body. "How do I get back to the human realm?"

He became agitated at my question and started walking in circles. "You can't leave. The queen won't allow it. She brought you here for a reason. You have to stay."

I nodded, showing him I understood. Of course, he was loyal to her.

"That's fine, I won't go anywhere until she allows it. But, if the time comes, how do I leave?" I asked, gulping down a slice of fear.

His eyes grew large, and he bowed deeply. "My queen," he whispered and scurried out of the mirror.

I turned.

She was at the door.

Sharra.

Wearing a pair of holey black jeans and a black tee-shirt with the words: Love Bites scrawled in red across her chest. She wore no makeup. Her hair hung on either side of her head in braids.

On her feet were red Converse, my favorite shoes.

She looked young, my age.

In fact, she looked a little like me. We could've easily been sisters.

"Oh," I said, brushing my bangs off my face. "I'm not ready."

"I can see that." She smiled.

It was less cruel than usual, almost innocent.

Unclasping her hands, she raised them and spread them in front of her, as though she were greeting someone or offering something.

Clothes and a red pair of Converse, just like hers, appeared on the counter next to the brush. "Put those on. I'll wait." She closed the door.

"Hurry," Zenny whispered from the edge of the mirror. "The queen does not like to be kept waiting."

"Alright. Disappear first." I didn't want to change in front of a tiny man lurking in the mirror. That was just creepy.

"Right away." He bowed stiffly and vanished.

Once he was gone, I tossed the towel on the counter and put on the clothes: a red bra and matching undies, a plain red shirt, black jeans, red socks, and the red shoes.

As I put on my clothes, I thought about Sharra and why she'd decided to dress like me. Was she hoping to seem less intimidating?

I also found the fact that she could do magic interesting.

The Vampires I read about in fiction and the TV shows I watched portrayed us without magic. That was left for witches, but it seemed Sharra had magic, and she didn't even have to do a spell for the magic to occur.

It was like she thought it and it happened.

I glanced at my reflection when I finished.

Zenny might know the answers, but I knew Sharra was waiting. I hesitantly opened the door.

The vampire queen stood in front of a large window, staring out,

seemingly lost in thought.

"I'm ready," I said softly.

OceanofPDF.com

POISONED APPLE

THE VAMPIRE QUEEN appraised me with scheming eyes and nodded her approval before heading out of the room. "Excellent. Let's go."

I followed, curious about her plans and not caring that she probably had ulterior motives.

Also, I was glad for the distraction from my heavy guilt over Gabe.

The sooner she showed me whatever she wanted to show me, the sooner I would have to face the consequences of my actions. Sure, I accepted that I should but that didn't mean I would revel in it.

Though I longed to see Pops and the guys, even if they hated me.

I just needed the pain and the guilt to stop.

Sharra and I passed through a sunroom, down a steep set of stairs, and through a large sitting room filled with extravagant chandeliers, furniture, thick draperies, and a red grand piano.

Seated in some of the chairs were supernatural creatures. Vampires, I guessed.

All of them were female, dressed in clothing from every century.

Some wore dresses with tight bodices and large skirts, others were dressed like the vampire queen and me. All of them looked young - perfect skin, perfectly coifed hair, and red, red lips.

Little pixilettes fluttered around them, serving them something red - possibly blood - in crystal goblets. The vampires took the offered glasses and then shooed the pixilettes away like they were irritating gnats.

The little things seemed worn out, their shoulders hunched, their eyes droopy. The pixilettes I met said they were in charge of the changing seasons.

Why were these ones serving the vampires?

If I hadn't lost the necklace, I could fix this, change the way things were done. I cringed internally, knowing that wasn't possible.

I couldn't change anything.

After we walked through the sitting room, we entered the circular room I remembered from my dream or vision. This time it was empty of anyone except Sharra and me.

She went up the steps in front of two high back chairs.

Had there been only one the first time I was here?

I tried to go back through the dream. I couldn't remember.

The vampire queen sat on the chair to the left. "Sit here," she said, indicating the throne on the right.

Once I sat, she waved her hand, and the room vanished. We were in the middle of a grass and flower-filled meadow. Birdy chirpped happily. Sweet fragrance from the flowers on the trees and all around us tickled my nose while a cool breeze danced against my skin.

The queen stood and walked into the meadow toward hundreds of apple trees. Heavy, fully ripened fruit hung from the branches.

I listened to the stiff grass crackle under her shoes.

When she reached the closest tree, she reached up and plucked a red apple.

My heart began beating fast.

In the story of Snow White, the wicked witch gave the girl an apple. The girl took a bite and fell under a spell.

Only true love's first kiss could wake her.

Was that the vampire queen's plan?

Did she intend to offer me the apple?

Poison me and hope my true love would find me and kiss me?

I snorted at the thought.

Love didn't work that way, and life wasn't a fairy tale.

It was real, complicated, messy, and took effort.

Not to mention the fallacy behind true love's kiss. Gabe and I had kissed, and I was still a vampire. Either Professor Pops had been wrong, or Gabe wasn't my true love.

I'd kissed Christopher too.

Something else occurred to me.

Was that why Christopher left?

He'd accomplished his goal, and I'd become a vampire.

The vampire queen rotated, studying me.

I'd messed up so badly there was no way the Seal of Gabriel, the beautiful pendant Christopher gave me, would work any longer. I ruined any chance of restoring balance when I became a monster.

It was too late for me.

Maybe I should eat the apple.

Then I wouldn't be able to harm anyone.

"Snow," the queen barked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Yes," I said, moving from the throne and over to her.

The landscape was beautiful, peaceful.

I ran my hands over the tops of the tall grass and the white daisies that grew in clumps as I made my way to the tree.

The vampire queen was impatient, and I hurried.

When I was near her, I held out my hand.

I would eat the apple.

I would sleep eternally and no longer be a detriment to those I loved.

But she batted at my hand. "Get your own," she said, taking a large bite.

I inhaled, surprised. "I will," I said after I recovered.

Reaching up, I plucked a large apple from one of the branches.

The sweetly-scented blossoms filled my lungs. Rubbing the apple skin on my sleeve out of habit, I scanned it for bruises or wormholes

and, seeing it was unspoiled, took a bite. I chewed slowly, expecting there to be no flavor.

All food tasted like ash since Christopher had bitten me.

But the fruit was delicious. The flavors were a mixture of sweetness, and - I dropped it.

Blood.

The fruit tasted just like blood.

What the hell?

I closed my eyes, waiting for the inevitable poisonous toxin to send me into blissful oblivion.

Several seconds passed, and I still felt the same.

When I opened my eyes, I noticed the queen watched me with an amused expression.

"It won't be long now," she said, taking another bite.

I knew it. "You did poison me." Relief and fear filled my veins.

She laughed. "I'm teasing." She took another bite.

Some of the juices dribbled down her chin.

"These apples are some of the best in Sharra. I wanted you to try them. Didn't you like it?" She indicated the apple I dropped.

The truth was the flavor had been beyond exceptional. The combination actually made my mouth water.

"It was fine," I lied.

She shook her head, amused. "This is your home as much as it is mine. Let me show you around."

I hesitated. What harm could it do?

OceanofPDF.com

SHRUGGING, I followed her back to the thrones. When she sat, so did I.

"This is the entrance to the orchards," she said, pointing. "Beyond the apple trees are peaches, plums, and pears. All of them are grown and cultivated to our specific tastes." She nodded, and I knew she referred to the blood.

Somehow it was fused within the fruit.

"Sometimes it's nice to eat solid food," she continued. "A liquid diet can get boring after a few hundred years." She snapped her fingers, and we were in a forest.

Giant trees shaded the fern and mossy floor.

A babbling brook rushed along next to us.

Three deer drank from its edge, unaware of us.

She put a finger to her lips.

I bobbed my head, indicating I understood and watched her move without sound toward them.

I fought down the knot forming in my stomach.

What did she intend to do?

When she snapped the neck of the largest deer, I shuddered.

"Why?" I asked, stunned.

The other two deer bolted.

The queen pulled a knife from a sheath I hadn't noticed before. Laying the deer on its side, she sliced open its belly.

"Stop!" I turned away so I wouldn't have to see its guts.

Tears threatened, but I pushed them back. I

had the feeling my weakness would only irritate her. I sensed her

move next to me, smelled the blood on her hands.

It was heady, an aroma similar to that of a human.

I turned and saw she held something - a piece of meat, or an organ in her hands. "Try it. Like the fruit, the animals in Sharra are cultivated for our needs."

I shook my head, but the scent had my canines threatening to burst forth, and my mouth watered. "No, thank you. I'm a vegan."

The words sounded hollow.

It was a lie, and she knew it. I hadn't been vegan in weeks.

She chuckled. "Really? That isn't the impression I got from the way you handled those humans."

She stuck the thing in her hand in front of my face. "Try it. You'll like it."

The vampire queen was right, of course.

I certainly didn't act very vegan.

Stepping slightly to the right, I turned my nose away from her hand. "I thought we only drank from humans," I finally said, trying to buy myself some time.

She took a bite from whatever it was she held.

Disgusted, I looked down, studying the red shoes on my feet.

"Humans are trite creatures. Their presence on this planet has been useful. I've recycled them to benefit our race, but they will die out long before we do." She took another bite.

"Recycled?" I kicked at a chunk of moss in the dirt at my feet. "I'm human. You, your body - " I paused.

I'd almost said she was human too.

That wasn't true, but I now got what she meant by recycled. "What about the other vampires? They started out human. They are as human as I am."

She waved a dismissive hand. "You may look human. Even I look

human, but after your first drop of human blood, the genetic code within your body changed. You are no more human than the deer, or these trees. You are a vampire now. Accept it. Embrace it."

She threw the remainder of whatever she held in her hand into the stream. "I thought you already had." She wiped the blood from her hands on the moss near her feet.

At her words, my heart sank. "Is this what you wanted?" I couldn't meet her gaze.

Professor Pops told me Christopher's job was to turn me into a vampire, so I figured the vampire queen was happy.

"Of course, it's what I wanted. You have such potential. And Sharra is a wonderful place to live, learn, and become what you are meant to be."

"Which is a vessel for you," I spat out, curious about why she was going to such trouble to talk to me when she could just do whatever she needed to do, and my soul would vanish, leaving my body for her.

She shook her head, making a tsk-tsk sound.

"I don't know what you've been told, but you'll be more than a mere vessel. You'll become the most powerful creature in the many realms. Everything you desire, anything you wish, will be at your fingertips."

"For my body only, but I'll be gone."

"You've been talking to Adam Henry, perhaps even Kenmei. Those two are such drama queens."

"I have." A part of me hoped Professor Pops and Kenmei weren't telling the truth, but I doubted it. What reasons would they have to lie?

"I'm sure they even told you the story of Silindra and me. About the war?" She raised an eyebrow. "And maybe even about a necklace?" She eyed me, searching my face for answers.

She was leading me.

Deny, deny, deny, I thought.

"Maybe." I shrugged.

"Well, of course, they did. Those are their weapons. The way they get the marked to do their bidding. That's why I brought you here. I wanted you to see I am not some power-hungry maniac as they led you to believe. I am not a monster, Snow, but merely a leader. My people chose me. They need me, and I love all of my subjects equally. You may have seen some of them as we passed through the sitting room of the castle. They are given the freedom and more power than they could ever need, everything they could ever want. All I ask in return is their allegiance. That's all I'm asking of you."

I took a step back. "Why would Profess - Adam lie? He has no reason." I'd seen proof what she was saying was true.

She sighed. Her shoulders sagged slightly, as though she carried the weight of the world on them. "They told you about the war, correct?"

"Yes."

"Well, did they happen to mention it was Kenmei I fought against? Did they tell you he led those who battled against me for power? For the throne that was rightfully mine?"

She started breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Her hair, which was dark and luxurious began to twinkle with darkness like she was about to explode. "Did they tell you he turned my own sister against me?"

OceanofPDF.com

HELLO SNOWFLAKE

"THEY TOLD me you had her tortured and murdered," I said, equally angry, though I was sure there was no twinkling darkness coming off my hair.

The vampire queen gasped and pressed a hand to her chest in mock sarcasm. "They what? I could never murder my sister."

She was a big fat liar. I knew it. Sensed it.

Pushing down my fears, I changed the subject. "Are you saying you were in the right? You deserve the power?"

I didn't add that Kenmei and Professor Pops both told me they were her hunters at one time and that I knew they left her.

Immediately a small flutter danced in my belly.

Was that where Christopher went?

Professor Pops and Kenmei never told me what they did to break free of her.

Was it just a matter of walking away, or was more required? I thought about the bear Christopher carved and how excited he was when I gave it to him.

"Without a doubt, I deserve the power. I've ruled for thousands of years. That isn't going to change anytime soon." She walked back over to the thrones and sat.

I did the same.

She twirled her index finger, and we were back at the castle.

Standing, she moved to the center of the circular room.

"Have you seen the so-called Seal of Gabriel?" She eyes glittered with need.

I gulped and tried to calm my racing heart. After I turned, my

hearing got better, so I had no doubt she heard my increased heartbeat and already knew the answer. "I - I don't know," I stammered, trying to pretend I wasn't sure.

She spun around. It was apparent she knew I wasn't telling the truth either. "Where is it? Do you have it?"

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head. "No. I don't know where it is anymore."

"You had it in your possession?" Anger burned her features. "Stupid girl. It must be destroyed. That thing could ruin everything." Her voice softened. "If you find it again, bring it to me." She brushed her fingers along my jaw. "That pendant will be the death of all vampires, the whole race, including you. And him." While she spoke, she moved her hand in a whimsical S motion.

A glass case, like those my stepmother used to hold her porcelain dolls, appeared atop a white stand. It was much more extensive and reminded me of a coffin.

Someone was inside.

I took a step toward the coffin, trying to ignore the ball of fear growing in my chest.

"Who is that?" I asked, giving the queen a sideways glance as I walked past her.

"You'll see, my dear Snow." The evil smile was back.

The ball of fear in my stomach grew into full-blown anxiety. Inside the coffin was a guy, his dirty blond hair flawlessly combed.

His eyes were closed, but I knew they were hazel.

"Christopher," I whispered.

Around his neck hung the carved bear, the one he made right before he was changed into a vampire. He wore brown leather pants and a white shirt with a leather vest.

Dark chocolate brown boots were on his feet and stopped just under his knees. His hands rested on his stomach.

"Is he?" I stopped, unable to finish.

"Dead? No. But if you don't bring me that necklace, he will be." She came to stand next to me. "You don't want that, do you?" She touched my shoulder, and it took all my courage not to shrink away.

"I don't know where it is. I swear." I clasped her hand, begging her to believe me.

"If you think really hard, I'll bet you can figure out where to start looking for it." She squeezed my hand back, and I thought the bones in my fingers might break.

"There - " I began but stopped.

"You're not ready, Snow," the vampire queen's words echoed through my mind and I was no longer in Sharra.

A sound escaped my throat, and I clamped the hand the vampire queen crushed only moments ago over my mouth.

I was happy and scared all at once.

Maybe I wasn't ready, but I was home, standing in the middle of my room.

Purple walls filled with baby animal posters.

Purple curtains.

Purple towels in the bathroom.

I was glad to see all of it.

Wistfulness swept through my veins.

At the same time, there was terror. How would I confront Professor Pops and the brothers? Cindy? Gatsby? And my stepmom and dad - were they here?

Not to mention Christopher. The vampire queen said he wasn't dead but how long would he remain that way? My insides quivered with a jolt of selfish happiness to note that Christopher hadn't abandoned me but he'd been taken.

I needed to help him. But first I had to deal with the consequences of killing Gabe. Pops and the brothers deserved closure.

Using my newfound stealth, I crept over to their bedroom and peeked inside.

My dad and stepmom weren't in bed, and my heart fell.

I'd been gone for two weeks.

Maybe no one bothered to tell them what happened.

I'd lost my cell phone at some point during my time away.

What about poor Gatsby?

"Here, kitty, kitty," I called, not turning on the lights.

I didn't need light to see any longer, and I didn't want the brothers or Pops to know I was home just yet.

So, I listened, taking in the familiar smells and sounds of the house.

I didn't hear any soft padding of kitty feet. Quietly, I tromped down the stairs.

In the kitchen, I sat at the counter.

Pulled over the envelope filled with the invitation to my birthday party.

A tear fell onto my cheek.

The idea of the party was awful, but the person who planned it meant the world to me.

How could Professor Pops ever forgive me for what I'd done?

"Gabe," I whispered.

"Hello, Snowflake."

OceanofPDF.com

ARE YOU REAL

THE VOICE CAME from behind me. It was a voice I thought I'd never hear again.

I didn't want to move, afraid if I turned around, I would realize I was hearing things or it'd been a figment of my overactive imagination.

But I sensed movement.

My body began to tremble. Could it be? Was it possible? I was too afraid to find out.

His voice whispered in my ear. "Snowflake. You're back. I knew you'd come sooner or later. I've been waiting."

I had to see him.

Turning, my eyes caught hold of his face, and he was there, standing before me.

His gorgeous green eyes watched me intently, and a smile sat on his beautiful face. But even that could be my imagination.

My mind still wouldn't believe it.

I placed my hands on his arms, feeling the warmth radiating off him. His breathing was rapid, a hint of mint coming off his breath, and he smelled good.

Like my Gabe.

Still, I struggled to accept the truth standing in front of me. "Are you real?"

He pulled me into his arms.

Gabe! He wasn't dead.

Somehow.

My arms circled his waist, my head resting on his shoulder. I

closed my eyes, allowing myself to be momentarily lost in his embrace.

He was alive. Gabe.

After I don't know how long, I pulled back, desperate to see his face. His features would tell me whether or not he was angry.

"It's good to see you," he said softly, his voice full of emotion.

I couldn't get a read on him.

"How is this possible? I saw the angle of your neck. It was broken." I fought hard to keep the tears threatening to escape at bay.

His gaze fell to my mouth an instant before his lips pressed against mine.

That was the last thing I expected, but I reciprocated, pouring all of the guilt, the sorrow, the excruciating pain I'd held inside over the few two weeks into my kiss.

He scooped me into his arms and carried me upstairs into my bedroom, where he lay me on my bed before climbing on with me.

Our lips never separated, and he deepened the kiss.

I clung to him as his thumbs skimmed the skin under my shirt, sending fiery heat along my waist.

After a long time, he lifted his head.

"Snowflake, I didn't die. It may have appeared that way, but Professor Pops and the brothers overreacted. I was just unconscious for a while."

I wanted to believe him, but something in his voice, a slight hitch when he'd said they overreacted, gave me pause.

The memory of the way his body felt under me, the way I handled him - as though he were prey and not my first crush. The sound of his neck breaking. The moment ripped through my consciousness as though it were happening again for the first time.

I shuddered, shaking my head at the recollection.

"No, you were dead. Why aren't you telling me the truth? Did

you?" I couldn't complete my question even though I was desperate to find out the truth. "Are you a vampire?"

He jumped off the bed, a look on his face like I just slapped him.

"No," he said. "No way!"

I tried not to be offended. "You know I am a vampire, right? Drinking from you changed me."

He let out a heavy breath. "Yeah, I know," he said, sitting beside me again.

"Does that make you uncomfortable? Because you didn't seem all that uncomfortable a few seconds ago." I got to my knees, adjusting my shirt and pushing back the apprehension fluttering like nervous pixilettes in my stomach.

He ran a hand through his hair, his gaze focused on the floor.

What was wrong with him? Ever since my hunter bit me, he'd been hot and cold. I couldn't figure him out.

"No, it doesn't make me uncomfortable. It makes - " He paused momentarily before continuing, "I am beyond happy to see you. But - " He let the word hang in the air.

"Spit it out, Gabe. What's your problem?" The guy could totally press my buttons. I was so, so happy. Because he was truly alive. But Gabe ticked me off way to easily, too.

He watched me a moment, taking me in. "It's just. Ugh! Why is this so difficult?" His green eyes pleaded, as though I should understand what was wrong.

I didn't, not even a little bit. "Tell me."

He turned and took one of my hands in his. "Professor Pops told me he told you about those who might want you dead."

"Yes. He explained that other vampires, and other creatures, believe that if all marked are killed, then it will be easier to destroy the queen." The internal pixilettes quivered again.

"That's right. And just as the queen is the vampire leader, there is

one who rules over those who stand against her." He started to fidget, playing with a tassel on one of my pillows.

"Makes sense," I said quietly. "Somehow you know the leader?" I was waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop.

Gabe continued like he hadn't heard my question. "When I was little, Professor Pops adopted me. You know that." He chuckled nervously.

"Of course," I whispered.

"From a young age, I knew I was different, that Professor Pops was different, and that the world wasn't as simple as it seemed. When I turned twelve, Pops showed me the Museum of the Supernatural. Something clicked inside. I felt drawn to hunt those who served the vampire queen." He brushed some hair out of his eyes and cleared his throat.

"Pops wouldn't let me, not that I blame him. He continued to train me, but that was all. I knew there was more and that a big piece of the puzzle was missing. I didn't know why until a few days after I turned sixteen. A visitor came to see me." He stopped and searched my eyes.

"Oh? Who?" I asked, feeling nervous for him. I scooted closer.

OceanofPDF.com

"He opposes the vampire queen." He shook his head. "He's the leader of those who want you and all of the marked dead." He blew out his breath. "More than that, though, he is my father."

"Like, your real father?" I was confused.

We'd all believed his father was dead - that he'd died in a fire more than a decade ago.

He nodded. "Yes. When we spoke, he explained that he needed to fake his own death." Gabe's eyes filled with wonder. "Apparently, he's been alive a long time."

The make-believe pixilettes in my tummy were having a field day. But I could only focus on one thing at a time.

"Why didn't he want you?" I was confused. The man faked his own death and left Gabe to go through life alone.

Thank goodness for Professor Pops.

Gabe pulled away. "It isn't that he didn't want me. He's just busy, and those who are loyal to the queen killed my mom. He believed Professor Pops would be able to care for me until I was old enough to understand. And Professor Pops did. I couldn't have asked for a better father."

That was true, but I still didn't get it. Had his father known what Professor Pops was? "But Professor Pops is a vampire." I spoke slowly, trying to let all he said sink in.

"Technically, yes. He is. But he's more than that, and my father trusts him." He crossed his arms, his features twisting. "He may not like him or what he is, but he trusts him."

I shook my head. "Okay, so you're the son of the man who wants me dead. But how does that explain why you're alive?"

I knew there were many other questions I needed to ask him as well. "I know you died. No one could survive a broken neck or a torn-out throat." Yet there he was, sitting on my bed, looking as amazing as ever.

I shuddered at the memory of him and forced back my desire to run.

"There must be a balance in all things. For every sunset, there is a sunrise. For each sadness, there is happiness. And for every evil, there must be good." He paused to let the words sink in.

They sank in all right, and I started to get mad.

Was he saying I was evil?

Had he been waiting for me so he could make out with me before killing me? That seemed kind of perverse.

"What do you mean?" I released his hand, moving away.

My movements didn't go unnoticed. He frowned but didn't stop me. "When vampires were created, so was another species. Equally powerful, but keen on living in seclusion." Gabe took a deep breath.

"Please don't tell me they were werewolves," I said, mocking.

"No, not werewolves, but chayot." He pronounced it like someone might say coyote but with a ch at the beginning.

"Chayot?" I smirked. "Did you just make that word up?" I thought about slapping his knee and smiling. He was teasing me.

"Snow. This is serious. If you don't believe me, look up the word on the Internet. It's there, though a lot of the information is incorrect."

He really was serious. The pixilettes in my stomach vanished, replaced by a vicious knot. "If you say so." I sat cross-legged and settled my hands in my lap. "But why aren't these chayot in Professor Pops' books? Or on display in the Museum of the Supernatural?"

He scooted nearer. "Any written mention of the chayot is considered blasphemy. The chayot are sacred and to be revered." While he spoke, his voice softened, but that just infuriated me more.

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me that the chayot are the good guys, and we vampires are the bad guys? Is that what you're saying?"

He let out another weighty breath. "Basically, yes."

I jumped off the bed. "Unbelievable," I snapped as I paced, catching my reflection in my full-length mirror. Even she looked frantic.

"What about Kenmei and Professor Pops?" I didn't add Christopher, but his body in the glass coffin crossed my mind.

"They were human before they became vampires." He gingerly moved toward me. "Though they did a lot of evil in their time, they've atoned and dedicated their lives to destroying the vampire queen."

I backed up, somehow feeling like a caged animal, and remembered what the queen had said. My DNA was changed.

I was no longer human.

Didn't he know that?

"What about me?" I asked between rapid breaths.

He shrugged. "See, it's like this - " He stopped and walked over to my dresser and began fiddling with the perfume bottles. He took off each lid, brought the bottle to his nose, and then crinkled his face like the bottles contained skunk spray.

If the situation hadn't been so difficult, I would've laughed.

Instead, I waited for him to go on as apprehension over what he would say filled every crevice.

Finally, he sighed, turned back to me. "That's why I'm here. My father is the first chayot. When the war broke out between the vampires and the other creatures, he stayed out of it. He and the other chayot didn't get involved until later when vampires decided to kill and use humans."

Frustrated tears filled my eyes, but I forcefully wiped them away. "You're a chayot?" I struggled to believe it but that would explain why he didn't die.

"Half. Yes." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, his shoulders rising to his ears.

Was that why his blood tasted so good? "You aren't making sense. You are half whatever the hell a chayot is and half what? Changeling?" It was the first word that came to mind.

As I said the word, an image of the squat, frog-looking creature came to mind.

I knew they could make themselves look different. Hence the name changeling.

At the word, Gabe wrinkled his nose. "Hell no, Snowflake. Human. I'm half-human."

"Is that why chayots want to kill vampires?" I asked.

OceanofPDF.com

MAYBE I DESERVED IT

MY BREATHING CAME in ragged chunks. "Is it because we are no longer human?" I wanted out of my room. Out of this conversation with Gabe, and the whole thing.

The desire to bolt took over.

For the briefest of moments, I went to the window, desperate to be anywhere but here.

"That's part of it. But there's more. See," he hesitated.

I studied his reflection in the glass, but I didn't turn.

"My father fell in love with a human, and with that love came many children. The vampire queen made an extra effort to capture and change their offspring into vampires. Sons and daughters with chayot blood make even more exceptional vampires than a regular human does. The vampire queen favored them over all others, and she nearly got them all."

I thought about the vampires I'd seen in the castle.

Were they Gabe's relatives?

I didn't ask. Didn't move.

I was a vampire - the enemy.

I wouldn't give him any information.

"The queen brought this war upon herself. It's my father's life work to finish it - kill them all. Destroy her. End the suffering of those chayot she's changed." As he spoke, he straightened, and a regal arrogance shifted his features.

I crossed my arms. How dare he? I hadn't asked for this.

Yet somehow, he was saying I was evil - a thing to be destroyed.

Maybe I deserved it. I thought of all the humans I'd fed from over

the last two weeks. I'd enjoyed it. Reveled in it.

My hands in fists, I faced him. "Well then, what are you waiting for? If that's why you've come, do it. Kill the evil vampire you just made out with." My words came out harsh, laced with spite.

I closed my eyes and rolled my shoulders back.

If he wanted me dead, so be it. If I had to die, it should be by the human - even if he was just half-human - whose blood I drank first.

Several minutes passed, and neither of us moved. I heard him, still standing there, breathing erratically.

I blinked open my eyes to see tears crowded Gabe's lashes and streaked his cheeks. The haughtiness was gone, replaced by a desolate sadness.

I tucked my hands in my back pockets. He was so annoyingly complicated. "What? Am I making it too easy? Do you want me to run?" I asked, turning the palms of my hands toward him in supplication.

He shook his head, a strangled moan leaving his throat. He sank to his knees, bowing his head.

"Why did you have to turn?" The words came out anguished.

I went to him then, kneeling in front of him. "You offered yourself to me. I was there, I remember." My cheeks heated at the memory of our kissing. "You wanted me to bite you," I added, softly.

"No," he growled. "I didn't. That isn't how it went - " His voice trailed off. "You-you tricked me. I wasn't strong enough to resist you, and you used your - " He paused.

"I used my what? Womanly wiles?" I snorted in disgust. I knew he was talking about a vampire's gift of compulsion.

A fantastic ability that came along with being a marked bloodsucker.

But I hadn't had that skill before I drank from him.

"I wasn't a vampire until after you let me drink from you. I didn't

use any kind of spell, or magic, or whatever you want to call it. I didn't have the ability then." I got off my knees and went back to the window.

The slivered moon glowed through wispy clouds.

Frogs croaked, and the wind whistled lightly through the trees. "If you'd like, I can show you the difference. I have the power to persuade you into doing anything now." I didn't look at him but heard his breath catch. "Is that what you want?"

"Snowflake," he whispered.

I spun around.

Gabe was back on his feet.

"What the hell do you want from me, Gabe? If you want me dead, kill me. I won't stop you. Just do it and get it over with because I'm beyond sick of your hot and cold."

He crossed his arms. "I should kill you. It's what I'm required to do." He looked away. "But, I can't." Each word came out like he was in pain. "We are meant to be enemies, but that isn't how I feel about you."

My anger returned. I walked over and slapped his face. "This is all your fault. You know that, right?"

He flinched, surprised.

I didn't give him a chance to refute my accusation. "If you had just told me what you were instead of acting weird, I wouldn't have bitten you. I would've resisted," I said, fighting the trembling of my lower lip.

Thinking back, I wondered if I could have, but I had to believe it was true.

It looked like he hadn't thought of that.

Stupid guys and their stupid hormones.

"You're right," he said quietly. "But, I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" I exhaled and turned away.

He swallowed, taking me by the shoulders and making me face him. Then he took my hands in his. "I was afraid you wouldn't talk to me anymore. That you would hate me." He hesitated and closed his eyes. "I hate myself."

I yanked my hands from his, frustrated. He was still doing it, acting all kinds of sweet one second and like a total jerk-face vampire killer the next.

"Why? Why even care?" I went to my bedroom door and pushed it wide open. "Let me make it easy on you. Either kill me or leave. This doesn't have to be difficult. Now that I understand what you are required to do, just get it over with!" Fury made my canines grow, but I didn't care. I let him see the monster in me.

Tears filled his eyes. "I can't," he seethed. "Don't you get that?" His body teemed with desperation and shook with emotion.

OceanofPDF.com

I LOVE YOU

"NO, I DON'T," I said, my body moving toward him on its own.

When I was inches from him, I stopped.

"Why can't you kill me, Gabe?" My voice was low, my breathing erratic as I studied him, trying to decide what the hell a chayot was.

I had no clue. He'd said he wasn't a werewolf, so there was that.

He pulled me so that our chests touched, his eyes boring into mine.

My heart pounded, and I felt his pounding too.

Beat for beat.

I was furious, scared, and angry.

Worst of all, I wanted him.

I wanted his lips on mine again.

And I wanted him to keep his promise to never leave me.

His hurt and confusion vanished, replaced with his need for me.

In answer, his mouth covered mine, his lips warm and urgent.

Without hesitation, I responded, hungry for all of him.

He seemed to need me the same way, and before I knew it, we were back on my bed, his body covering mine, his hands in my hair.

I let my hands roam over his body, exploring the muscles on his back, shoulders, and chest.

Our lips parted momentarily when I lifted his shirt over his head.

Our eyes met.

His were clouded with confusion and something else, and I guessed they were a reflection of mine.

I wasn't sure what we were doing or how we would solve our problems.

We'd been friends most of our lives.

We were supposed to be enemies.

That's what he'd said.

But at that moment, I didn't care, and neither did he.

When I tossed his shirt on the floor, he groaned, pressing kisses into my neck, along my jaw before hesitating, his eyes locking with mine.

"I love you, Snow White. I've loved you since the day Professor Pops brought me home, and I saw your inquisitive, beautiful face in my driveway."

I searched for any hint of a lie as my pulse quickened. "You love me?" I asked uncertainly.

He wrapped his arms around me, his elbows on either side, holding me, a willing captive.

"So much it hurts," he said softly, a smirk playing across his lips.

I realized he was thinking about our first kiss, down in the Seven Magics Academy training room when I drank from him and thought I killed him.

"Won't your dad be mad? He knows what I did, right?"

He nodded, the smirk turning into a smile. "I've just decided I don't care. For the past several weeks, I've tried to be the obedient son and do what my father expects. Take on the family business. But where you're concerned, I can't." Gabe's face turned dark, full of determination. "I won't."

My heart melted, but I wanted him to be clear. "Is that really feasible, though? Isn't it your sacred duty or something to destroy me and my kind?" I still didn't know what he was.

He pulled his arms from beneath me and brushed his fingers through my hair.

We were so close our noses almost touched.

The smell of toothpaste tinged his breath, and manly cologne

surrounded his body.

The muscles on his arms rippled, and he flexed. I took in his dark lashes, thick like a girl's, but on him, they only increased the perfection of his face.

There was a slight arch in his brows.

His dark hair swirled in disarray, and his lips were parted slightly.

Sexy.

"Together, we'll figure it out." He kissed me tenderly. "I won't lose you. I made you a promise, didn't I? That is my sacred duty now, to make sure you're kept safe."

I smiled. My cheeks hot with desire. "What if I want to - " My eyes found the pulsing vein in his neck.

The idea of drinking from him again caused my fangs to appear.

He inhaled.

Worried, I scared him, I caught hold of his gaze. "I don't have to."

His expression became hungry. "Well, the damage is done. You've already discovered you can't kill me, and - " Gabe looked away.

"You liked it," I said hoarsely, finishing his sentence.

"Yes," he whispered. "I liked it." He cleared his throat. "Well, up until you broke my neck. That really did hurt, at least for a few minutes."

Our eyes met, and we both laughed. "I'm really sorry about that." I touched his neck with my fingers. "Beyond sorry," I added, my fingers finding his pulse. "But, I've had some practice since the first time."

His eyes widened. "You haven't killed anyone."

"No. I've been careful." My fingers trailed down his back, making goosebumps rise on his skin.

"That feels good," he said, kissing my nose. "I know what would feel better." He rolled us so that I was on top, and he lifted his chin, offering me his pulsing vein.

It was my turn to be surprised. "Are you sure?" I asked, checking his face.

My need for his blood filled my soul even as I straddled him. I wanted him bad.

"Very sure. Take it." He closed his eyes.

I moved so that I could have better access.

Opening my mouth, releasing my fangs, I lowered my head.

I took it slow, allowing each tooth to prick his neck gradually, knowing with the pain also came pleasure.

His breath caught in his throat. When my fangs were fully inside, I began sucking, pulling his blood from his body.

He moaned, taking my head in his hands and pressing me deeper into him.

I sucked harder. This time I counted. When I reached eight, I stopped.

He flipped us, placing me under him again, my canines still embedded in his neck. He pressed his body into mine. "Don't stop, Snow."

I sucked again, counting all the way to fifteen. Way past my limit, but I was almost too far gone to stop.

Surely if I drained him dry, he would die. Wouldn't he?

I had to stop. I pulled out, my fangs retracting.

His eyes were hooded, heavy with lust.

Our bodies twined together.

Gabe's lips found mine, and I froze, worried he would be disgusted by the blood on my lips.

OceanofPDF.com

YOU'RE SO BEAUTIFUL

GABE DIDN'T SEEM to mind the blood. His tongue dove into my mouth and circled mine.

My hands wandered along his back, down to the waist of his jeans and along his butt.

His breathing came faster as we moved, desperate to be even closer to each other.

Our lips parted, and we looked at each other.

"I want you," he said.

"I want you too." So badly I ached.

He helped me sit up, lifting my shirt over my head before tossing it onto the floor.

Then he scooted me back under him, skin touching skin.

"Snow," he whispered, his voice gruff, kissing my neck, along my collarbones and shoulders. "You're so beautiful."

In response, I wrapped my legs around his hips.

Did I really want to keep going? My body sure did, but not too many minutes ago, he'd called us enemies.

He'd said it was his duty to kill me.

But he'd also told me he loved me.

Funny how life worked.

You fought.

You made up.

I decided to go with it and went to bite his shoulder.

Someone cleared his throat, and the lights flicked on.

We froze, both of us looking over toward the sound.

Professor Pops stood in the doorway, his hands on his hips.

My face blazed at the sight of him.

Gabe blocked me with his body. "Give us a minute, Pops," Gabe said calmly.

"I'll give you five. Get dressed," Pops answered sternly, giving Gabe a look that said he was in big freaking trouble. The door closed.

"Crap," Gabe whispered.

I swallowed, working on getting myself under control.

Part of me was glad we'd been interrupted.

But my body was really disappointed.

In the hall, I could hear the brothers snickering.

"I guess they made up," Heathcliff said.

"I told you he wouldn't kill her," Bart added.

"You owe me twenty bucks." That was Salvatore.

Gabe and I looked at each other.

He helped me off the bed.

I threw my shirt back on, and he did the same.

"Ready?" he asked when we were decent.

I knew Gabe was alive, and all the guilt I felt was for nothing, but nervousness fluttered at facing Professor Pops. I didn't want to see the disappointment on his face.

"As I'll ever be." I worked to smooth down my hair.

Before I opened the door, I paused and took a deep breath.

"Wow, dinner and a show," I said and swallowed, working to push down the humiliation that everyone knew what we were doing.

Gabe looked confused a second and then started to laugh. "I'm a full-service boyfriend."

Boyfriend? I snickered, still feeling blissful after-effects of drinking Gabe's blood.

Our relationship felt like more than that.

An image of Christopher in the glass case danced across my mind, reminding me that any happiness I experienced was at his expense.

I needed to find the Seal, or all vampires would be destroyed, including my hunter.

But who would've taken it?

My stepmother? Cindy? What about Gabe's father, or someone in his group? Wouldn't they want it if it could destroy vampires?

I gasped at the questions, my mind moving in one direction. Toward Gabe.

Did he have it?

Kenmei and Professor Pops said it would give the person who had it more power, though it worked best for me.

So, if Gabe or his father had it, did they know what to do with it? I didn't even know what to do with it.

"Snow, what's wrong? You look like you're in pain. Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine. Just a lot going on in here." I tapped my head with a finger. Gabe placed his hand over mine.

Before we left the confines of my room, I had a question. "Do the guys know what you are?"

He chuckled. "Yes. After my brush with a broken neck and my quick recovery, Professor Pops and I told them. Dorian, Heathcliff, and Salvatore wouldn't speak to me for a week. They were so mad at me for not telling you and not telling them." He huffed. "I should've told you all a lot sooner. So much heartache could've been avoided if I had."

With a sigh, he sidled over, grabbing my hands. "Can you forgive me? Can you love me?" His eyes searched mine.

Love? He'd repeated the word.

If I truly loved Gabe, then either the spell or prophecy or whatever - "Lips red as rubies, hair dark as night, drink your true love's blood,

become the Vampire, Snow White" - was just a lot of mumbo jumbo, or I didn't really love, love Gabe.

Professor Pops had told me that a kiss from my true love would return me to human. That hadn't worked, so did that mean Gabe wasn't my true love?

I thought about the vampire queen and what she told me, that Professor Pops and Kenmei were lying.

Someone was lying, but who? Who could I trust? I still had a lot to learn.

I blinked. "Yes, of course, I forgive you. I'm sorry for running. I was such a coward. Had I stayed, a lot of heartache could have been avoided as well." I could ask him to explain what a chayot was. I should. But part of me didn't want to know. At least not yet.

He kissed my forehead. "Then, we'll agree it's both our faults and forget all about it."

"Okay," I muttered, but a big part of me believed it was impossible to totally forget. I wanted to tell him that too, but I was mentally exhausted.

A lot had gone on in a short amount of time, and I needed a break.

"C'mon, let's go see what Professor Pops has to say."

We opened the door, and I followed him down the hall until we reached the top of the stairs where I hesitated.

Gabe turned back. "What's wrong, Snow?" Then he glanced beyond me toward my window. "We could run, if you want."

"Does my dad know I left?"

OceanofPDF.com

NEEDED TO ESCAPE

GABE'S EYES found mine again. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I guess your dad tried to call you several times, and, when some random person answered, he freaked out and called Pops. We didn't want to worry him, so Professor Pops told your dad you lost your phone and that you were upset about him leaving again so soon and that you needed some time."

He touched my cheek with a thumb. "If you hadn't returned by tomorrow, we were going to have to tell your dad the truth."

"Good," I said, exhaling that stored up stress. I would call him tomorrow morning. "What about Gatsby? Do you know where my cat is?"

"Yeah, the poor thing came meowing at our backdoor a couple of days after you left. We've kept him with us. He's been well cared for, but he sure misses you." He took my hand.

"I can't wait to see him."

We lumbered down the stairs and headed into the kitchen.

Professor Pops and the brothers were there.

The guys smiled sheepishly, though Professor Pops looked serious.

"Hi," I said, clinging to Gabe's hand and hiding behind him slightly.

Professor Pops took hold of my other hand and pulled me to him, hugging me tightly.

He wasn't mad.

I forced back a sob, embracing him happily, enjoying the scent of books, ink, and cigars that was the Professor. He may be disappointed, but he still cared for me. I was beyond grateful for that knowledge.

"I am glad you're okay. I was worried sick." Pops held me at arm's length. "Where have you been?"

I couldn't tell them about the vampire queen or the trek I traveled in search of blood. It was all best forgotten. Before I could answer, Salvatore spoke.

"Yeah, Snow. We looked for you every day, but it was like you vanished."

"You shouldn't have run. We will always have your back," Dorian said, his eyes sad.

I nodded. "I'm sorry. It's just when I saw Gabe and thought he was - " I refused to even say what I thought had happened. "Something inside me broke, and I needed to escape."

They all nodded, letting out grunts of understanding and sympathy.

Except for Sebastian. "How many regular humans did you kill?" The words sounded light, but I could tell he was nervous about the answer.

"None," I answered. Focusing on Professor Pops. "I remembered what you said. I counted. I didn't take too much." I felt movement from Gabe but didn't dare look at him.

Professor Pops smiled, his shoulders visibly relaxing. "That is excellent news." He released me.

"I guess this means we don't need to cancel her party," Daniel said.

The rest of the brothers groaned.

And I laughed. "My birthday party? Are you sure you want to host that? I don't need anything. I'm just so glad to be back with you all."

It wasn't necessary, but at this point, I'd do anything, go anywhere for them. As long as these amazing guys - men - were near me, I knew anything was possible.

Professor Pops clasped his hands, and smiled. "Of course we do, my dear. You only turn sixteen once."

"Yes, but will she be able to resist all the delicious human blood dancing around the room?" Dorian asked, his voice tinged with

curiosity.

As he spoke, he raised his chin slightly.

I doubted anyone else even noticed. I did.

What was it about Dorian offering me his blood?

They all turned to me, some smug, others concerned.

I shrugged and then sighed, drawing out the time before I responded.

They all seemed to be holding their breaths.

Giving Gabe a sideways glance, I nodded. "I will have no problem resisting. That I can promise."

"I know she can too," Dorian said, pulling me into a hug.

Gabe shoved him. "That's enough. Back off my girl."

"Let's have a ball," Salvatore shouted.

The back door flew open, and we all turned to see Cindy, dressed in soft pink pajamas and fluffy pink slippers, rush into the kitchen, and skid to a halt. Even with bedhead and no makeup, she was gorgeous.

"Snow. Merryweather. White!" she fumed, crossing her arms.

I swallowed nervously. "Hey, Cin," I said, moving over to her and patting her on the shoulder. "It's nice to see you."

She flinched, but quickly recovered and threw her arms around me. "I'm tres glad you're back."

"Me too, Cin. Me too." I hugged her tight, thankful I had such great friends.

"Don't you dare run off without me again. Got it?" She pushed me away so she could study my face.

"I won't." I raised an eyebrow.

She'd bragged about her locator spell and about being a big-time witch, so why hadn't she located me?

Unless she hadn't been looking.

"Good." She released me but linked her arm with mine at our elbows. "Please tell me there are cookies and hot cocoa with marshmallows. I need comfort food."

We all laughed.

AFTER THAT NIGHT, things returned to normal pretty quickly.

I went back to Salem Academy the next day, which was a Wednesday, and continued my Seven Magics Academy training in the evenings.

By the following weekend, I was all caught up in my classes.

Professor Pops had been right.

Human stuff was super easy now.

My Salem Academy teachers were shocked but also pleased with my newfound intellectual prowess.

My Seven Magics Academy training was coming along nicely as well.

After school, I hung out with Cindy on the days she wasn't working. It was fun to listen to her talk about my party, dresses, makeup, and the guys.

I let her practice makeup spells on me and do my hair.

It wasn't my favorite pastime, but it was alright.

She was really talented and made me look good.

She still didn't know Gabe and I were together. Worse, she didn't know what happened to me.

That I was a vampire now.

I half hoped Professor Pops would tell her what I was, but he didn't.

OceanofPDF.com

INSTEAD, he said one of his relatives needed help and that I'd agreed to take care of his niece and nephew.

Cindy bought it and only asked a few questions.

Like how much was I paid, whether I had fun taking care of the kids, and most importantly, had I met any cute guys.

Mostly, she would show me her magic, even practicing on me sometimes.

One day I went to school with a pink streak in my hair, the next I had a red one. She also polished my nails using magic, which was cool.

I especially liked it when they were sparkling red. Thankfully, she was over Gabe. And she only asked about Christopher once.

She'd believed he and I ran off together and that I was pregnant. The woman had wild fantasies, but they weren't even close to the real drama in my life.

When I spent time alone with Gabe, we did a lot of kissing, and he let me drink his blood. We decided to hold off on going further physically.

At least until after my sixteenth birthday.

That seemed appropriate.

I still hadn't been able to tell him that I loved him.

That omission appeared to be wearing on him because he said it a lot, but I didn't know whether that was how I felt.

I mean, sure I loved him, but I wasn't positive I was in love with him.

With Pops and the other brothers, I researched in the Museum of the Supernatural and trained with different weapons.

My Seven Magics Academy training was one of the best parts of my day, though there was no mention of chayot in any of the books.

An Internet search had given me some idea of what Gabe was, and I'd asked Professor Pops to fill in the details, so I had a vague understanding of what a chayot was.

But I still wanted to talk to Gabe about it.

There hadn't been any time to think much about Sharra, Christopher, or the necklace. Though I silently hoped Christopher was okay.

I knew the Seal of Gabriel was out there and that someone had it. But I was at a loss as to how to bring it up.

It was Friday night, and Cindy was at work.

Her job was the one thing about her I didn't understand. Her family was wealthy. She didn't need to work, but she liked to.

Go figure.

I was glad, though.

That little bit of reality kept her from being too snobby.

Gabe trained me after school.

Then he cooked himself a steak with a side salad while I watched, hungry for his blood. When he finished, we left his house, walking over to mine.

There we could be alone.

We watched a movie. Well, we mostly kissed, and I drank his blood.

Now that I knew he was supernatural, I could taste it - the searing light within his blood. It radiated from his pores and gave me a slight buzz.

"Hang on." Gabe got up off the floor. "I need some water."

"Fine." I rolled onto my stomach, watching him get a glass from the cupboard before filling it with water at the sink. "So you're half-

angel?" I asked, waiting for him to confirm what I thought was the truth. That chayot was a type of angel.

Gabe chugged down the water before refilling it and drinking some more. I heard his heart skip a beat. "You know, then," he said and smirked, coming back over to the living room and sitting beside me.

I rested my head in his lap, smiling up at him. "I guess so," I said, appreciating the confirmation, though it wasn't a flat-out declaration. "Say the word again."

He knew I liked how he said the word like coyote, but with the ch sound at the beginning. I thought it sounded incredibly sexy coming from Gabe's succulent mouth.

According to the Internet, chayot were holy beings that dwelled on Earth.

One site contained diagrams explaining why and listed names of biblical prophets and teachers they believed were chayot.

The pictures portrayed figures without wings, or horns and a tail.

They looked like any average human.

I wanted to believe that was Gabe - at least half of him, but I didn't know for sure what it meant that he was an angel.

Gabe finished the water in his glass, resting it on the carpet beside us. Then he tucked the pillow behind his back.

My cat Gatsby stood from his place near the TV, giving me a one-eyed glare.

I ignored him, and he trotted from the room.

"But you are an angel?" I verified.

"Technically, yes. But chayot are specific types of angels and are rarely spoken about." Gabe brushed his hands through his hair.

He didn't really seem to want to talk about it, but I wanted answers.

"What, no wings?" I grabbed a pillow from off the couch - the front of this one cross-stitched with Ursula hovering over a wide-eyed Ariel

- and set it on his lap before resting my head on it.

I was trying to be funny, but he seemed preoccupied.

An incomprehensible shadow passed over his face but immediately disappeared.

He adjusted my pillow, so my head was nearer to him.

"Chayot were created for a specific purpose. Each possesses a deeply embedded passion for keeping humans safe. It's their only responsibility."

An insistent dread filled my heart, and I had to tell myself he didn't mean me. I pushed down the feelings, my insecurities.

"And you can't die?" The memory of his body twisted at an odd angle, sprang to mind, and my stomach turned.

What I really wanted to know was how his kind - chayot - could be killed.

What I'd learned from the Museum of the Supernatural was that the word immortal was a relative term.

Every creature had a weakness.

You just had to know what it was and how to use it to your advantage. And if chayot wanted me dead, it would serve me well to know how they could die as well.

"As I said before, yes, I can die. All creatures can. But it isn't easy for me." He smirked, cool cockiness oozing from his pores.

"How?" I asked and immediately regretted it.

OceanofPDF.com

KISS ME

GABE'S EYES DARKENED, and he studied me.

"Never mind," I added quickly.

He carefully lifted me so that I was straddling him, and I realized what he was doing. When he didn't want to talk about our differences or the fact that we were supposed to be enemies, he would kiss me.

Then we would get lost in the amazing feelings created by making out. My body hummed in anticipation.

I watched his eyes, curious about what I saw in them.

They were filled with hunger, desire, and something else. Guilt?

Did he regret the way he felt about me?

Had his biological father said something to him about the fact that I wasn't dead yet?

If only I could explain to his father that I was still me.

Still Snow White, a girl from Salem, Massachusetts.

All that changed was I needed blood to survive and - Okay, so a lot about me was altered, but it was physical.

My soul was the same.

Gabe continued to watch me.

"What?" I asked, feeling self-conscious.

Gabe had to know I was still the girl he'd flirted with at Warehouse Video, the same girl he wrapped in his arms and promised to never leave.

Sure, I'd been bitten and changed into a revenant and finally a vampire. But I hadn't killed anyone. I still went to school, fed my cat, and did the usual stuff.

Gabe seemed to sense my internal struggles.

"Kiss me," he said, his voice low and husky.

He tugged me closer, and our lips met.

I pressed my body into him, allowing my need for him to overpower everything else. Tasted his angelic essence on his lips.

For several long minutes, we were lost in each other, and I forgot about everything but how good it felt to have Gabe's hands caressing my body, his tongue skimming the inside of my mouth.

When we broke apart, we were both breathing heavily.

"You're really good at that," I said, biting my lower lip.

Gabe chuckled and a quiver of lust rushed through me. I wanted his blood in my mouth. I wanted his scent on my skin.

I smiled, running my hands through his thick dark hair. Gabe was beautiful.

His eyes searched mine, his usual cocky grin plastered on his face.

"My turn," I said, no longer able to hold back. I pulled his hair, tugging his head and exposing the delicious blue-green vein at his neck. My fangs started to grow.

A low rumble escaped from him, and he closed his eyes. "Yes."

I sank my teeth into his neck, relishing the way his skin parted. I tugged his body tightly against mine, sucking slowly, enjoying the intimacy.

"Snow," he whispered, cupping my butt with his hands.

Now that I knew he was half-angel or I guess, half chayot, I relished the distinct difference in his blood.

I understood it, and I also knew I could be a little rougher with him than with regular humans.

After a few minutes, I pulled back before pushing his shirt out of the way and burying my fangs into his shoulder.

He kissed my neck, sucking hard. I knew I would have a hickey.

At least for a minute. I healed way too quickly for it to last.

When I pulled back, he grabbed my head and kissed me, his tongue entwining with mine. Then he stopped, looking at me.

"I love you, Snow," he whispered, his lips brushing against mine.

I had to say the words back. "I love you, too," I returned.

He slowly moved us so that I was under him.

I knew Professor Pops had "the talk" with him after he walked in on Gabe and me the other night, and we'd agreed not to go further, but his body felt so good against mine. I almost decided to change my mind.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, kissing him with such passion, I hoped he could feel how much I cared.

My hands went to the waist of his jeans, running my fingers beneath them.

Gabe stopped, sitting up and pulling me with him. His face and body told me he wasn't ready to be done. Not even close.

"I should go," he said, his voice hoarse, his hair rumpled.

"Okay," I said, standing with him.

He hugged me. "You're amazing," he said, his lips brushing against my hair.

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you." I nuzzled his neck.

His breath came out ragged as he kissed my forehead.

"I can't imagine what it feels like for you." He touched his neck, feathering his fingers across the place my teeth had been moments before. The holes were already gone. "But I've never experienced anything better."

His words caused my knees to go weak. "That pretty much sums it up."

For some reason, an image of Christopher popped into my mind.

Ask him about the pendant. Use your powers of persuasion if you have to and ask already, my inner voice commanded.

But I couldn't.

I didn't want Gabe to think I was accusing him of stealing. Nor did I want to ruin the moment. It'd been hot. My body still buzzed.

"What is it?" he asked, his fingers touching my swollen mouth.

I shook my head. "Just happy." I sighed, leaning into him. I never would've believed there could be a Gabe and me.

"Me, too." He went to the door, opening it, letting in the brisk November air. "You're turning sixteen tomorrow." He still held my hand.

"Yep." Did he want to come back in? It was only one day. Just a few hours, and then I'd be officially sixteen.

His eyes dropped to my lips, but he pulled away. "See ya, Snowflake." He went out onto the porch.

Disappointment flared low in my belly, and my thighs quivered. "Bye." I swallowed, desperate to ask him to stay.

"Tomorrow," he said, and I heard the promise in his voice.

"K."

After he was gone, I got ready for bed, a perma-smile trapped on my lips.

Once I had my purple comforter over me, Gatsby jumped up and curled himself at my feet, his purring a soothing ballad. I immediately fell asleep.

OceanofPDF.com

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

I WAS DEAD. My body rested on a cloud of red inside a clear glass cylinder that was my casket. I'd been laid to rest in a gossamer white dress. Dainty white slippers covered my feet.

My dark hair was curled, and a yellow ribbon wound through several strands like a headband.

In my hands, I clutched a single red rose, the color of my stained lips. Dark lashes stood out against the stark white of my skin. The casket rested on a white stand in a lush field full of thousands of white daisies.

They swayed in the slight wind.

The smartly-dressed brothers and Professor Pops were at the foot of my casket, and the vampire queen stood near my head.

She wore a blood-red dress that scooped low, enhancing her cleavage. Above, the sun shone brightly. Birds twittered in nearby pine trees. The hum of insects provided a despondent melody, and a babbling brook meandered nearby.

It was like looking at a painting of a moment in time.

No one spoke.

No one moved.

What are they waiting for? I wondered.

Overhead a glorious man with velvet-white wings descended. In his hands, he held a large sword. Tears filled my eyes as an overwhelming serenity consumed my soul, and I wondered at my feelings.

Why wasn't I sad or angry at seeing my body laid to rest in a casket. I should've at least felt fear at seeing the menacing chayot hovering over my dead body. Instead, there was only calm.

He drew closer, his features coming into view.

"Gabe." I noted the set of his jaw and the hardness in his green eyes.

He landed next to my body and lifted the lid on the casket. Still, the brothers, Professor Pops, and the queen remained still.

Could they not see him? Was he going to kiss me awake?

The eyes of my corpse flew open, and my fangs grew. A furious growl rumbled in the throat of my dead body.

Gabe brought the blade above my heart and plunged. As the sharp edges parted my skin, it made sounds like metal ripping through concrete.

"I'm so sorry," he cried, pulling back after several moments. Red blood dripped from the edge of his blade and landed on my white dress.

My eyes closed.

My fangs withdrew.

And I was gone.

WHEN I WOKE, I was shocked to see eight handsome men standing at the foot of my bed - Professor Pops and all seven brothers.

Like in my dream.

At the sight, my pulse quickened.

But I took a deep breath.

They weren't in suits.

Nor did they look sad. Instead, they appeared happy.

Professor Pops held a light wooden tray abounding with food.

"One. Two. Three," Heathcliff whispered.

Eight deep voices sang as one. "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Snow. Happy birthday to you."

Gabe said Snowflake. I recognized his baritone.

"And many more," Daniel added.

"On channel four," Salvatore sang.

"We live next door," Bart crooned, lifting a hand in the air.

"She likes to snore." Dorian wiggled his eyebrows in amusement.

"It shakes the floor," Sebastian finished, holding the last note.

I couldn't help the embarrassed giggle, and I covered my head with my blanket. "Thank you," I muttered. If I had the choice of any eight people in the entire world to be part of my life, these goofy, awesome, amazing men would be who I chose.

"Show your face, birthday girl," Dorian said, flipping the covers back. He caught some of my hair in his fingers, and I yelped.

"Violent," I howled playfully.

His eyes grew wide in mock terror. "Sorry." He brushed the hair out of my face with one hand. I sat up and stuck out my tongue, which caused all the guys to laugh.

Professor Pops set the platter of food on my nightstand. A large waffle topped with a generous helping of whipped cream, strawberries, and almond slices steamed from the center of the plate.

A glass of orange juice rested near the knife and spoon, and a bowl of fruit sat above the fork.

"Looks delicious," I said, wishing it would taste like the food in Sharra. At the reminder of the apple I sampled while there, my mouth watered.

"You can eat in a minute. Presents first," Heathcliff said. One by one, they filed out of my room and then came back. Each held a beautifully wrapped present.

I willed away the tears forming on my lashes, sitting up, tucking the covers around my legs.

My eyes still watered, and I waved my hand in front of my face, hoping to fan away the tears. "You guys didn't have to get me anything. The party tonight is more than enough."

"Pish posh," Salvatore said, setting a box wrapped in shiny silver paper and tied with a red bow in front of me.

I raised an eyebrow at his choice of words and laughed. "Thanks, old lady."

"Open it," he said, ignoring my name-calling as he sat at the end of my bed. The others gathered around.

I picked up the box and shook it. It was light, but there was definitely something inside. Untying the ribbon, I ripped off the paper, removing the lid. "Socks," I said, holding up a blue pair with black mustaches all over them. "A lot of socks."

"Sixteen pairs of socks," Salvatore said with a radiant smile.

"Lame," Sebastian goaded, slapping Salvatore in the back of the head. Salvatore reciprocated by punching Sebastian in the stomach.

Professor Pops glared. "Knock it off," he snapped, efficiently ending the altercation.

"I really needed socks. Thank you." I leaned over and hugged Salvatore.

"You're welcome," he responded, suddenly shy.

Sebastian pulled him from the bed and sat in his place. His box was wrapped in a shimmering navy-blue paper and tied with a big magenta bow.

He placed it in my lap.

I opened it with gusto, the excitement building at all of the presents. Inside were smaller plastic boxes.

The first contained a watch with a red band, the face shaped like an apple.

"Cute," I said, setting it next to me on the bed to open the next box. Another watch was nestled inside, but this one had a baby blue band.

The face was surrounded by diamonds - hopefully fake. The next little box had a watch with a black band and tiny black diamonds circling the face.

I knew there would be sixteen in total.

OceanofPDF.com

SWEET SIXTEEN

"THESE ARE COOL, RIGHT?" he asked, searching my face.

"Very cool," I responded sincerely, putting the black one on my wrist. Salvatore made a noise, obviously perturbed I hadn't put on a pair of socks, so I hurriedly did.

"Sixteen watches, all in different colors." He helped me open the rest. My bed held a rainbow of watches, and I wondered what I'd do with them all.

"I think there might be a theme to the gifts," I said, glancing at each of the guys.

They all agreed with "yes," and "of course."

My smile was so big it hurt my cheeks.

"Told you it was a great idea," Daniel said.

For the next half hour, I opened presents, the delicious-looking food forgotten. It didn't matter. I wouldn't have enjoyed it anyway, and I think they all knew it.

Each brother gave me sixteen of something.

Dorian gave me shirts.

They were new and made for women, but still had old eighties memorabilia on the front with musicians like Def Leppard and TV show characters like the Smurfs. A yellow shirt had a smiley face drawn on it with a hole in its forehead. I put it on over my tank.

Bart gave me earrings in all different shapes and sizes.

My ears weren't pierced, but there was also a gift card to go get them done. I would ask Cindy to go with me later today, so I could wear a pair for the party later that night.

Daniel gave me phone cases, which I thought was terrific, especially since they all had some form of the Snow White character

from the books and movies on them.

Heathcliff gave me journals. "So you can write down your thoughts," he said. They were beautiful. Some were leather, others had pretty designs and flowers on them.

Professor Pops presented me with sixteen pairs of Converse in an array of shades from bright orange to teal and lime green to lemon yellow. I loved them so much.

"Thank you," I squealed before clearing my throat. I couldn't help the enthusiasm that spewed out of me. I wasn't a shoe person unless the shoes were Converse. "These are awesome!"

I jumped up on the bed and hugged him.

"So glad you like them," he grinned, his eyes twinkling.

I cleaned up my bed, putting the watches into the box, the socks back in their box, and moving the Converse into a boxed pile on the floor.

Gabe stepped forward. "Open mine," he said, his voice soft.

I'd been nervously avoiding his gaze.

The dream of him floating from the sky and stabbing me through the heart was still firmly situated at the forefront of my mind.

Last night he said he was half a specific type of angel.

Seeing him in my dream with his wings freaked me out.

"Snow?" Gabe shook the present playfully.

I smiled. "Sorry. I'm a little overwhelmed, but happily so." The box he handed me was small, the paper was a bright green secured by a white and green polka dot bow.

I opened it. Inside was a gift card to Warehouse Video with sixteen free movie rentals on it. "I love it," I said, hoping he understood the more profound meaning. I loved him too.

I stood, hugging him. "Thanks, Gabe. I'm sure I'll put these to good use."

He placed his hands on my waist, sending an electric pulse of heat

through my belly. I leaned into him, enjoying his smell, like fresh laundry, sandalwood, and a hint of his mouth-watering blood.

Angel or not, enemies or not, I was drawn to him. Opposites attract, I thought, secretly pressing my lips to his neck. Gabe kissed me lightly, and my body warmed. His soft lips melted away all worry.

"We'd better let Snow get cleaned up. Plus, you boys have a lot of work to do before the party tonight," Professor Pops said, clearing his throat.

They all grumbled, obviously not excited about the work ahead.

"Later, Snow," they said as they unhappily left the room.

I stifled a laugh, feeling happier than I had in a very long time. "I can't wait to see you guys in your tuxes," I sang out.

More grumbling ensued.

Climbing out of bed, I followed them into the hallway, watching them from over the banister as the guys went down the stairs. Professor Pops didn't follow, but bent over, picking up a white, extra-large box leaning on its side, a red bow tied around it. "One more present," he said, bringing it over to me. It was as long as my bed.

"What is it?" I asked, too intrigued to be embarrassed by the extravagance.

"You'll see," he smiled, causing the wrinkles near his eyes to become more prominent.

I removed the bow. Across the box, written in bold black, were the words, Vera Wang. My eyes found his. "I already have a dress, remember? My dad and stepmother bought one for me," I whispered.

He tipped his chin toward the box. "Open it."

Carefully I removed the lid. For some reason, my hands shook, my heart beating rapidly. Folding back the tissue, I sucked in my breath.

Layer after deep crimson layer of a transparent, filmy material covered the entire inside of the box. On top of the cloud of red was a strapless bodice.

I gingerly pressed it between my thumb and first finger. It was soft, like silk.

"Try it on. Let's see if it fits."

"Alright," I agreed, mesmerized by its beauty.

"Vera is a friend of mine. When I explained the dress was for your sixteenth birthday party and that the theme was a masquerade ball, she excitedly created this masterpiece."

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I said softly, walking into the bathroom and shutting the door.

Quickly I removed my shoes, plaid pajama pants, smiley face tee shirt, black tank top, and the watch Sebastian gave me.

I stepped into the dress and pulled it over my chest. Pinching the sides together, I awkwardly zipped myself in.

The dress felt like liquid against my skin. Opening the door, I stepped out, nervous anxiety skipping in my belly.

OceanofPDF.com

BE THERE IN TWENTY

PROFESSOR POPS HELD out his hands. I took them, and he gently twirled me. "You look exquisite, Snow. Like a fiery dream."

I blushed, enjoying the compliment.

Seven heads peeked into my bedroom. They'd come back up the stairs, but I hadn't heard them.

"Holy wow," Heathcliff said.

The others nodded their approval.

I found Gabe. "Gorgeous."

"Get," Professor Pops scolded, shooing them from the room. They reluctantly left, and I heard them tramp down the stairs like a herd of sweet elephants.

I walked over to the full-length mirror, and my heart raced faster. The girl in the mirror looked older, more mature. Like a woman.

"The mask will arrive later this afternoon. I'll have one of the boys bring it over," Professor Pops said, choking up.

I turned to him. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head, clearing his throat. "I am honored to know you, Snow White." He bowed, and my heart lurched.

Why did he do that? The words from the vampire queen filtered through my mind.

She said he wanted her power.

I wasn't buying it.

Professor Pops didn't act like someone who craved power.

Just the opposite.

I touched his shoulder. "Thank you for everything. I'm so glad to know you, too." Heat rose in my cheeks.

He straightened and walked to the door. "Always a pleasure." He seemed sad, but before I could ask him why, he smiled.

"I'll see you tonight. Happy birthday." Then he left.

I turned back to the mirror.

Dark half-circles, like crescent bruises, made my blue eyes appear haunted. My short hair was a mess.

The dress was beautiful, but I needed work.

I needed the best girl-friend on the planet. I needed Cindy.

Making an easy decision, I called Cindy on the regular house phone because my dad and stepmother decided I wasn't mature enough to have a cell after all.

Sure, I'd lost the dang thing after only a month. But it hadn't been my fault.

I was in a blood-induced haze caused by my belief that I killed Gabe. I shouldn't be held accountable for my actions during that time. The problem was, I couldn't explain any of that to them.

My dad, and especially my stepmother, wouldn't understand that I'd been so far gone, they only existed in a deep recess of my mind - that I only remembered them on the rare occasion when I wasn't wholly drunk on human blood.

"Happy birthday, Snow," Cindy shouted as soon as she picked up the phone.

"Thanks," I answered, plopping on the couch and flipping on the TV. Gatsby climbed next to me and yowled, rubbing his head against my thigh. I needed to feed him. Rising, I went to get his kibble.

"Are you stoked about your party tonight?" she asked.

"Um, yes. I am. It's just - " I hesitated.

"You want me to do your hair and makeup," she finished for me.

I laughed. "Yes, please." I sighed. "It's an emergency."

"Does Abercrombie go with Fitch?"

"I - "

"Never mind. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Thanks, Cin." I clicked off the phone and filled Gatsby's water dish. "Well, kitty, I need a shower." I ran to the stairs and was halfway up when the phone rang.

"Bring over your dress," I said, thinking it was Cindy. I'd forgotten to make plans and didn't want her to go back home to get herself ready.

"What? Snow, is that you?" It was my dad.

"Oh, hi, Dad. Sorry, I thought you were Cindy. She's coming over to help me get ready for my party." As I spoke, I climbed the stairs, went into my bathroom, pulled out a clean towel, and then turned on the water to warm up.

"That's nice." He paused and inhaled. "Happy birthday, Snow Angel. Wish I was there," he said in a pretend perky voice. I knew he really did wish he was with me.

A lump formed in my throat because I sure needed him. "Thanks, Dad. I wish you were here too."

He exhaled. "We should be there for Christmas." He clucked his tongue. "You know what? I will be there for Christmas. Promise."

I had a feeling his words defied my stepmother's wishes. If she had anything to say about it, they'd be in Paris or Italy. Anywhere but with me.

"That's awesome. Can't wait." The lump thickened. I wanted to believe he would come, no matter what, that I was important enough for him - but past experience told me it wasn't true.

I heard my stepmother speaking in the background, telling him to hurry up. "Alright, well, have fun at your party. Take care of yourself. Be safe."

"I will. Thanks." The lump in my throat sank like a rock to my stomach.

"Love you, Snow Angel. Talk to you soon."

"Love you - " The phone clicked off. "Too."

I STOOD in front of my full-length mirror, unable to believe the reflection was mine. Snow White. A klutzy tomboy turned vampire with a fondness for boyish hand-me-downs and Converse. I ran my fingers over the fluffy skirt.

Hundreds of different sized ruffles in a soft, see-through material were capped with red satin ribbon. The tight bodice felt like a seamless hug - not too tight, not too loose. The dress hung at just the right length and looked awesome with my red Converse - yeah, not even Cindy could talk me out of my shoe choice.

They were brand new. One of the pairs Professor Pops gave me, not the pair from the vampire queen. I had a feeling he picked out the color to go with my dress. He knew me better than most.

"You look tres gorgeous, Snow," Cindy said.

I laughed internally, guessing she must've decided French wasn't as dull as she thought. I turned back and forth, checking my reflection at different angles. "Thanks, Cindy. You did an amazing job with my makeup and on my hair."

She grinned. "No duh. You're going to be the most beautiful girl at the ball tonight."

OceanofPDF.com

PINK LIP GLOSS

I SNORTED. "WHATEVER." But as I studied my reflection, I thought she might be right.

Cindy shook her head and continued to pet Gatsby, who sat on her lap, purring noisily. She still wore her jeans but had a strapless nude bra on top.

The party was in a half-hour, but twenty minutes ago, we agreed to meet at Professor Pops'.

Cindy's hair was in three loose French braids that came together in the back near the nape of her neck. She curled the ends and pinned them into a bun and put little baby blue flowers in between the curls.

Her makeup was a little darker than usual. "Dramatic," was what she called it.

My eye makeup was similar.

On her lips, she wore a light pink gloss.

On my lips was a dark red that matched my dress.

Cindy spent an hour using different sizes of irons to put curls all over my head, then she teased and backcombed until my dark hair was like a curly cloud.

She left my bangs straight and used some kind of goop to make them stay to one side.

I looked like me, only different. Older. More sophisticated.

"You getting dressed soon, or did you decide to wear that?" I asked, turning to face her.

She nudged Gatsby off her lap and stood. "Nah, I'm wearing my dress. It cost me a small fortune. Will you help zip me?"

"Sure." Cindy was the only uber rich girl I knew who wouldn't accept her parents' money. She liked to buy things for herself. It was

one of the many little things I admired about her.

She slid off her jeans and walked over to my open bedroom door, where her dress hung. Beneath was a box, and she removed the most gorgeous but dangerous-looking pair of shoes I'd ever seen.

The heels were thin, like glass, but probably six inches tall. Gunmetal beads adorned the band across the foot and the cuff that went around the ankle.

"You're really going to wear those?" I asked, wondering how she'd dance, let alone walk.

"Of course, silly." She slid them on and buckled the cuff. She was nearly as tall as me. "Wow," I said as she unzipped the black garment bag.

"Wow good, right?" Cindy asked, sliding a strapless sequined dress out. "My legs appear slender, and my ass looks toned?"

"Definitely," I said. Who was I to question the girl who lived, breathed, and ate fashion?

She stepped into the dress, and I zipped it up. It was sleek and clung to her every curve. Each sequin was the size of a penny and the exact shade of her shoes. Underneath the sequins was a baby blue material in the same color as the ruffled bottom of her dress. She looked like a mermaid, the most dazzling mermaid I'd ever seen. "You look amazing, Cin."

She went over to the mirror, pulling and tugging on the dress until it was just so. She turned to check out the back. "You think?" she asked, though she knew I knew it was a fact. She would be the best-looking girl at the ball. But at least she wouldn't have to be embarrassed by me.

"Since you're the birthday girl, we ought to get you there before everyone else, right?" she asked, heading to the door.

"I suppose," I said, suddenly nervous.

I sat on my bed as though a heavy weight pushed me down. My

shoulders turned in. I hadn't had blood since yesterday.

Professor Pops gave me more bloodlust tea, and I'd had some that morning before Cindy came over. But since I was no longer a revenant, it probably wasn't going to do any good.

Even Cindy's blood, which wasn't all that fragrant, caused my fangs to quiver with need. If she offered, I'd take it, but I really wanted Gabe's or Christopher's. or even Dorian's.

That I thought of him surprised me, but it was true.

He kept offering, and I was ready to give it a try. I had a feeling it would be amazing.

"What's wrong? You shouldn't sit. You'll ruin the lay of your dress." Cindy held out her hand, and I took it.

"Fine." I stood and reorganized my ruffles. Swallowing, I searched Cindy's face, listened to the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat, and smelled her skin's lilac scent. Nothing about her spoke of fear or worry. I knew she was a witch. She'd used a spell to freshen my nails, so they were blood red, and panted hers blue. Could I tell her my secret? Would she understand? "Cindy," I cleared my throat.

"What is it?" she asked, smiling brightly.

"I - why didn't you use a locator spell to find me?" I asked, surprised that's what came out of my mouth. I hadn't meant to go there with her tonight.

She grabbed my hand and squeezed. "At first I wanted to, but then when Professor Pops told me you were okay, I figured I wouldn't bother. After a week, though, I was really starting to worry, so I tried."

"Oh?"

"For some reason, the spell didn't work." Her impeccably plucked eyebrows scrunched together in concentration. "I have no idea why."

I nodded. "That's okay, Cin." I wasn't ready to tell her and moved to the door.

Cindy followed. "Not really. I was distraught. Several times I

sensed your presence, but for some reason, your location was concealed. I even asked my grandmother about it, whether or not I did something wrong." She frowned.

"And?" I encouraged.

She shook her head, her face filled with a strange expression. Her heart rate increased. Nerves, I thought.

"My grandmother said she didn't understand it either. That there was only one reason, it wouldn't work."

I giggled unexpectedly. What would she say? What was the reason? I didn't think I wanted to hear the answer. At the top of the stairs, I rested my hand on the banister and lifted my dress, more grateful than ever that I was no longer so klutzy.

"It's peculiar."

I bit the inside of my cheek. Could I tell her? Just blurt out the truth? Say, "Cindy, I'm a vampire. But don't worry, I won't kill you or suck your blood or anything. I've got it under control." I started down the stairs, and Cindy followed.

OceanofPDF.com

MR. UNICORN

"My grandmother said the locator spell works based on whatever you're looking for. A human is one way. If it's an animal, I have to change up the spell a little. For a plant, I do the spell even more differently."

"Cool," I laughed, a wave of panic washing through my stomach.

"Well, I tried the human spell three different times. Just to be safe, I did the spell for an animal and for a plant as well. None of them worked."

I reached the bottom of the stairs and faced her. "Maybe you still did something wrong. You know you struggle with that science-y stuff in biology."

"That wasn't it. I did everything right. My grandmother said - " she stopped.

I opened the front door, but a fragrant wind blew it from my grip, and the door slammed shut. "What?" I asked, knowing Cindy had used magic. I was going to have to tell her.

"My grandmother said the only reason the spell didn't work was that you aren't human, but something born of magic."

I wasn't surprised. The vampire queen said my DNA was changed. "Oh."

Cindy went on. "She gave me a quick lesson on all the different magical creatures in the world, even explained that my favorite stuffed animal - Mr. Unicorn - remember him?" She stopped, waiting for me to answer.

"Uh-huh," I prodded. Nerves danced along my veins. I didn't know why I was so worried about telling her. She possessed magic. She was a witch. Surely, she would accept my being a vampire.

"Well, yeah, so Mr. Unicorn is based on a real creature my grandmother knew a long time ago. At first, I was freaked out but figured hey, if I could have a spellbook with a dragon's eye on the cover, surely I could handle the knowledge that fairies and unicorns are real." Her breathing came more rapidly now. I sensed she was about to figure out what I was for herself.

"Go on," I whispered, clutching my hands together, waiting. "What am I then?"

"Well, you're too big to be a fairy, and you're certainly not a gremlin or an elf, so I don't know." Cindy placed her hands on her hips and waited. "Tell me, Snow. Please. I can handle it."

"No, I'm not a fairy. Closer to a gremlin, I guess." I choked up for no reason at all. With the brothers, they knew. Professor Pops had prepared them. Christopher was the one who bit me, so I hadn't had to tell him. I hadn't had to come out and tell anyone yet, to say the words "I am a vampire." I tried it in my mind, and they got stuck.

Refusing to go from my brain and out of my mouth.

I guess the most significant part of me worried she wouldn't like me anymore once she found out the truth. Gabe said vampires were evil. What had Cindy's grandmother said about my kind?

She moved, so we were practically nose to nose. It was weird having her so tall. One of her fingers touched my cheek, and she said some words in a language I didn't understand.

I gulped. My skin tingled, and I knew she cast a spell. I decided that if she freaked, I would just compel her not to be afraid.

"Tell me, Snow."

I nodded, taking a deep breath. "Cindy, it's um. You see. Well, the truth is, I'm a - "

She sucked in her breath and stepped back. "You're a vampire. The spell worked. I can see you for what you truly are." Her eyes grew round like two giant blue saucers.

"Yep, that's me." I looked away, scanning anywhere and everywhere that wasn't her.

She sat on the couch, and I knew she must be stunned because sitting would wrinkle her dress, and that was not something Cindy would do.

"What about your dress? You'll wrinkle it," I said quietly, copying what she said to me upstairs.

She waved away my worry. "My grandmother mentioned vampires." Cindy paused and seemed to be mulling over the word, working out what she now knew to be the truth.

I grabbed her hand. "Still warm, see? I'm still me." I resisted the urge to cry, to pity myself or feel bad. I couldn't change what had happened, couldn't go back and get unbitten or undrink Christopher's blood, or Gabe's, or any of the other humans'.

Her eyes squinted in bewilderment, and she placed a hand on my chest. "Your heart still beats."

Cindy shook her head, surprise shining in her features. "My grandmother said vampires were creatures without a heart - that their internal makeup was completely different from other living creatures. How is this possible?"

"I'm not sure." And that was the truth, though Pops had a heartbeat and so did Christopher, so I was guessing her grandmother might have received misinformation.

Or, maybe it was something else altogether. Like I could hear the echo of their human hearts before they became vampires?

Perhaps the vampire queen's magic did something to me, the way it did for Christopher. Maybe it was because I was odd, to begin with. Kenmei had said the magic within the Seal of Gabriel was created for me.

I shook those thoughts from my mind.

I didn't fully believe the magic in the necklace or how magic and

vampires worked. I still needed to find the damn necklace.

Christopher's life depended on it.

At the thought of him, I decided to be forward and ask.

"You haven't seen a necklace with a silver chain and a red gem in the shape of a teardrop attached to it, have you?"

She shook her head. "Not in person, but I saw something about a necklace, in my spellbook. It was called the Seal of Gabriel. Is that the one you're talking about?"

As she spoke, her voice raised an octave. She obviously knew that it contained magical properties.

Witches could probably use the necklace to increase their power.

"Yes, that's the one." I nodded, and a combined feeling of hope and dread throbbed against my temple.

She went over to the door, grabbed the bag she'd chucked next to it, and pulled out her spellbook. The eye on the cover blinked, watching. I held back a shudder.

Scooting closer, I waited while she flipped through the pages until she arrived at a picture of the necklace.

"It says - "

A horn blared from the driveway.

"Are you expecting someone?" Cindy asked.

OceanofPDF.com

WHERE'S YOUR MASK

I SHOOK my head but remembered Professor Pops mentioned someone would bring over my mask when it was ready. "It could be my mask."

She closed her book, and I went to the door, Cindy following beside me. "Do you want some of my blood?"

I laughed, opening the door. "Are you offering?"

"Noooooooo," she said, but laughed as well. "You aren't some bloodthirsty fiend." She said it as a statement, and I figured it was mostly to convince herself.

"I'm just me. Snow White, the girl you've known since forever."

"That's a relief." And it was.

I heard it in her voice and by the beating of her heart. She peeked over my shoulder.

Dorian was outside, near the passenger door of an extensive black limousine.

He bounced up and down, and I guessed he was cold.

The limo seemed like overkill. Professor Pops' mansion wasn't that far away.

"Shall we?" I held out my arm to Cindy.

"You go. I need to put away my book." I watched her walk carefully over to her bag.

Lifting my dress, I went out onto the porch, leaving the door open.

Cindy appeared, grabbing hold of the knob. "Wait, my mask." She said something I guessed had to do with magic, and her mask sailed down the steps, landing gently in her outstretched hand.

She was proud of herself, and I couldn't blame her.

Her magic was getting better, fast.

She closed the door, and I started down the steps.

"Hurry up, you two, I'm freezing my butt off out here," Dorian shouted.

"Keep your teeth in," I griped, making sure my hem didn't touch the ground. Cindy made it down the steps and was beside me. "Your magic is awesome."

"Duh." She laughed. "Thank you for saying it, though. I've been practicing."

The November night was chilly.

I breathed in, enjoying the crisp scent of the pine needles and how the cold air clung to everything in the shape of tiny snowflakes.

It occurred to me that I felt happy, momentarily satisfied. The feeling radiated with a glow I could almost taste.

In that instant, everything hung right with the world.

Gabe loved me.

Cindy knew what I was and hadn't run away.

The brothers and Professor Pops cared for me without judgment.

There was still my dad and stepmother as well as Sharra and Christopher, but I would allow myself this moment of joy.

One night.

Tomorrow I could focus on finding the Seal of Gabriel and dealing with Sharra.

Dorian opened the door, waving me inside. "In you go." He took my hand, assisting me in.

At his touch, I felt a jolt of warmth. It almost felt like magic, and I checked his face to see if he felt it too. He smiled an enormous smile. I returned it, thinking he looked totally hot in his tux.

Once I was inside, I sat and waited for Cindy.

She moved at a slower rate.

The sidewalk was in pressing need of repair, and Cindy in her six-

inch heels nearly toppled over a few times before Dorian jogged over and came to her rescue.

"What the hell are you wearing? Stilts?" he asked in mock disdain.

"Very funny," she replied but clung to his arm.

The two of them looked good together, him in his black tuxedo with a burgundy and black striped tie, a white shirt, and a burgundy vest, and her in her blue mermaid dress.

Cindy climbed in, and Dorian closed the door for us.

A man sat in the driver's seat.

Dorian climbed in on the other side of him. "To the ball, Giorgio," Dorian said, pointing toward the mansion.

"You got it." His voice was laced with sarcasm, and I thought he felt the same way I did about the limo being too much.

He checked the rearview mirror and held my gaze. Something about his eyes seemed familiar.

I couldn't think why though.

In the next second, he looked away, shifting the limousine into drive.

Cindy leaned close. "Tomorrow, you and I will have a big, long chat, and you're going to tell me everything about Chace and Gabe. Deal?"

"Can't wait," I said, and meant it. Now that she knew, I wanted to tell her everything.

Dorian turned his head to look over his shoulder. "What are we agreeing to?"

Cindy and I glanced at each other and laughed, but I wasn't going to tell him. Girl talk was just that. Cindy raised her chin as she slid back in the plush leather seat. "None of your business, Dorian."

AS WE PULLED out of the driveway, I noticed a brown rectangle box on the seat next to Cindy.

"What's that?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"That's your mask, Snow. Check it out," Dorian said from the front seat. I scowled, thinking he should've sat in back with us.

"It seems small," Cindy remarked, handing me the box.

I placed it in my lap. It did seem minute compared to Cindy's mask, which had three large feather plumes in baby blue and gray protruding from the right side.

Her mask was baby blue except around the eyes, which had small sequins the same color as the sequins on her dress, lining the openings.

Timidly I removed the lid on the box and shifted the white paper inside. The mask nestled within the tissue was simple: red satin, the exact color of my dress, covered in black lace. I immediately loved it.

"That's it?" Cindy started.

I'd told her Professor Pops was having the mask made specifically for the ball. She obviously thought it lacked any flair. It wasn't pretentious or over the top. It was perfect.

"I like it. The mask won't take away from Snow's beauty," Dorian said.

My cheeks got hot. "Thanks, Dorian. Where's your mask?"

Cindy sniffed, glancing at hers.

He rolled his eyes. "It's at the house. We all decided on the same style and color. Black. Except Bart's. His is gray. He always has to be different."

We pulled into the circular driveway, and Giorgio put the limousine in park. Dorian jumped out, ran around to our door, and held it open. His face shone with anticipation.

"What is it?" I asked.

OceanofPDF.com

BIRTHDAY PARTY

"YOU'LL SEE." He leaned in so that I got a good whiff of his neck. I had the feeling he did it on purpose. "Love your shoes," he said, and I shivered. Like Eve with the apple, Dorian was tempting me.

Just a taste, my mind cooed. But I resisted. Now wasn't the time.

As I waited for him to help Cindy out, I stared up at the mansion. Lit with thousands of white, shimmering lights, it seemed to possess its own glow. "It's beautiful," I breathed, feeling like I'd stepped into a fairytale land.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Dorian said. "C'mon." He stood between Cindy and me and held out his elbows. I took his arm in one hand and my dress in the other.

We climbed the steps. The front door opened without any of us knocking, as though they were waiting for us. We went inside.

The brothers and Professor Pops stood off to the right.

Several of them were fidgeting with their tuxes, but they all wore their masks.

One of the brothers, Sebastian, handed Dorian his.

He slid it on, moving next to Heathcliff.

They all looked dashing. Cindy thought so too. I could tell by the tittering noises coming from her throat.

Their tuxes were all black, except Bart's. His tux was a dark gray, the same as his mask. There were other, subtler differences in the cut and shape of their tuxes, but the significant variance was the colors of their ties and vests.

Bart's vest and bow tie were golden brown.

Salvatore wore black with black, his sleek black hair in a low ponytail.

Sebastian's vest and tie were navy blue.

Daniel's satin vest and tie were white with white.

Heathcliff's were gray.

Professor Pops didn't have on a vest but a black cummerbund with a black bow tie.

My heart fell a bit when I saw Gabe wasn't among them.

Heathcliff pointed at the railing along the grand staircase. Suspended by a shiny silver rope hung a gigantic banner. Happy Sweet 16, Snow!

"That's amazing," I breathed, admiring it.

"Happy birthday!" all the guys shouted.

It felt like my face would break at how big I smiled.

Cindy's eyes were wide. "Merde," she cursed.

I laughed, squeezing her hand.

As one, the brothers gushed at how pretty we looked. I nodded, said, "thank you," and hugged everyone, but I worried about Gabe.

"Where's Gabe?" I asked Salvatore as we embraced.

He stepped back, eyeing Professor Pops.

Professor Pops cleared his throat. "He's with his father."

The remaining brothers issued comments about the lack of truth to the statement, but I just nodded. "Is he coming?"

"His father?" Cindy asked.

"Yes, he'll be here," Professor Pops responded, patting my back. "You look so incredibly beautiful."

"Thank you," I said, trying to ignore the shadow that crossed Pops' features. What wasn't he telling me?

"You've got to see the ballroom," Heathcliff said.

"You're gonna love it," Daniel added.

I let them lead the way, hoping Gabe would come soon.

Cindy moved, so we were next to each other, and we exchanged a look. Hers was confused.

Mine? I agreed to tell her all about it tomorrow.

From the front door, we went left instead of right to the kitchen, from which delicious smells emanated.

Cindy's heels clicked against the floor as we passed the library and the entrance to the indoor pool. The guys pushed, joked, and shoved in front of us, but something definitely weighed on Pops' mind.

When we arrived at the twelve-foot tall double doors, the guys paused and turned, facing Cindy and me. Her heart fluttered fast like a hummingbird's wings, and I knew she was excited. I was too.

"Put your mask on, Snow," Sebastian said, coming over to help.

I placed it over my eyes.

Sebastian tried to help Cindy with hers, but she slapped his hand away.

"I'll do it. I don't want you ruining her hair." She carefully slid the stretchy silk-wrapped band over my hair and placed it against my head.

Moving to look at me, she sighed and clapped her hands. "Pops was right. You look amazing."

I grinned, the edges of the mask touching my cheeks. "I'm glad. You look pretty damn hot yourself."

"You're so sweet. Thanks for being my best friend all of these years. I could've have survived without you." Cindy adjusted the bodice of her gown and straightened up.

"You ready, birthday girl?" Heathcliff asked.

"Most definitely." My heart pulsed in time with Cindy's.

I'd been in the ballroom several times over the years, mostly when I was younger. I knew the outer and side walls were made entirely of windows.

Above, from the center of the ceiling, dangled an enormous

chandelier. In large, checkered squares, blocks of the ceiling were carved out, and inside hung fans.

The wall toward the front of the house held mirrors, making the space look twice as large. As kids, the boys and I would sneak into the enormous room to roller-skate, ride our scooters, or skateboard.

Professor Pops would inevitably find us, give us a stern talking to, and then send us on our way.

Daniel pushed open the double doors. He was so theatrical, and I covered a smile with my hand. The guys parted, allowing Cindy and me access to the entrance.

When I stepped through, I felt transported to another time. I noticed the lighting first and looked up. The chandelier emitted a soft red glow.

Dozens of thick white panels of cloth extended from the top of the light and draped outward to the point where the ceiling met the walls, giving the appearance of an enormous tent.

Square tables, each seating eight, were covered in white linen and set with large centerpieces filled with a spray of red flowers in different varieties and shades.

Along the back wall stood probably thirty waiters dressed identically in white old-fashioned tux tails with bright red cummerbunds and bow ties.

Their hands clasped behind their backs. They were lined up with the tallest on the outside and the shortest in the middle.

"Wow," I breathed, taking it all in.

Current Top-Forty music played softly from speakers discreetly attached to the walls. A DJ set up his equipment next to a decorated table with a sign above it that said: Presents HERE. Scented vanilla candles emitted a pleasant fragrance.

"It's beyond beautiful," I said, turning to Professor Pops. "You all really outdid yourselves. Thank you!"

"It was our pleasure." Professor Pops gave me a gentle squeeze.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it." Salvatore and Sebastian casually ran to the front door.

Moments later, excited chatting could be heard coming down the hall.

"This is gonna be fun," Cindy said.

I swallowed, for some reason, nervous about the party. I wasn't sure if it was panic that no one would show, the horror that everyone would come, anxiety over Pops' weirdness, the fact that Gabe was with his dad, or the odd gleam in Cindy's eyes.

Tonight would be one to remember. I had no doubts about that.

OceanofPDF.com

FIVE LAYERS OF RED

WHEN ALL THE GUESTS ARRIVED, Professor Pops welcomed everyone and asked that we all take our seats.

The waiters sprang to life, and dinner was served: chicken cordon bleu with steamed baby potatoes and asparagus spears topped with a creamy hollandaise sauce. Everyone commented on how amazing it tasted.

Several times, as I popped a tiny bite of potato or asparagus - yeah, I still didn't eat the meat - into my mouth and forced it down, I longed for the food in Sharra: the food explicitly made for vampires, the food that tasted like blood with a hint of whatever fruit or vegetable or meat it was.

Dessert would be my cake, later tonight. It sat on a decorated table beside all of my presents.

The cake stood tall. Five layers of red velvet covered in red fondant. The black frosting was piped over the top in intricate swirling designs.

White flowers, which looked a lot like snowflakes, were placed methodically in groups of three and five.

On the top layer stood a girl in a red dress holding a cake with sixteen glowing LED candles.

She looked a lot like me.

Even her fondant-ruffled dress looked the same as mine. Around the edge, standing like guards protecting the girl, were sixteen real candles.

When dinner ended, the tables and chairs were cleared and disassembled in record time. Some were pushed to the side so people could sit and visit.

The music was turned up and people danced. Everyone looked amazing and seemed to be having a good time.

I hadn't danced, and I really didn't want to. Even with my new abilities, I probably still had two left dancing feet.

Plus, Gabe still hadn't arrived.

What was he doing? Searching for Pops, I found him talking with Kenmei and a man I didn't know in a corner.

Heathcliff came over, sitting beside me. "How's your bloodlust? Feeling in control?"

I smiled. "Yes, I'm fine." The pulsing blood in the room was mesmerizing, each scent unique. All of them combined to form a decadent bouquet. More than once already, I'd held my breath, forcing my sharp fangs back into place.

Cindy danced closely with one of the senior football players from school, a guy named Chad. Before tonight, Chad and I hadn't said two words to each other.

That was the case with most of the people here.

Sure, I'd seen their faces repeatedly over the years, but I didn't really know any of them. I was surprised so many bothered to come. No one would miss this, my inner voice huffed.

Daniel, Sebastian, Dorian, Salvatore, and Bart danced near each other, each with a beautiful girl in his arms. A pang of sadness split my heart.

Gabe, where are you? At the thought, thousands of pinpricks trickled up my spine like an electric current.

My gaze shifted from the dance floor to where Kenmei and Professor Pops talked to the unfamiliar man. As one, they turned toward the door. Pops and Kenmei appeared angry, and the other man sneered arrogantly.

Heathcliff stiffened at my side. "This is not good."

"What? What's wrong?" I asked, holding my breath in anticipation

of whatever was going to happen. Gabe walked in, looking incredibly handsome in a black tux, bowtie, and cummerbund. The buttons on his white shirt were black as well. His jaw clenched as he searched the room.

Was he looking for me? I hoped, but a part of me was afraid. He didn't look pleased.

"Snow, I need you to come with me." Heathcliff grabbed my hand and pulled me behind a group of people, toward the other side of the room.

"Why?" I asked. I wanted to find out what was wrong. The tension in the room crackled. Had Gabe brought that with him? It was then I noticed the men and women filtering in behind him. They all wore black but weren't dressed for the party. They were dressed to hunt.

And I knew they'd come for me.

Heathcliff kept going, but I wouldn't leave. If they were after a fight, I'd give them one. I yanked my hand from his. He glanced at me, surprised. "Please come with me. I know a place where you'll be safe."

I shook my head. "I'm staying. I need to find out what's going on."

Heathcliff took hold of my shoulders. "Listen to me. Those men out there are chayot. They are here to do what Gabe couldn't. They intend to kill you. We've got to get you out of here. I have a friend standing by who can take you to Wonderland, Arizona. You'll be safe there."

I heard the undercurrent of fear in Heathcliff's voice.

It meant a lot that he was worried but, just as he'd forgotten I was stronger than him a moment ago, he also didn't realize that I wouldn't be running from these creatures and into the hands of a stranger and a place called Wonderland.

Not in a million years.

"What are you waiting for?" Dorian hissed, coming up behind Heathcliff.

"She won't go, and she's stronger than I am," Heathcliff hissed.

"If you don't - " Dorian began, glaring at me.

"Snow White, show your face. Accept your fate and come with us." A tall, very stunning man stepped in front of Gabe as he spoke.

The music stopped, scratched into silence.

Those who were still dancing paused to see what was going on, whispering and pointing. The chayot fanned out, systematically searching for me.

"Understand now? You need to leave," Dorian said, crouching. He pulled me down with him.

"Is this part of the party?" I heard someone ask.

"Probably," someone else answered.

"Cool."

"I'm going to count to five. If you haven't come forward, one of these human children will die." The man's voice was low but carried like he spoke into a microphone.

The other chayot continued to search, moving silently.

I frantically searched the room for Cindy. Where was she? I'd lost her in the shuffle when the chayot showed.

"One."

Gabe glanced at the man, and I instantly understood he was Gabe's father.

"Two."

"Get her out of here," Dorian said. "I'll try to hold them off or distract them."

"I will not leave," I whispered fiercely. "If I do, they'll kill someone. I refuse to be part of any more suffering." Plus, I had to find Cindy.

Dorian shook his head. "Stubborn," he growled. "They're bluffing. Gabe said the chayot are like divine creatures. Intentionally hurting an innocent would be against their laws."

"Three."

I glanced around at Gabe's father. "He doesn't look like he cares about any laws." Anger trickled along my spine and bloomed in my chest.

Gabe whispered something in his father's ear. A flick of his wrist and two chayot men came up behind Gabe and held him fast.

Gabe fought against them.

I saw the ugly fury in their expressions, and my heart stopped at the sight of him fighting against his own people. They had better not hurt him, or there would be hell to pay.

"Four!"

"I've got to show myself. I don't have a choice." Leaving the brothers, I pushed through the crowd. Before I reached him, Sharra appeared.

"You always were dramatic, Oberon."

I slid to a stop at her appearance. The crowd gasped around me as someone whispered the word magic. Others were looking around, searching for a way to escape.

The vampire queen had a dozen vampires with her.

"Oh crap," Sebastian said, sliding next to me. All the brothers except Gabe circled me as if they could protect me better than I could defend myself.

Suddenly Professor Pops and Kenmei were there. "Boys. Snow. I want you to gather the kids. Keep them calm. Lie. Tell them this is part of the festivities, then lead them through the secret door."

His intense eyes found mine. "Use your powers of persuasion. Convince them. Can you do that?"

I nodded. I'd have to hold the gaze of every person. "What are you going to do?"

"Stall and then end this. Now go. Hurry."

OceanofPDF.com

DESTINY

THE GUYS CIRCULATED, rounding up the students into six groups. I stopped at each one, using my newfound vampire gift to convince the students this interruption was a surprise portion of the party.

I just hoped the chayot and the vampire queen allowed the students to leave.

"Sharra. Oberon. This isn't the place for a dispute. It is a room full of human children. Let them leave. They are innocent." Professor Pops' voice rang through the room, loud and strong.

"I've given you an ultimatum, Adam." Oberon waved his hands at the students. From behind him and along the borders of the room, the chayot pulled swords. "Either Snow White steps forward and accepts her destiny, or the accidental death of a human will be on your conscience."

Destiny. The word Kenmei used to describe what I needed to do with the Seal of Gabriel. The same word the vampire queen used when she spoke about what I was to become.

I was sick of hearing it. My life was my own, regardless of what Kenmei, the vampire queen, or Gabe's father thought.

I wasn't a puppet on a string. My story hadn't been written.

Chayot men and women continued to roam along the edges of the ballroom, spreading out. They kept their distance from the vampires. I did a quick mental run-through on how to kill workers and drone vampires.

To slay a female required a stake through, or shredding of, the heart.

Males had to lose their heads.

My body inadvertently shuddered.

I didn't know if I could kill them. And I had no idea how a chayot could be destroyed.

Dorian grabbed my hand. "C'mon," he mouthed.

I nodded, unsure what else to do. We needed to get every non-supernatural creature out of the ballroom. That was the most important.

"Have you seen Cindy?" I asked Dorian, still searching for her. She hadn't been with any of the six groups the brothers rounded up.

He shook his head. "I'm sure she's fine. That girl can take care of herself."

And I can't, I thought, momentarily irritated. Did Kenmei, Professor Pops and the brothers believe I was too weak, or too much of a coward to face the chayot, the vampire queen, and her followers?

"Do you see her?" Oberon called out.

"Not yet."

"No."

"Negative."

Oberon shook his head in exasperation, as though he felt sorry for what was about to happen. "Five," he said softly.

One of the chayot grabbed Daniel by the arm.

Daniel fought back, using moves that looked like they belonged in an action film, but another chayot jumped in, pressing a short sword against Daniel's neck.

Oberon nodded, and the chayot took the sword from Daniel's neck and shoved the steel into his stomach. A gurgling noise escaped his lips as the chayot withdrew the blade, letting his body fall to the floor.

"No. No. No. Stop. Stop it!" I screamed, kneeling next to him, ignoring my sudden and profound hunger for blood.

My fangs grew, cutting the outer edges of my lips. I snarled at the male chayot who'd done Oberon's bidding.

He winced, stepping back, but quickly recovered, turning his

bloody sword in my direction.

"Leave now. Harm no one," I commanded, hoping my compulsion worked on him. The chayot obeyed and took off toward the exit.

When he reached the large double doors, several chayot grabbed him and did something to release him from my hold.

I growled as an overwhelming frustration suffocated my insides, amplifying my desire for blood.

"Snow." It was Gabe's voice, soft like a summer wind. I would know it anywhere. Slowly, I turned until I found him. He was near the doors, but still being restrained by two chayot guards.

The look Gabe gave me, one of love and devotion - it was all I needed to center my thoughts.

I focused and recalled what he once said while we trained. "During battle, anger is good, necessary in fact, but it must be controlled." I inhaled deeply.

My fangs retracted, and I rose, my eyes zeroing in the Oberon's.

I could persuade him to do what I wanted.

Why hadn't I thought of that before?

Moving slowly, deliberately, I stepped over the Daniel and spoke directly to Oberon. "You will let every human leave. You will let the Daniel be treated and taken to the hospital, and you will get the hell out of Adam's house." I pointed toward the doors as I spoke.

He stared blankly, and I thought it worked until he laughed - a hearty, vile, irritating laugh.

"Did you hear that? She's trying to command me. Me!" he roared. The rest of his group laughed with him, though they seemed frightened too.

My face grew hot. Why hadn't it worked?

The vampire queen spoke respectfully, her voice gentle. "Do not do this, Oberon. This isn't a battle you'll win."

I'd momentarily forgotten about the vampire queen and her

followers. They'd been so quiet. They hadn't harmed a human, and the queen wasn't threatening to kill anyone. I tucked that knowledge into the back of my mind.

Professor Pops came forward. "She's just a girl, Oberon. You saw she was near blood and didn't feed. She's no more an animal than I am. Rethink this madness, my friend."

I fought back the tears. Professor Pops truly was my protector, more of a father even than my own.

Oberon directed his men with his eyes, and suddenly Professor Pops was being held back by several chayot.

I wondered where Kenmei was.

The chayot, Professor Pops, and Kenmei were supposed to be on the same side.

Obviously, Pops chose me over the chayot, and Oberon wasn't happy.

A burst of love for Pops fueled the anger burning in my heart.

Oberon would pay if he harmed him.

Gabe's father moved into my personal space, towering over me. "Have you come to your senses? Are you willing to accept your fate? Or are you too much of a monster to care if others are killed because of your cowardice?" One of the chayot holding Pops put a blade to his neck. A droplet of blood trickled from the newly opened wound.

For some reason seeing Professor Pops' blood brought questions to the forefront of my mind. Like, did he still drink blood? He was technically still a vampire. At one point, he'd been the vampire queen's hunter, the same as Christopher. Did he still possess the powers of persuasion? And what about Kenmei?

"Snow. Merryweather. White. Snap out of it!" Cindy's voice sounded in my ear, as though she stood beside me. But she wasn't there.

Or was she? Did she know how to make herself invisible?

Was that why I hadn't been able to find her once the chayot and vampires showed up? I'd have to ask her about it sometime when Professor Pops wasn't in dire trouble.

I knew if he was beheaded, he would die. I couldn't allow that to happen.

I stepped forward, lifting my chin to meet Oberon's glare. "You will not hurt him or anyone else."

He laughed again, turning his gaze from left to right, encouraging his followers to join in. From the V in his black button-up shirt, I saw the gleam of something red. It glittered in the subdued lights.

OceanofPDF.com

FLAMING SWORD

INSTANTLY, I knew what it was.

The Seal of Gabriel on the end of the silver chain swayed gently near his throat.

If Oberon had it, then that meant Gabe had stolen it.

My barely contained fury exploded.

How dare he?

How dare Gabe?

All this time Gabe had lied to me. Used me. He didn't love me any more than a bear loves a fish.

Something in my features must've changed because Oberon stumbled back.

Clasping his hands together, a flaming sword appeared. "Don't come any closer."

Caught off guard, I put a hand in front of my face to shield myself from the heat.

Flames licked the air, bringing with them a unique scent - like burning metal and flowers.

"It's time to end you," the chayot leader sneered.

Professor Pops still fought against the chayot, hollering for Oberon to stop.

The clang of metal against metal - sword against sword - rocked the ballroom. The vampire queen and her followers had joined the action.

Shouting.

Sounds of death.

Cries of pain.

The destruction needed to stop.

Oberon lunged at me, his fiery sword raised above his head, a look of hatred twisting his face. I could swear I saw large white wings extending from his shoulder blades, the way they had from Gabe's in my dream.

With my newfound speed, I stepped inside Oberon's space, so I was under the sword.

With one hand, I ripped the Seal of Gabriel from his neck and spun away, ending up to the left of him.

Oberon brought down the sword, the fire scorching some of the ruffles on my dress.

The singed material released a horrible smell, like burning plastic. I grasped the red teardrop in my hand and whipped around so that we were face to face.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, my heart pounding not in fear, but excitement. I held the Seal of Gabriel in my hand. I could save Christopher and end Sharra's tyrannical rule.

It wouldn't exactly be that easy, but at that moment, I felt like it should be.

Oberon pinched his lips together and gave me a sardonic smile. "I think you already know the answer."

"No, I don't." My lips trembled as the words spilled out. "Tell the truth."

"Let me make it clear, vampire." Spittle spewed from his mouth, striking me in the cheek as he spoke. I wiped at it with the back of my hand.

"The magic in that pendant only exists because of Gabriel."

I knew that. I'd heard the stories. "I know."

We circled each other. The sounds of fighting around us became nothing but background noise. It was as though Oberon and I were in a bubble.

"Gabriel is my son," he continued.

I knew he was trying to mess with my head.

That the Gabriel who'd been a hunter and had killed Silindra and created the Seal of Gabriel was one of Oberon's sons was news to me.

But if he thought he could convince me that my Gabe was the same as Gabriel, he was mistaken. I'd tasted Gabe, and I knew he most definitely wasn't a hunter or any kind of vampire.

"You're lying." I shrugged.

There was much more I should've said, but he lunged at me again with his fiery sword. I moved at the last second. He missed me by millimeters.

The heat burned my skin, and I flinched at the stark pain. It evaporated seconds later.

He tried another tactic. "You will lose. The vampire breed is dying. You're nothing but an afterthought, and I am the first chayot, bringer of justice, supplier of righteousness, and harbinger of divinity."

As he spoke, he pushed back his shoulders, an arrogant leer distorting his features.

"You may be the first, but that doesn't make you better or even good. Otherwise, you wouldn't be set on destroying me." I dodged his sword again. "I think you're an old demon that craves power and nothing more."

He howled and swung the sword.

I spun out of the way, but this time he was prepared and grabbed me by the neck, squeezing my windpipe.

Oberon pulled me close. "You're a gnat, made to be crushed." He squeezed harder, and my feet left the floor.

With one hand, I tried to pry his steel fingers from my neck. From the corner of my eye, I saw his burning sword coming closer.

I still held the Seal of Gabriel in on hand. It began to glow bright red.

When it became so bright I was about to close my eyes, the light show shot into Oberon.

The chayot's grasp on me relaxed as he flew back, knocking over several other chayot and vampires in the heat of battle.

His sword vanished as he sprawled on the floor.

Oberon was mine.

Cold wrath blackened my veins.

I once read that war was the world's way of cleansing itself.

At the time, I thought the statement seemed brutal, without compassion. I was beginning to realize that was the point.

With purpose, I stalked the first chayot.

He tried to stand, but the force of the blow from the pendant had him panting and clutching his chest. He was wounded.

Kneeling next to Oberon, I pressed the Seal into his chest. He gasped, his body shaking. Like old paper, his skin began to flake and fall away. "You will never again place your filthy chayot hands on me or someone I love."

He gritted his teeth, his eyes wide in fear. "You're nothing," he gritted out.

"Don't! Stop, Snow. Please don't," Gabe called.

I paused, lifting the pendant, catching and holding Gabe's sad stare. If I killed Oberon, it would change how Gabe treated me, the way he saw me, and I couldn't do that, even if Gabe was a thieving traitor.

No matter how much I wanted to destroy Oberon, I wouldn't, because Gabe didn't want me to.

I stood, moving away from the chayot leader before I changed my mind.

In the same instant, the fighting stopped.

OceanofPDF.com

OF TWO MINDS

VAMPIRE AND CHAYOT parted to let me pass as I made my way to Gabe. All was silent. I focused on Gabe's heartbeat, concentrated on the distinct thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump coming from his chest.

"Gabe." I seemed to float toward him, my feet hardly touching the ground.

The chayot that held Gabe released him. He held out his arms, a slight smile lighting his gloomy face.

I moved faster, allowing myself a moment of hope that Gabe and I could be together.

His smile disappeared. "No!" he shouted.

I sensed Oberon behind me, felt the heat of his sword. In a blinding flash, I faced him, his blade slicing my shoulder. Immense pain ripped through my body.

As I fell to the ground, a glorious red light shot from the Seal of Gabriel and into Oberon.

Someone screamed - Cindy, maybe?

I couldn't be sure, and the pain from where the fiery blade had cut into me seared so intensely I couldn't concentrate.

I closed my eyes, hoping my body would heal the wound quickly, but the pain only intensified.

Voices filled my head, like chirping doves.

I tried to understand what they were saying, but I was in agony.

The noise seemed to pulse into every crevice, pounding out everything else.

At one point, it felt like the Seal crawled inside of my hand, taking up residence there, as though we'd become one.

A tiny portion of the throbbing dissipated enough that I caught pieces of conversations.

- "He's dead." -

- "What will we do now?" -

- "You must lead us." -

A loud laugh that could only be the vampire queen.

- "I knew she could do it." -

- "Give me the necklace, Snow. Let go. It's over. You're safe." -

I worked to open my hand, but when I heard several gasps, I knew the Seal would never part from me again.

Its magic seemed to be twisting inside of me, filling me, changing me in ways I couldn't understand.

It stitched me up into something more, something scary and powerful.

After what seemed like days, the pain dissipated.

I opened my eyes and blinked.

The eyes I looked through weren't my own.

They were the eyes of the first vampire - the eyes of Sharra's twin, Silindra.

Somehow, the Seal of Gabriel had taken me back to the beginning.

I was no longer just Snow White but had become Silindra as well.

COMING in and out of consciousness, I recognized a part of me - my body - was still in the human realm and that Professor Pops and the brothers watched over me.

Occasionally, I would catch bits of their conversations.

Like now.

"What did you tell the doctors and her dad about what happened at her birthday party?" Heathcliff asked.

"I told them she fell," Professor Pops answered.

"Did they buy it? I mean, look at her. It's like she's sleeping, except for the red, glittery aura on her skin. That's not something you see every day." That was Gabe.

For the briefest moment, I longed to see him, but it didn't last.

"No, Gabe, it isn't. I think the red aura, as you put it, has something to do with the Seal of Gabriel. It's changing her somehow. Kenmei has gone in search of answers from the dragon, Abernathy."

"Her dad's freaking out. I've never seen the dude so distraught." Gabe again.

"It serves him right. He's been an absentee parent for far too long and Snow is fine." That was Professor Pops.

I did feel fine, but then I also felt disconnected from my body and the human realm. Like a shadow on the wall, I was only there until the sun went down.

"She is not fine. She's red and glowy. If she were alright, she'd be awake, coherent, and tripping up the stairs. She'd still be the girl I fell in love with."

Poor Gabe. I wanted to comfort him, but I couldn't. I hadn't accomplished whatever the Seal wanted from me.

"Oh, son, I'm sorry. I know this has been hard on you. But you must know she'll never be the same. Neither will you, now that Oberon is dead."

"Nothing's changed, except my desire to find the hunter. He never should've bitten her. If he hadn't, none of this would've happened."

"Snow's been different since long before the night Christopher bit her. You know that. She's been different almost as long as you have."

My heart broke for Gabe. With the Seal, I had killed his real father, Oberon.

Searing agony coursed through me until I felt the power of the Seal pull me from the human realm and back, back to the beginning once again.

At the knowledge that I'd killed Gabe's father, I knew we could never be the same.

He and I were over. Some things couldn't be forgiven. Murdering a parent was one of them.

When I opened my eyes again, I determined I would stay here and be Silindra.

They could bury my body for all I cared.

I would never return. I was Silindra, and I intended to stay that way.

With my fate decided, I studied my surroundings through Silindra's eyes and found myself on the path just outside the castle grounds, and I knew I was in the realm of Sharra.

Desperate to commit myself to my new home, I repeated the chant that was bouncing around in my mind.

But it wasn't me that spoke.

It was the voice of Silindra.

I was her, and she was me.

We were one.

My soul rested inside of her, but I wasn't alone in there.

She was with me, and she was in the driver's seat.

For the briefest moment, I wondered if this was what it would be like if the modern-day vampire queen - Sharra took over my body.

Would I still be in there? If so, it wasn't so bad.

Except that Sharra was wicked and evil, and that wasn't how I wanted to live my life. I'd tried it briefly, and it didn't take.

OceanofPDF.com

TWO SOULS ONE BODY

"I, Silindra, Queen of the Vampires, do solemnly swear to do whatever it takes to win." That was my new personal mantra. Of course, no one knew it but me.

I'd been the ruler of the vampires for over a thousand years. The position hadn't remained in my power because of luck, or a convoluted idea.

My sister Sharra disagreed. She was wrong, though.

I still ruled because of systematic planning, a shrewd knowledge of the citizens I governed, and my ability to deal with other magical creatures.

Like dragons.

Dragons and vampires meshed well together, for the most part, but while some of the human vampires craved dragon blood, the originals, like Sharra and me, had no stomach for the foul-smelling creatures. The oldest and most impressively magical dragon of them all was called Abernathy.

I needed to speak to him.

He was kind of a prickly character, but once you got around his rough edges, he had the heart of a gentleman.

Moving with vampiric speed, I reached the entrance to his cave. He wasn't the tidiest of supernaturals.

The whole place reeked of decaying flesh, bat guano, and seawater.

Despite the thick darkness, I could make out the bones of the damned scattered on the dusty earth.

Carefully I stepped over and around as many as possible, but they were everywhere, and occasionally my bare feet crushed one to

powder.

Noises bounced off the walls, adding to the bizarrely solemn rooms. Rats scurried, squeaking angrily.

There was a repetitive drip-dripping of water falling from stalactites clinging to the ceiling. And a gentle, continuous rumbling reverberated from the sleeping dragon.

As I tucked my magnificent wings closer to my back, a startled bat caught its feet in my sapphire blue hair before flying away.

Though I knew I had nothing to fear, I jumped.

Taking a deep breath, I held it a moment before blowing out, working to steady myself.

The deeper into the cave I went, the warmer the air became. Perspiration trickled along my hairline and lower back, making my fur stick together.

Memories danced along the fringes of my mind, beckoning me to remember another time, one that wasn't my own.

I shoved them more deeply into the recesses of my mind.

No question, I was Silindra, queen of the vampires, and I needed to find a way to stop my twin sister, Sharra before she destroyed everything I held dear.

As I entered another chamber, there came the distinct sound of rumbling, which sounded a lot like purring from a giant cat.

With each step, it became louder until I was within the dragon's chamber.

The room was enormous and without a roof. In the center of the chamber slept a stunning golden dragon.

He seemed to sense my presence because his languid saffron eyes blinked open.

"Hello," he said, his deep voice shaking the room and my soul. He studied me the way a bird of prey would examine its meal.

I cleared my throat, swallowing. Though his head was more than

double the size of my entire body, I didn't fear being eaten.

Dragons didn't like the taste of vampires, especially the originals, like me.

I rolled my shoulders back, allowing my wings to beat and expand before settling at my back. "Abernathy," I said, bowing at the waist.

Abernathy was a remarkable looking creature. Our wings were similar, though his were a beautiful metallic shade of gold while mine were black.

The way he held them draped over his back reminded me of a glorious cape.

On either side of his face and under his chin was a mane of wavy hair. The top layers of his scales shone like molten gold.

The scales underneath glistened in ambers and bright yellow.

He yawned, exposing his razor-sharp teeth as he shook his head. "What brings you into my lair," he said, his voice booming against my bones.

I tried to swallow again, hoping to rid my throat of the dehydration that took up residence. "I need your help," I said, sounding like I'd drunk a glass of sand.

"Is that so?" The dragon rose, his scales clicking against each other as he moved. With him on his feet, I felt like an ant - small, insignificant, and easily crushed. He smacked his lips as though considering my nutritional value. I stepped back.

"Yes, it's my sister," I said tentatively, raising my chin. I refused to let the overgrown flying lion intimidate me.

"Tell me," he responded. He sat on his haunches, and the earth beneath him shook. Abernathy blinked, waiting with interest. Or perhaps boredom.

I focused on his long black lashes. "Sharra is growing more and more ambitious for power. I fear if she succeeds in her plans, the world as we know it will be lost. Only those she deems worthy will

retain the magic, and six of the seven magics will be destroyed." I paused, unable to meet his gaze, and took a secret breath.

A big part of me hadn't wanted to come. Doing so meant I was betraying Sharra.

I loved my sister.

She and I had been the best of friends for a thousand years until discovering humans and their uses. Until she realized she could change them into a new variety of vampire and force them to do her bidding.

Until she decided she should rule instead of me.

"I may drive her back for a time, but she'll return. She's strong-willed and so determined." I swallowed. "I - We need a way to protect a portion of the seven magics so it can't be muddled to suit Sharra's lust for power."

"I see." Abernathy's tail whipped and curled around his feet. I got the feeling he really didn't care but wanted to mollify me. "You realize, dear Silindra, life is evolution whether you want to believe it or not." He drummed his clawed paws on the ground, sending wisps of dust into the air. "Had a tadpole not longed to roam on land, it never would have become a frog."

I nodded. It was the same argument Sharra used, but that didn't make what she was doing right.

"Why do you want to stop what so naturally is?" Abernathy continued. "Unless you are worried, the creatures of magic will agree with her instead of you."

OceanofPDF.com

A PIECE OF HIS SOUL

ABERNATHY GAVE ME A KNOWING GLANCE, and I cringed.

Clearing my throat, I steeled myself and tried to glare.

The idea of forfeiting one's magic made no sense to me.

Why would someone willingly give up such a gift? Choose to mate with lesser creatures? Weakening their power. There was no rhyme or rationale behind the logic.

I flapped my wings in frustration. "The unicorns believed as Sharra does, and they are nearly extinct, each generation's magic diluted until the youngest no longer grow a horn and can't communicate with other creatures of magic. It's a disgrace! They are called horses now, and Sharra has sent them all to the human realm to do the humans' dirty work."

My words came out ragged, but that was the truth.

It was despicable what happened in the name of Sharra's "evolution."

"Perhaps," Abernathy said thoughtfully.

I fisted my hands, the muscles under my brown fur straining from the pressure. Would he refuse me?

A blip confuzzled my mind, and I was no longer in Abernathy's cave. My consciousness had returned to the human realm, and a time I didn't know.

From deep within, I felt the change.

"WHAT'S the matter with her? It looks like she has a disease - that odd shade of her skin. And she hasn't moved in weeks," Sebastian said.

"I wish I knew. Snow Angel, come back, honey. Daddy's here." My dad. Silindra's consciousness was drowned out, and I returned. I tried

to reach out - to pull away from Silindra, but she wouldn't let me go.

"Let's fly to Italy for Christmas, it'll do you some good to see another part of the country." That was Vivianne, my stepmother. At her voice, anger burned through me.

"You can do what you want, but I'm her father. I'm not going anywhere, in case she wakes up." I wanted to high-five my dad and hug him, but I still couldn't break free.

"You heard the doctors, there's nothing wrong with her. She's probably just pretending like always."

"Then get the hell out, Viv. Go! Do what you want. I won't leave my daughter alone again."

"How dare you talk to me like that!" Vivianne's voice sounded as shocked as I felt. I hadn't heard my dad talk like that ever. Not to anyone, and especially not to her.

"No, how dare you! For the past ten years, I've chosen you over her. Never again." His voice cracked, and I knew my dad meant it.

Dad, I tried to shout, but Silindra pulled me back.

Back to the time when original vampires ruled the world.

ABERNATHY EXHALED, sending smoke through his nostrils, and I took another step back. "If you wish to save magic, there is much you must do. While I do not agree the horse is less of a magnificent creature than the unicorn, I do believe there is merit to what you request. Saving magic will benefit all creatures."

I felt my shoulders relax, and my wings vibrated in response.

It didn't matter if he agreed with my beliefs or not, only that he told me what I needed to do to protect the world's magic from dying out completely.

"You'll help, then?" I wanted to make sure before I got too excited.

"Yes, Silindra, Queen of the Vampires. I'll give you what you desire, but remember, all choices come with a price."

"Thank you," I breathed, feeling a little giggly and wondering

where the emotion came from. Usually, I was exceptional under pressure.

Abernathy tossed his head back. "Hhhmmmmm. Aaarrgggghhhh. Hhhmmmmm. Aaarrgggghhhh."

The noise trembled deep within the dragon's body.

He pranced from one foot to the other, as though dancing.

I moved back until my wings touched the chamber's wall.

He rose up on his hind legs and let out a roar, breathing a column of fire.

Bats died instantly, falling like black rain all around us.

I turned into the wall, shielding my face.

After several long moments, he stopped, and I faced him.

An angry pain burned in his eyes.

He opened his mouth, and I had a momentary flash of fear that he would send his fiery breath my way.

Instead, something small rolled off his tongue and landed on the dusty floor in front of him.

"Take that," he said, returning to his seated position, looking as though he'd done nothing bizarre.

I hesitated. "What is it?" A hairball? Nasty.

"Go on, it won't bite."

Yeah, but it might be oozing saliva and other disgusting dragon slime, I thought, standing over it.

Abernathy chuckled, his eyes twinkling merriment. "Go on," he prodded.

Cautious, I picked it up. Warm to the touch and, thankfully, slobber free. It looked like a topaz gem, shaped like a teardrop.

A grey-black substance swirled within. Holding it between my thumb and first finger, I peered at it more closely.

"What is it?" I asked again, hearing the wonderment in my voice.

"That, dear Silindra, is a piece of my soul."

I gasped and almost dropped it.

"Why?"

To give away a piece of one's soul was huge.

"In order to save magic, you must combine a piece of my soul with the six other magical elements," Abernathy answered.

A vibration began within my body, and I knew he spoke the truth.

"What exactly?" I asked, pressing the gem into the palm of one hand. I wanted to make sure I did exactly as he said.

"The horn of a unicorn. Strength of a troll. The heart of a fairy, the sight of an elf, and the essence of an original vampire. Finally, the blood of a hunter - but not just any hunter. When the time comes, you'll understand what I mean."

It sounded crazy, but I decided to trust him.

He'd given me a piece of his soul.

There was nothing more significant.

Abernathy spoke. "Do not fight what is meant to be. You have a young vampire within you. She will be the one to restore the magical balance when the time comes."

A gasp sounded from the nethermost part of my mind.

I sucked in a breath, frustrated.

I hadn't made the noise, but who had?

Shaking my head, I tried to rid myself of the clutter. After a thousand years of living, I thought I'd experienced everything, but something new was happening within my mind.

Without waiting for my response, the enormous golden dragon turned away from me and lay back down, curling himself into a ball.

Within seconds he was snoring again.

Tightening my grip on the gem, I retreated from the cave.

A part of me worried about keeping Abernathy's soul safe.

In the wrong hands, it would destroy lives. With the magics combined, whoever wore the gem would possess more power than all others, including the dragons.

Excitement shot through my heart.

I would be the most powerful creature in the world.

"No." I heard the voice distinctly, like someone standing next to me had said it, but there was no one else around.

My vision went dark.

"POPS, I noticed Kenmei is back. What did he find out? Does he know why the Seal of Gabriel disappeared? Why she's red?" Dorian asked.

"He discovered little more than we already knew. Abernathy said the magic within the gem is binding with Snow. If that's the case, she'll be unstoppable, a force more powerful than any of us has ever seen."

"Including the vampire queen?"

"Yes." Professor Pops took a deep breath. I mulled over what he said. I would be the most powerful creature? That was scary. I didn't want that kind of power.

"Holy crap. Let's wake her up then." Bart's voice.

"Try a kiss, numnuts. It works in fairy tales," Salvatore said.

"Back off, Salvatore. I'll go first."

"Dorian, I swear to St. Valentine, if your lips go anywhere near hers, I'll kick your ass."

"You're such a baby, Gabe."

I longed to wake and tell Gabe I was sorry. Obviously, even though I killed his father, he still cared. I wanted him and the others to know I was okay. That I knew they were watching out for me and that I missed them. Gritting my teeth, I tried to return home, but Silindra wouldn't let me go.

"Not yet," she said to me. "We're not ready. We must see this

through."

OceanofPDF.com

SENSUOUS LIPS

I EXITED the dragon's cave and was met by Ryden, my most trusted friend.

The pixilette had transparent wings and hair the color of daisies. Gabriel, one of Sharra's hunters and my secret lover, was also there.

I was surprised they found me.

At the sight of Gabriel, my breath hitched. It still shocked me that I had any kind of physical reaction to him since he was a human-vampire, but I craved him like a flower craved the light.

He wore his black hair long and in a braid. Several strands had fallen out and framed his chiseled face.

His eyes were emerald green and seemed to overflow with serenity and goodness. He wasn't tall, about my height, and muscled.

He wore black pants, fur-covered boots, and a matching black shirt without sleeves. Strapped to his back were crisscrossed swords.

His sensuous lips were puckered with worry.

Sharra had used her magic and her blood to change him from human into a vampire. With no wings and no fur, he should've been ugly, but he wasn't. Although I was more than offended by what she'd done to him, I couldn't help the strong feelings - the desire - I felt for him. My emotions went against everything I stood for, but I couldn't deny them.

Flying off Gabriel's shoulder, Ryden came to me. "Did you find Abernathy? What did he say?" She spoke in a high, barely audible voice as she flitted around my head.

I held out my hand, exposing the amber stone for them to see.

"Oh," she gasped, clutching her hands to her chest. Her wings beat rapidly as she landed on my palm, reverently touching the stone. "It's

beautiful," she breathed.

"It's our future," I said, placing it inside the satchel I wore across my chest.

"What did he say? What do we do with it?" She placed her hands on her hips.

I wanted to tell them precisely what Abernathy said, but something stopped me. "First, we need to find the elf known as Devoran."

Gabriel placed a hand on my shoulder, his eyes questioning.

I covered his hand with mine and pulled it to my chest. "The dragon is sending us on a quest." The word "us" filled me with contentment. We were a team, Gabriel, Ryden, and I.

"A quest? What are we searching for, my love?" Gabriel brushed his hands through my wild, unkempt hair.

I caught hold of his waist, pulling him close, ignoring the frustrated noises coming from Ryden.

Gabriel and I embraced, and he kissed me, his warm lips caressing mine.

At his touch, my body snapped to attention, every part of me quivering like putty in his hands.

Ryden and I talked on more than one occasion about my passions for the human-looking vampire.

I knew it was wrong, that I shouldn't be seen cavorting with a watered-down vampire, especially one that served Sharra.

But whenever he was near, my body would melt.

Every strict word I told myself, each promise I made to Ryden was forgotten around him. The promises flitting from my head like a petulant bird.

I craved his proximity.

Even now, knowing we needed to complete the most important task of my long life, I couldn't stop myself from kissing him, touching him, wanting him.

"Gabriel," I whispered.

He responded by deepening his kiss, and I felt it in my knees, down to the tips of my toes.

"Shiny sheep poo, would you two break it up?"

I smiled against Gabriel's lips.

Ryden had quite the way with words.

"Fine," I said softly, but my gaze never left Gabriel's. "Climb on, Ryden. You don't want to get left behind."

She flew to my shoulder. "You're disgusting," she murmured into my ear, but I noted the hint of sympathy in her voice. The little pixilette understood.

"Shall we go your way or mine?" I asked Gabriel, my wings beating behind my back longing to fly, to feel the wind in my hair. There wasn't a better experience.

"My way, if you please," Gabriel said.

I sighed. "Oh, alright." I knew he didn't like to fly.

"Where to?" he asked, wrapping his arms around my middle.

"The Isle of Rhue."

He lifted me into his arms, and I marveled at his strength. I wasn't the lightest of creatures.

As he ran with vampire speed, something clicked in my brain and I was transported to another time.

"SNOW, it's me, Cindy. I don't have a lot of time. Your boyfriend thinks witches had something to do with what happened to you, but it isn't true. He's on a rampage trying to find out the truth."

"Are you ready to complete the spell, my child?"

"Yes, Grandmother."

"Good. Then begin."

"Don't worry, Snow. This isn't going to hurt," she said and then

spoke words I didn't understand. "Essaya. Guinevia. Essaya cayana soyoble."

Her grandmother said the words with her. I felt something happening to my body, like the lightest touch of snow or the sprinkling of rain.

"See, my dear, the spell is working. She's fine. We just need to help the idiot chayot keep her safe until she wakes. I have no doubt she will when she's ready." At Cindy's grandmother's confidence, I relaxed.

"Thank you, Grandmother."

THE ISLE OF RHUE, in the Mediterranean Sea, featured an inlet cloaked by enchantments. Only those who possessed magic could find it, and even then, it was difficult.

The elves weren't social creatures, and the elven leader was no exception. In fact, he was ornerier than Abernathy.

A rock had more warmth and softness.

Needless to say, I was not looking forward to this encounter. I'd spoken to him all of ten times in the last thousand years. Each exchange had been at the meetings the leaders of the seven magics held once a century.

We arrived quickly. Gabriel halted at the edge of Keening Forest. It was known for its giant pine trees, and hostile phantoms said to be able to make you crazy or hallucinate or both.

Seeing one wasn't high on my list, but it was highly likely we would.

Gabriel released me, allowing my feet to crunch against the dried grass. "This way," I said, wanting to get this over with before it began.

"I don't know," Ryden said, her high voice quivering. "Are you sure this is necessary? I mean, can't you command Devoran to come to you?"

OceanofPDF.com

HOLY MONSTER

"I COULD, but he wouldn't come. He's arrogant like that." I took a deep breath. "We have to do this." I stepped over a pinecone the size of Gabriel's head. "Stay on my shoulder," I told Ryden lightly. If a pinecone fell on her, she'd be squished.

"I will, Silindra. Everything is so big. I could live in one of those pinecones." To prove her point, a hairy spider as big as my fist crawled out of one. "Holy monster, I'm hiding in your hair," she said with a shudder.

I let her do as she pleased.

The spider would make the pixilette into an appetizer if it caught her.

"I'll get rid of him," Gabriel said, shooing the spider away with the tip of his boot. There wasn't much growing under the canopy of trees, just a lot of dirt, pine needles, pinecones, and the occasional fern. It made sense. The sun was all but blocked from view. Shadows danced within the stilted silence. In the distance, I could hear the waves crashing, and something else. Moaning.

"The song of the dead," Ryden whispered, pressing her little body against my neck.

"Let's go," Gabriel said, taking the lead, but he immediately stopped.

A group of six elven guards approached with their swords drawn and blocked us from going forward.

"Put those away, my friends," I said but heard the edge in my voice. "My name is Silindra, Queen of the Vampires. I'm here to see Devoran. Take me to him at once."

One guard came forward. "Apologies, my lady. I didn't recognize

you." He bowed deeply before returning to his upright position.

I regarded him deliberately. He and the others tried not to gawk. It was understandable. I was a magnificent creature, but I was also a vanishing breed.

Most of the original vampires were gone or, like my sister, had pilfered a new body. A human body. The idea of leaving the body I had - the one that would live forever - for a paltry and limited human body, disgusted me.

I wouldn't lower myself as the others had.

Besides, humans couldn't fly! I would die before giving up my wings.

"It's alright." I stepped forward.

The elves were slight creatures, their frames tall and thin like the branches on a willow tree, skin and hair the color of silver dust, and eyes as deep blue as the sea.

They were dressed in tunics, two in black, two in green, and two in blue.

I never did understand the need for clothing since they were binding and uncomfortable. The humans wore them, as did many other supernaturals, but I couldn't be bothered. I had my fur.

A squeal resonated through my mind.

I hadn't made that sound.

She's excited, I thought, and then caught myself.

Who was this she? Perhaps the young vampire Abernathy mentioned? Shaking my head, I cleared my throat, focusing on the elves.

"I am Veb," one of the guards in black said. He came forward as he spoke, placing a fisted hand to his chest.

"Good to know you, Veb. Now, if you please, I'm in a hurry." I waved my hand toward the dark forest, motioning for him to lead us in. I didn't want to be impolite, but he seemed leery of us, especially

Gabriel. I didn't have the time for an internal debate.

Veb shuffled his feet, a frown on his effeminate face. "Silindra, I can take you and the pixilette to Crystal City, but I have strict instructions that I must never, under any circumstances, allow one of his kind in." He bowed low but kept his steely gaze fixed on Gabriel. "Again, apologies."

My insides burned with anger. "Listen, Veb. I don't care what you were told. This hunter is with me, and I am the queen - "

Gabriel placed a hand on my shoulder and spoke in my ear. "Can I have a minute?"

"Excuse us," I said and stomped away, following Gabriel. When we were a ways off, I took his hand. "Gabriel, if you think I'm going to bow to these elves, you can think again."

Gabriel smiled. "The thought never crossed my mind." He discreetly kissed my cheek. "Your sister has called me to her side. I'm sorry, but I must go. We can't let her know we are together."

A sickness formed in my stomach. I didn't want him to leave. Having him near brought me contentment. But I knew he was right. "Go," I said, and turned away, determined not to let anyone see the tears in my eyes.

"It's better this way. We don't want word to get back to Sharra that the two of you were on the Isle of Rhue together. That would raise too many questions," Ryden added.

I knew she was right, but I didn't like that I would be without him. Nor did I like that the elves questioned my authority. I rolled my shoulders, wanting to take my sadness and anger out on them.

When I returned to the guards, they were all smiles.

"Follow us."

Two guards walked ahead, and two brought up the rear.

The other two disappeared into the trees. As we walked, I wondered about the perpetual groaning, like a sigh of relief and a cry

of agony combined.

The noises seemed to be coming from the trees, but I didn't see anything when I looked.

"Are the stories about the phantoms real?" I asked, knowing they were but wanting to make conversation.

"Yes, they are," Veb said.

I waited for him to continue, to give me a more thorough explanation, but he didn't.

If we were at the castle, he would've been flogged for his insubordination. Or drained dry. No, definitely flogged. The idea of drinking elven blood was off-putting. Their blood tasted like moldy tree sap. Ugh.

The voice inside my head groaned as well.

I ground my teeth together in frustration. "Can the phantoms do any harm?" Again, I knew the answer but wanted to distract myself from Gabriel's absence.

OceanofPDF.com

SIRENS CIRCLED THE BOAT

"TO THE BODY, no. But the mind - " Veb let his words trail off. "They are excellent at getting inside here." He pointed at his head. "They spin tales you can't help but believe until it's too late."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Plug your ears," I mumbled to Ryden so the elves wouldn't hear.

"On it."

"Three full moons ago, a couple of humans stumbled into the forest by accident.

They owned a measure of magic, though they didn't know it, but it was enough that the trees within our forest opened to them.

Within moments of entering, their minds were altered. The phantoms twisted their thoughts and made them believe they were on a boat, stranded at sea. For days they rowed until the female died."

"Why didn't you meet them as they entered, the way you did with us?" Had they wanted the humans to suffer? Some of the magical creatures believed humans to be less than animals.

"They had magic, but it wasn't enough to alert us. The magic you and the others possess is much stronger, so when we sensed you, we used our magic to keep the phantoms away."

I huffed internally. That was good news, though I didn't fully trust these elves. "What happened to the man? Did he escape?"

"We found the male about to expire and asked what his business was within the forest. He said he didn't know. Asked me if I was an angel come to take him to Heaven. I told him, no, and he asked me why I walked on water." Veb chuckled. "Poor thing, I asked him if that was what he saw, and he said yes, that it was very deep and that sirens circled the boat, telling him to jump and join them at the

bottom of the sea."

Veb glanced back at me. "The man said he couldn't because he couldn't leave his wife."

"That's horrible," I said, glancing nervously at the trees.

"We calmed him before bringing him to our healers, but he died anyway." Veb shrugged. "There are other stories of the phantoms if you'd like to hear them."

"No, thank you. Perhaps silence is better." I searched the forest for any signs of a phantom. The only movement was an occasional falling pinecone.

AFTER WHAT FELT LIKE FOREVER, my restraint vanished. "Can't we go any faster?" I asked, frustrated the elves couldn't fly or move at incredible speeds the way vampires could.

"Almost there," Veb said, stepping off the worn dirt path.

He and his fellow guard wound us through ferns toward what I thought was an ancient tree. Its trunk was more extensive than I was tall.

Veb touched the tree lightly and whispered something.

I watched, curious. The bark on the tree folded in on itself, revealing an entrance.

Ryden and I inhaled simultaneously.

"Cool," Ryden said. I had to agree.

"Right this way." Veb presented the opening, his hand beckoning. I hesitated but could sense no danger. The other black-clad guard entered the tree trunk. A giant orb of light seemed to swallow him, and he disappeared.

I'd heard elves traveled on the light. Since I never spent any time with them, other than occasionally at a council meeting, I couldn't be sure the whisperings were true.

Now I could see it was a fact.

"Please, this passage will take us directly to Crystal City."

Not wanting the elves to know I was nervous, I moved to the opening. "Is there anything I need to do? I'm not an elf," I said, scowling and making myself appear confident.

"Travelling by light will not harm you, Silindra."

I nodded, hoping they didn't hear me gulp.

"Might as well get it over with," Ryden whispered.

I stepped into the tree's trunk, and several things happened at once.

A whoosh sounded in my ears, as though I were traveling at an extremely rapid rate.

There was a pulling.

The scent of daffodils filled my nose.

A tingling sensation started at my head, ran down my back, out along my wings, and through my appendages.

I became the light: pulsing, vibrating, throbbing.

Strangest of all, I heard the young vampire inside my head gasp.

Time and space seemed to stand still and rush by in one blinding flash.

Images of a human girl with dark hair and bright blue eyes raced along with my mind. She was one of the marked who'd become a vampire. I saw flashes of light and a fiery sword cut into her flesh. There was pain and then - .

I screamed, or she did. I didn't know.

The light was gone, and I was outside once again. Standing on top of a grassy hill, looking down on the most glorious sight I'd ever seen. I heaved a cleansing breath.

"Welcome to Crystal City, Silindra."

My insides raged with worry over what was happening to me. I didn't understand the images I'd seen or the girl in my mind, but I

couldn't focus on that.

I had a job to do.

Somewhere in the city below was Devoran, the king of the elves.

I needed to ask him for his eternal sight, and I needed to do it immediately.

Sharra wasn't slowing down.

She continued with her nefarious plans.

If I were going to stop her, I needed to do my part, which meant collecting the different items Abernathy spoke about. I thought for just the briefest moment about what it meant to give the gem the essence of an original vampire.

How would that work without the vampire dying? Was it even possible for an original to die? I had a feeling the answer was yes, though I didn't know what our weakness was. In a thousand years, I hadn't found one.

"Let's go," I said, rushing down the hill. Those thoughts wouldn't do me any good.

"Did you feel that? It was like I was torn apart and put back together again at the same time. Are you alright?" Ryden asked, her voice breathy.

OceanofPDF.com

SNOOTY BLUE BLOOD

I GRUNTED IN ANSWER. She'd described what I felt exactly, but I doubted she saw a human girl in her mind.

"The city looks like the end of a rainbow," Ryden added.

I nodded, expanding my wings, making sure they were still in one piece. When I was satisfied, I relaxed a little. "Keep your wits about you, Ryden, my friend," I whispered.

"I will."

Opulent grass gave way to crystal-paved streets and buildings, ranging in color from light red to sunny yellow, sapphire blue to the palest purple.

The structures correlated with the roads. Sunny yellow streets contained businesses, homes, and gardens swathed in yellow. The purple streets correlated with purple buildings, blue with blue, green with green, and so on.

Elves were everywhere, busily bustling about their lives.

After several minutes I realized the elves wore clothing associated with street colors.

Where all of the colors appeared overwhelming at first, their meaning quickly became apparent.

It was a pecking order.

Fascinating, I thought but kept my mouth shut.

Elves gawked at me excitedly.

Some of the young ones followed, tittering behind their hands until we reached the end of their street.

Then they would abruptly stop, as though crossing into another color would produce severe consequences.

The closer we got to the middle of the city, the more exquisite the buildings, the roads, and the clothing. Everything in the center glistened like diamonds - clear and faceted.

The elves' clothing was blinding white.

They adorned themselves in luxurious furs, jewels, and fancy hats. None of the elves on these streets seemed excited to see me. In fact, they looked down their long, skinny noses at me. A growl grew in my throat.

Ryden patted my neck. "Don't mind them. Their haughtiness will be their downfall."

I calmed myself, swallowing my desire to tear into them with my fangs so I could get their snooty blue blood all over their pretty white clothes. At the thought, I laughed.

Veb scowled, wariness pressed into his thin lips, and I closed my mouth.

He held open a door, and I walked through.

The decorations inside the building were scarce like everything had been swallowed by light.

Resisting the urge to raise my hand and block the blinding brightness, I followed Veb up a circular corridor.

Let me out, the voice inside my mind shouted. I bit my lip, trying to force it away. Please.

My mind drifted, and I found my mind taking a back seat so the girl could be in control. We immediately were in her time.

"WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO, Gabe? Why are you leaving now?" Professor Pops asked.

"Several of the marked have been found dead. Holden thinks those responsible are renegade chayot working with other magical creatures, including the hunter, Christopher, and even the witches. Holden wants me to take my father's place as their leader. I'm going to

destroy Christopher - make him pay for what he's done to Snow. Besides, there's nothing I can do here." His voice sounded mournful. With all my might, I tried to open my eyes, to reach out to him, but Silindra wouldn't let me go.

"Oh, son. I know it's hard, but we've got to - "

"Don't bother giving me a pep talk. I've got work to do."

"What about Snow? Did you want to say good-bye?"

"I've already said my good-byes. Now I'll avenge her." At his anger, I sobbed. My poor Gabe. He believed I wasn't coming back. I didn't blame him. I wasn't sure I would be back either.

"Why are you treating her like she's dead? Her heart still beats. Her chest still rises and falls."

"Whatever. I need to move on with my life, and you should move on too. Don't wait up."

My heart broke into a million pieces, and I wept, allowing myself to be pulled back into Silindra's time.

OceanofPDF.com

MY FAVORITE BLOOD

THE SOUND of roaring water came from somewhere within the building and grew louder the higher we went. When the guards, Ryden, and I reached the top, I understood the noise.

A large waterfall raged, causing the mist to churn and swirl, making the air wet. I

t smelled of lilies.

The droplets clung to my fur and slicked off my wings.

Directly in front of us was a rounded landing dangling by six silver cords.

Veb climbed on and beckoned me to follow.

I stifled a sigh, knowing if the bottom fell out from under me, I could use my wings to escape.

Still, I held the slick crystal rail encircling the landing, hoping to steady my nerves.

Slowly, like molten lava, the landing moved, pulling us closer and closer to the waterfall.

When it looked like the raging water would soak us, a circular piece of ceiling, just larger than the landing, appeared, diverting the water around us.

At once, we were swallowed in darkness. I was thankful my eyes easily adjusted to the dark, but I knew Ryden wasn't as lucky. Her tiny fingers clung tighter to my neck.

"So dark. It's like we've been buried," she whispered.

After several moments, I wanted to say something to alleviate Ryden's fears.

Veb must've sensed my uncertainty. "We will arrive innnnnn - " The landing clanged softy, and the water parted like a curtain. "Now."

We stepped into a wonderland. I was too shocked to say anything. The bright blue sky shone so perfectly, I wondered if it was real.

Trees bearing the most beautiful, luscious-looking fruit in different colors abounded. Their fragrance had my mouth watering.

Surprised, I took a step toward the nearest tree, clasping a lime-colored fruit in my fingers. Its texture was soft and smelled like blood, my favorite blood.

That of my hunter - Gabriel.

How was that possible?

Overwhelmed, my eyes tore through the sumptuous garden, searching for an answer. Birds sang from dense branches, their feathers all the shades of the rainbow, their tails nearly touching the ground.

Animals great and small.

The unicorn and the gremlin, the lion and the lamb, the eagle, and the mouse.

They all frolicked together.

"What is this place?" I asked, unable to help myself.

"This is my home."

I swung in the direction of his voice.

Devoran walked toward me, his hands spread out on either side of him in welcome.

He wore a crisp white shirt with embroidered white buttons and matching white pants. White silk slippers adorned his feet.

His long silver hair was pulled back and secured in a bun with long pointy sticks. He appeared relaxed, his features kind.

He smiled - his almond-shaped eyes, the color of a cloudy sky, crinkled in mirth.

His features and the way he moved were unexpected, mainly since he acted so differently at the council meeting.

"Devoran?" My eyes told me that was who strode toward me, but my mind struggled to believe.

"Welcome, Silindra. I've been expecting you."

I remained immobile. Everything about the way Devoran acted went against all I'd known of him over the last millennium. That concerned me.

Why was he different?

Was this a trick?

Had the phantoms caught hold of my mind, and this was all a hallucination?

It couldn't be, I thought, discreetly pinching myself.

The air smelled so intoxicating I almost decided I didn't care.

With a shrug, I plucked a fruit from the tree and sank my teeth into it before I changed my mind. The fleshy fruit tasted exactly like Gabriel's blood.

"What is this?" I asked, too startled to follow decorum.

"Amonie fruit. Do you like it?"

"It tastes like blood," I admitted in awe.

Devoran nodded. "That's the beauty of the fruit within my sanctuary."

Two crystal chairs and a table appeared in front of the elven leader. He slipped into one of the chairs.

A silver decanter materialized along with twin silver goblets, and a miniature - for Ryden, I guessed.

"Won't you have a seat? Take some refreshments." He indicated the pitcher with his pointy chin.

"I'm so thirsty. Do you think there's watermelon juice in that container?" Ryden asked.

I wondered what was in there too. All I could smell was Gabriel's delicious blood.

"Devoran, you know I only drink blood. Is that what you're offering?"

His smile widened. "But of course, dear Silindra. What kind of host would I be otherwise?"

Ryden sighed.

"Can we get some watermelon juice for the pixilette, Ryden?" I asked, sitting hesitantly in the chair opposite him.

"The decanter pours whatever it is you wish to drink, so if dear Ryden wants watermelon juice, that's what she'll receive." His friendly voice was strange.

Ryden squealed with glee and flew from her hiding place at my neck, toward the tiny glass. Devoran picked up the decanter and poured her a drink.

The pixilette took a small sip, and then several more.

Clapping excitedly, she flew into the air, spinning like a magical top. When she stopped, she laughed. "It is watermelon juice."

I stifled a smile.

"Would you like a drink, Silindra?"

Curious, I agreed, setting the piece of fruit on the table. It vanished immediately.

He poured, and I watched a thick red liquid flow into my glass.

When it was filled, I picked it up, startled by the strong scent of blood.

Pressing my lips to the glass, I tasted.

It was blood.

More specifically, Gabriel's blood.

I felt my eyes widen.

"How is this possible?" I wanted to set the glass down, but I couldn't. With only a little decorum, I chugged down the remaining contents.

"It's part of the magic of my home." He gave a slight chuckle, and I nearly fell off my chair. Devoran never smiled, let alone lifted his lips out of a grim line.

"Who are you?" I asked, moving my body so that I fully faced him. The elf beside me couldn't be king of the elves.

OceanofPDF.com

I CALL HER ENVY

"SILINDRA, it is me. I know I am usually melancholy. But you are in my home, in my garden, my most favorite place in all the world." Devoran smiled, and I noticed the tiny wrinkles feathering near his eyes. "Can I show you around?" he asked, rising.

I nodded, feeling out of sorts, but stood as well. The sooner we finished with pleasantries, the sooner I could be on my way.

"Good." He looked at Veb. "You are excused," he barked.

"Thank you, sire." Veb bowed and left.

Once the water curtain resettled itself and Veb was gone, Devoran smiled. "I know why you've come."

I wanted to respond, but the girl inside my mind tried to break free at that moment, pushing against my mind, and I found my consciousness floating like a cloud back to her time. It was apparent she missed a boy named Gabe. I found it interesting her love's name was the same as mine.

"HAPPY HALLOWEEN, Snow. I know you hate girlie stuff, so I only put a little bit of clear gloss on your lips, added just a few sparkles to your eyelids, and put a red stripe in your hair. The nurses are going to flip about that." Cindy was speaking to me, and she said Halloween. How was that possible? It was only November a few days ago. My head pounded, and I desperately fought to wake.

Cindy went on. "I'm dressed up like a cheerleader. We had to wear a costume for work. I bought you one just like mine. We'll save it for next year, even though you know I hate wearing the same thing twice. It's okay, though. I think, under the circumstances, the Vogue gods will understand. Just please wake up. I'm lonely without you. Sure, I have other friends, but you're the only one who knows what I am."

Poor Cindy, she must feel so alone. I wondered if she had a boyfriend. I wanted to know all about what she'd been up to.

Cindy went on, "And your dad, he's taken to drinking. Your stepmother left him. Okay, that's a big-time bonus, but not his drinking. Professor Pops isn't sure what to do about him."

Oh no! My dad. I needed to wake for him.

I needed him to know I was alive and that I cared about him.

"Gatsby is so desolate," Cindy went on. "I tried to sneak him into your hospital room, but the nurses found out and made me take him away. He's with Professor Pops because your dad kept forgetting to feed him."

My poor cat!

"Don't even get me started on the guys. Holy Halloween-in-a-handbasket. They are miserable, except Gabe. He's always out being Mr. Big-Shot leader. I think he forgot he's only eighteen. Yeah, he had his birthday. None of us celebrated, though."

I've got to return. It's important. Let. Me. Go! I said the words in my mind, but Silindra's power seemed to grab my soul and yank me back. A tether connected both of us in a way neither of us understood.

I WASN'T surprised Devoran knew what I wanted - he was always astute at our council meetings - but I doubted he understood the full reason.

The elves had been around almost as long as the vampires and the secretive chayot, but we still had a few decades on them.

"I went to see Abernathy," I said, getting right to the point. "If we are to save the seven magics, I must have a specific property from each of the great magical races."

He nodded solemnly. "And what did Abernathy give you?"

Answering Devoran was necessary. I knew that. He would expect nothing less, and his question was worthy.

"A piece of his soul." I brought the amber teardrop from the satchel I carried, showing him the magical gem.

His eyes widened. "Unbelievable." He reached out as though he wanted to touch it, but I immediately returned the stone to my satchel.

A flash of anger - the look I was used to seeing on Devoran passed over his features for the briefest moment before it was gone.

He slipped his hands behind his back and began walking. I moved to stay alongside him.

"Abernathy and I have never agreed on much," he went on. "He is more impulsive with his decisions, while I tend to think things through so I can plan for different variables."

Abernathy just seemed lazy to me, but I nodded my agreement. Better to be diplomatic and let him believe he had the upper hand.

"By my calculations, you are here to ask for the eternal sight of an elf, correct?" He raised one thin eyebrow in my direction.

"That's right," I answered, not even a little surprised he did, in fact, know exactly what I needed.

"We can discuss it, but first I want to introduce you to someone." Pointing at a small black unicorn, he changed the subject. "I call the little unicorn over there, Envy. See the lustrous shine of her coat? The perfect length of her mane? Her violet eyes?"

"Yes, she's lovely." I had a soft spot for unicorns. They were healers by nature.

"Her brothers and sisters hated her for her beauty. More than that, they hated her for her great magic. They were awful to her, refused to play, or show her any kind of affection. Her mother and father possessed very little magic, and they despised her as well. She was considered the runt. One night her family gave her a sleeping potion, and as she slept, they proceeded to break her legs and tear off her horn." He shook his head sadly.

I was in shock.

It never made sense to me that there was such cruelty in the world.

But I wasn't naïve enough to believe it didn't exist. All creatures had malice woven into their DNA as well as goodness.

The difference between those who were malicious and those who were kind were their choices. Whether they clung to the best parts of themselves or wallowed in the rest.

Devoran went on. "They abandoned her at the edge of our forest. I believe they hoped the phantoms would destroy her. But her magic is powerful, and I sensed her and brought her here before any more harm could come to her."

I was surprised he helped.

Elven magic was rooted in sight.

OceanofPDF.com

MINGLE WITH YOUR MAGIC

ELVES WERE able to see back through time as well as forward in time.

With all they could see, they cared little for the rest of the world.

I guessed he saw something in Envy he wanted to use for himself. "I'm so glad. She seems to be doing better."

"She is." He nodded. "When she woke from the sleeping potion, she possessed enough magic to heal herself, and now she's happy and thriving."

The unicorn, acknowledging Devoran's words, shook her mane and pranced over to him, pushing her nose against his hand.

He smiled, petting her between the eyes, below the small nub where her horn was growing back. "She is loyal to me to a fault." Devoran playfully shoved Envy away. "That loyalty could be the death of her."

I shivered, understanding what he meant.

It didn't matter if Devoran's desires were good or evil.

Because Envy was loyal to him, she would do whatever he commanded. It was the same with the vampires loyal to Sharra.

Beyond the unicorn's extraordinary beauty, she seemed kind.

As I watched, she nudged a baby hedgehog over to a patch of clover and kept him company while he ate.

It occurred to me that Devoran had shared the story as a stalling tactic while he deliberated whether or not to give me what I needed.

Though I was in a hurry, I would allow him that time.

Not that I had a choice. Not really.

I could take what I wanted, but doing so would have consequences beyond the war with the vampires. All creatures of magic would take

sides.

Stealing from the king of the elves would turn many against me.

That wasn't an option worth considering unless he gave me no other choice.

After we strolled the entire sanctuary twice, Devoran stopped, facing me. "I will give you what you desire, but you must agree to something first."

As he spoke, several of the creatures from the garden raced over to him. He looked away from me, giving each of beasts some individual attention before sending them away.

"What is it?" I asked when he was done cooing at them. Whatever the cost, I would do it.

"To give you the sight, it must become a part of you, mingle with your magic, and insert itself within your body and soul."

That didn't sound pleasant or even possible. Warily, I scrutinized him. What was he playing at?

"It isn't the same as what the dragon did. It can't be taken but must be freely given. I won't tear the eyes from an elf. That isn't how our magic works."

"How then?" I was prepared for worse.

"In order for you to receive our sight, you must experience the pain and power that comes with such an incredible gift."

"Of course," I said, bracing myself. I had no idea what he meant, but I knew it didn't matter. Whatever the cost, I would pay it.

"Come, let me direct you to your room. You need some rest before we can begin." He picked up the pace, and I worked hard to follow.

I didn't want to rest. I wanted it over with now, but one look at Devoran, and I knew it wasn't up for discussion. "Excellent," I said, gritting my teeth.

One of the elven guards directed me to my chamber after Devoran promised to return soon. I took in the four crystallized walls.

Five small rectangular windows ran the wall's length to the left of the large bed covered in white linen and lavender - my favorite color.

Nothing covered the windows, and I saw the beautiful gardens beyond.

"I'll be back," Ryden said, flying toward the window.

"Stay out of trouble," I commanded softly, though I knew she would do what she pleased.

As she exited, I watched her disappear into the trees.

I had a feeling she was after more watermelon juice.

With nothing to do but wait, I removed my satchel and lay down on my side, careful to keep my bare feet off the downy covers and my wings from getting smashed.

As an original, I needed very little sleep, less than most other creatures, especially humans.

Or dragons.

They could sleep through the centuries. I rarely became tired, but I found myself so exhausted I closed my eyes.

"HER BIRTHDAY'S COMING UP." Dorian's voice cut through the darkness. "I can't believe it's been almost a year. It's a good thing her dad agreed to bring her home. I think the doctors wanted to run tests, treat her like a lab rat. Thankfully, he wouldn't allow that."

"I believe they would be shocked at what they discovered," Professor Pops said. "They're already curious about why her body isn't breaking down."

"She looks the same as she did a year ago, only her hair is longer," said Gabe, and my heart squeezed.

"Vampires age at an abundantly slower rate than humans, son. I'm more than six hundred years old, yet I don't look older than forty."

"Right." Gabe sounded irritated and weary. I did that to him. Though I knew I was somehow connected to Silindra, I willed myself

to break free, so I could explain it all to my dad, Professor Pops, Gabe, and all the rest of my family. It made no sense that a year had nearly passed in the human realm, yet with Silindra, it'd been less than a day.

"Gabe, come on. Don't be like this. Talk to me. Tell me how everything's going. Did I hear the rumors right? You captured Christopher?"

My veins filled with dread. I couldn't let them hurt my hunter. I growled, trying to wake, to separate myself from Silindra, but she wasn't through with me yet. Or, more precisely, the Seal of Gabriel wasn't through with me.

"We had him," Gabe said, interrupting my thoughts. "But he escaped. Next time we catch him, I'll kill him."

I couldn't let that happen! Somehow, I needed to separate myself from Silindra and the Seal.

OceanofPDF.com

FULFILL THAT DESIRE

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, it surprised me that I had, in fact, fallen asleep. My body hummed with invigoration. It also dazed me to realize I somehow saw the world differently. Was it the elves' eternal sight? There hadn't been any pain.

I got to my feet, shaking out my wings, allowing the circulation to reach every tendon and vein. They felt good. I felt good.

A large bumblebee flew in, lazily making its way to the wall on the right of my bed. It bumped into the door several times.

"Oh, you poor thing." I went over and cupped the bee between my hands, took it over to the window, and released it. The garden's aroma filled my nose. It still smelled like Gabriel's blood, and my knees went weak. I was hungry.

Directly south of the bed was an opening. I peeked inside, happy to see it was the relieving room. I went in and took care of my necessities. When I returned to the bedroom, I noticed a mirror hanging on the wall next to the bed. It wasn't there a moment ago. "Where did you come from?" It was large and oval, framed in what looked like finely spun spider silk or icicles. I usually wouldn't bother with it. Mirrors were of no value to me. But for some reason, I was drawn to this one. As soon as I peered into the strange glass, I understood. The reflection wasn't mine, but that of a girl. A human. With ruby red lips and dark hair.

My mouth fell open in astonishment. Tugging in a deep breath, I turned from side to side, watching the girl in the mirror imitate me. I closed my eyes, sure I was seeing things, but when I opened them, she was still there, staring back, her eyes as wide as mine.

"Mirror, mirror made for me, whose reflection do I see?" I asked, watching the girl standing there, her lips unmoving though I spoke

aloud.

"I'm Snow White," the girl responded, her voice soft.

I stepped back, using my wings to move more quickly. The reflection spoke to me. Tentatively I went back. She was still there.

Slowly I moved my finger toward the glass, curious to see if it was solid. Her creamy, hairless finger moved in time with mine, as though she didn't want to but didn't have a choice. When our fingers met, she gasped.

"Silindra," she said.

"How are you here with me?" I was shocked. I'd never seen this human before. In fact, I refused to entertain humans. I had nothing against them, but their existence meant little to me. Except for Gabriel, I thought, but I pushed that line of thinking away. Sharra had altered him. His body looked human, but he was no more human than I was.

The girl called Snow White leaned toward me. "I'm not sure, but I believe it was the Se - " She couldn't finish the word. It seemed stuck in her throat.

"But, you know what I am?"

"Yes." She touched her throat as though worried about what had happened a moment ago. "I've heard stories about you." She leaned back. "Your sister, Sharra, had a hunter mark me. I'm a vampire now." Her words sounded sad, and I felt momentarily sorry for her. I knew Gabriel had similar feelings.

Was this reflection sent to me by Sharra? My sister's magic was strong. Had she created this mirror as a way of luring me? A pang of longing shot through my chest. If I had a human body like Gabriel, then he and I could love each other fully - in every way physically. My body hungered to fulfill that desire, but no. I shook the thought away. I was an original, a true vampire, not some watered-down human version, like the girl whose reflection I saw. I would not be swayed by her or my lust for Gabriel, even if I did want him so badly, the craving

caused my eyes to water. "No!" I slammed my fist into the mirror, shattering it.

Snow squealed. I heard it inside my head. Pieces of glass fell like sharp rain to the floor. A few shards hit my skin and bounced off but I was unharmed. Urgently, I searched for my satchel, but it was nowhere to be found. Had the elves stolen it?

I headed to the door. Devoran had better provide me the answers I needed, including what he did with my gem, or there would be war, and I would be the one to start it. Before I could exit, the sound of tinkling glass made me turn. As I watched, the shattered mirror reassembled until it was whole. I knew if I looked into the mirror again, I wouldn't see myself, but the girl. Snow White. With a growl, I pulled open the door.

"Devoran!" I shouted, surprised that I stepped out into the garden instead of a hallway within one of the crystal buildings. Strange, but there I was. Grass, soft like feathers, brushed against my bare feet. The unicorn Envy flicked her ears, watching me, her eyes keen with interest. "Have you seen Devoran?" I asked.

She nickered and came over, her head bent low as a sign of subjection and respect. When she stood in front of me, I touched her head, directly above the place where her horn grew.

"Rise, dear one." I spoke softly, remembering the cruelty she endured and appreciative of the respect she showed.

"Devoran left Crystal City earlier today. I'm so sorry, apologetic, remorseful." She bowed again, putting one hoofed leg behind the other.

I noticed the leg she stood on trembled, and my anger subsided. A wave of sympathy for her filled my veins. "Please, Envy. You don't need to bow to me. Rise. I insist."

She did as I commanded.

"When will he be back?" I asked, carefully running my clawed hands through her delicate mane.

OceanofPDF.com

ENVY

"I DO NOT KNOW. It seems there is trouble between the trolls and the elves near Ellavera Pass. He's gone to make peace, return their harmony, rebuild an accord." Her tail swished as she spoke.

The trolls and the elves were always at odds over one petty issue or another. "I appreciate your time." I scanned the gardens. "Have you seen the pixilette I arrived with? Ryden."

She shook her head, making her long, beautiful mane flip back and forth.

"Where is she?" I wondered aloud, crossing my arms as some of my irritation returned.

"I could help you look for her if you like. The pixilette drank a lot of watermelon juice. She's probably sleeping it off, feeling woozy, hungover," Envy said.

"You're undoubtedly right," I said, smiling. Knowing Ryden, she overdid it and was snoring away somewhere in the trees. "Your assistance would be greatly appreciated." We moved toward the table where I'd last seen my friend. As I came closer, a silver decanter appeared along with a goblet.

"You must be thirsty," Envy said. "Why don't you have a drink?"

"I am." I poured the liquid that looked like blood into the goblet and drank until it was gone.

"Better?" Envy's dark liquid eyes studied me with curiosity.

I still wanted more, but there wasn't time. "Much."

Together, we moved over to the orchard. A ruby red fruit grew in abundance in this section of the garden. Even though it was a different color than the green fruit I smelled yesterday, it held the same aroma - Gabriel's blood.

"What does the garden smell like to you?" I asked, curious about whether or not she smelled blood.

She sniffed, her nose moving so that I wanted to reach out and touch its softness. Resisting, I clutched my hands at my sides.

"It smells of fresh clover, alfalfa, and Elisar apples." She flicked her tail, angling her head toward the red fruit on a nearby tree.

"That's what this is?" I touched one of them, admiring the luster of its skin.

She whinnied in response.

I picked the one I prized, holding it my hand by each end and down to Envy's level. She took it in her teeth and began to eat.

"Have you seen a gem? It's amber in color and shaped like a teardrop," I said, watching her eat.

"Are you talking about the pretty, the lovely, the gorgeous one hanging from your neck?" Her head bobbed up and down.

I pressed a hand to my neck. It was there. "How?" I wondered aloud but knew Envy wouldn't have the answer. Still, I was relieved. I removed it, eager to see the gem with my own eyes. Sure enough, the dragon's soul swirled within just as before. But there was more. An outline of an elven eye seemed to bob inside as well, its silvery shape staring beyond what I could see. Devoran had given me the elven sight. He said there would be pain, but I hadn't felt any. Unless I considered all I saw when I looked in the mirror and at Snow White. Had that been what he meant? I wrapped the gem in my fist and clasped it against my chest. There was only one way to find out. "As soon as we find Ryden, I need to be moving on. Can you let Devoran know I appreciate his help?" I spoke as I headed back toward my room.

She trotted along with me. "I will, Silindra. You have my word, my declaration, my bond."

"Thank you." I stopped, bending, so we were face to face. "You are an amazing creature. Better than most I've had the pleasure of

meeting. Hold on to that." The words seemed to have come from Snow White and not me, but I agreed with her. The unicorn was special.

"I'm honored, grateful, esteemed you think so. But where are you going now?" She nuzzled my face. Her whiskers tickled, and I smiled.

"I must go back into my room." I hurried in that direction.

"I will keep searching, looking, hunting for Ryden, then."

"That would be wonderful."

She trotted back toward the trees, and I went over to the place where I exited my room. From the outside, my room looked like a crystal cottage. It gleamed in the sunlight, shimmering with hundreds of rainbows. I stepped inside and went over to the mirror. Snow White looked back at me. "Are you stuck in the mirror?" I asked, getting to the point. I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway.

She shook her head.

"Did Sharra send you?"

"I don't think so. I think this did." She grasped the gem held by a chain that resembled the one around my neck. The difference was her gem was red, a deep crimson instead of yellow-gold.

I studied my necklace. "Where did you get that?" I indicated her jewelry.

"It was given to me by Abernathy. It's called the Seal - " she stopped as though she couldn't tell me more. Though she tried to mouth the words, no sound came out, and I couldn't discern what she was saying.

"Are you somehow here to stop me from collecting the magic I'm trying to preserve?"

She gulped. "No," she finally whispered. "I think I'm here to help. Somehow."

I shook my head and noticed hers shook like mine. "Are you inside my head?" I already knew the answer. How it happened, I didn't know.

"I am," she said matter-of-factly.

I had so many questions I wasn't sure where to start. But I got the feeling Snow had many more than I did.

Peering closely, I watched her do the same.

She wore a white dress.

It was simple but elegant.

The collar circled against her neck, accentuating the blood-red of the gem. The sleeves of the dress were long, and her hair was turned under at the ends.

A white ribbon was tied in a bow on top of her head.

She looked very young.

"How old are you?" I finally asked.

OceanofPDF.com

INSIDE MY HEAD

"I'M SIXTEEN," Snow said. "But I think I'm having a birthday soon." She cleared her throat, and I noticed she fought back the tears.

"You think?" I asked simply, putting my hands to my hips.

She nodded. "I don't belong in this time. Where I'm from, I recently turned sixteen. Since I've been here with you, I keep getting these flashes of conversations from where I'm from, and I'm hearing people I care about. One of them, Gabe, he said I had a birthday coming up, which would mean I've been away nearly a year."

She looked devastated. A tear ran down her cheek and, as though the feelings were my own, I felt an overwhelming agony.

In my mind, I saw a flash of steel, heard the clips of conversation.

Saw her in a beautiful dress.

Watched her get bitten by a hunter.

Saw her kiss a dark-haired boy who bore a striking resemblance to my Gabriel. (At least the girl had good taste in men.)

She walked through a room full of magical creatures.

Talked to a blonde human, she called Cindy.

I saw her mother. The woman was part elf, but this girl - Snow didn't know it.

The girl believed her mother was dead. There was a funeral. Her mother lay in a wooden box.

Pixilettes I didn't know visited her.

This human girl was unusual, filled with magic, more than she realized.

More even than her friend, the one she called Cindy.

The withdrawn chayot, Oberon, fought the girl. A flash of red light

-

I gasped. The visions vanished as quickly as they came.

I took a deep breath. "Do you know why you're here?"

She answered with a question of her own. "You're trying to collect the seven magics?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"I think I'm supposed to be with you, help you in some way." The girl moved back, wiping her wet cheeks with the backs of her hands.

"What time are you from?" I whispered, wishing I could take back the question. I didn't want to know.

"Many, many years in the future." Her voice sounded as scared as I felt, though I couldn't believe it was possible. Fear wasn't an emotion that plagued me.

A different time - that made no sense. I switched gears. "You heard what Abernathy said in the cave?"

"Yes." Her lips pinched into a tight line. "I've heard all of it."

I thought about kissing Gabriel and felt my cheeks get hot but only for a moment. I hadn't asked for the girl to hitch a ride in my mind. Until she was gone, she would have to deal. "Can I only see you in this mirror?"

"I don't know." Her voice was pained and anxious.

"It's alright, Snow White," I said, trying to bring comfort. "We'll talk again soon. I need to find my precocious friend Ryden so we can be on our way. If that," I pointed at her necklace, "brought you, perhaps once I complete the quest, you'll be able to go back to your time."

Something akin to deep sorrow changed her features, and it looked like she would cry again. "Oh, Silindra. I'm so sorry."

I didn't understand what she meant, and I knew I didn't want to know. It was better for life to happen without foreknowledge of what would be. Elven magic could produce such gifts of seeing into the future, but I never wanted to experience such nonsense for myself. "No

need. It isn't your fault you're stuck in my head or that you're from a different time. My guess is it isn't even your fault you're a human-vampire."

She gulped. "That isn't what I meant exactly. See, G - "

I held up my hand to stop her. I really didn't want to know. Before I could utter a word, Ryden flew into my room. "Silindra, I'm here!"

"Where have you been?" I asked, crossing my arms.

She shrugged, her teeny cream cheeks blossoming a deep shade of chartreuse. "Too much watermelon juice," she said. "Sorry."

"Humph. Well, I hope you're refreshed and ready to go." I lifted the mirror off the wall, deciding I would take it with me.

It was much easier to talk to Snow White while I was looking at her. Better than trying to carry on a conversation inside my own mind.

"Hang in there, Snow White," I said, wiggling the mirror back and forth, but it vanished. "Figures." As I spoke, my mind got hazy. This time I knew what was happening. Snow White pulled back to her time.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, Snow Angel. I don't know if you can hear me, but I love you. Daddy's here. And when you wake, the two of us are going to catch up on daddy/daughter time. Okay, sweetheart?"

SHE HAD a family waiting for her. I tucked that information away as I worked to bring the mirror back. No amount of my magic would make it appear.

"If you can hear me, Snow White, I'll figure out a way to bring the mirror back, but we've got to move on."

I know. It's okay, she said invoice my head. It made me crazy, and I didn't like it, but at least she knew I knew she was in there.

Outside, I closed the door.

"Ryden, let's go. We need to find a - " I stopped and glanced at

Envy. She stood a little way off, her tail swishing behind her, her bright eyes watching.

"You need the healing power of a unicorn horn, don't you? Am I right, correct, assured?" Envy asked slowly.

"Yes, that's right." I took in her stubby nub of a unicorn horn - at the spot where her horn was trying to grow. "I planned to speak with Lorenze, the leader of the unicorns."

Envy shook her mane. "No need. You can have mine as soon as it's fully grown, developed, supplanted."

I smiled. Meeting this sweet creature, seeing the way she loved so unconditionally, filled me with a joy I hadn't experienced in a while. "Thank you, Envy, but I couldn't ask that of you. Besides, I need it right away, and yours isn't fully grown. Thank you for your kind offer. It's a pleasure to know you."

OceanofPDF.com

MY FATE

SHE WHINNIED, stomping her foot as I headed back to where I came in - the waterfall.

The closer I got, the louder the roar of the water.

Mist splashed against my face. Once we were free of the elven city and back at the edge of the forest, Ryden and I would fly to the land of the unicorns.

It would be a quick trip.

Ryden fluttered near my ear. "Where are you going to put the horn, anyway?"

That reminded me that my satchel was missing.

It held more than my things.

It was of sentimental value because Gabriel gave it to me.

I didn't respond.

Ryden didn't know the whole plan yet.

She didn't understand what I was doing.

I would tell her, of course. I told her everything.

But I hadn't found an opportunity.

"Silindra, it's my destiny, my fate, my calling, to do this." Envy's voice roared louder than the waterfall as she raced around and in front of us, blocking our way.

I looked at her, searching her kind, generous eyes. "It won't work, dearest Envy." I reached out to touch her emerging horn but resisted at the last moment. "Does it hurt very much?"

She shook her head. "Not at all, but I promise my horn will be ready very shortly, soon, swiftly." Her long black lashes batted sweetly, but there was no denying the fervor in her voice. I

appreciated her passion.

"Envy, I've lived a long time. For a couple of centuries, I even dwelled in the land of the unicorns. I know it takes years for a horn to regrow." I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I would've done anything to keep her from more pain, but her horn couldn't grow as quickly as I needed.

She whinnied, pounding the ground with her hoof. "If you'll have faith in me, I promise, when the time comes, it'll be ready, developed, complete."

How could I tell this fantastic creature, no? I wouldn't. It was impossible. It might take longer than I planned, but if Envy believed it was her destiny, I would honor her request. "Thank you so much, Envy. I'll go to the trolls next then. I need to speak with them about their strength. On my way back, I'll stop here and check on you."

"That won't be necessary. I'm coming with you." She let out a neigh-whinny-neigh type laugh. I had to join in. "Okay?"

"Oh, I - "

Envy interrupted. "Don't say no. I'm supposed to go. Devoran even decided, agreed, approved."

If I took her, we'd have to walk. Or, I guess I could carry her if she let me. "Ryden and I are going to fly."

"How I would love to fly, to soar, to flutter!" Envy closed her eyes. Her lashes trembled against her lids, and her whole body shook like she was concentrating too hard. A black cloud began to form around her legs and rose up until it covered her entire body in its velvety tendrils.

I stepped forward, thinking she was in trouble. "Envy, what's the matter?"

"Stay back."

I stopped, watching in shock as the wispy ebony cloud became a glorious, feathery pair of deep violet wings. Inside my head, Snow

White gasped, and I swallowed. It was as Devoran said, the unicorn possessed a great deal of magic. "They're beautiful," I said, unable to stop myself from stroking the downy feathers. "Your magic is even greater than Devoran knows, I think."

She whinny-neighed again happily. "See, Silindra. I'll fly with you."

"Yes, you will." I rubbed her between the ears before heading through the falls.

Once we were out of Crystal City, we made our way out of the forest, keeping watch for any phantoms. We journeyed by foot since there was no place to take off and fly, and I felt myself and Snow being tugged forward to her time.

This time I didn't fight it.

From what I'd felt and seen, many people were mourning for her.

If I knew of a way to release her, I would, but even Abernathy had said I needed to let this be.

She and I were in this together whether we liked it or not, but I could give her a moment.

"WHAT'S THE PLAN? Continue to take care of her here?" Dorian asked, his voice tender.

Moments like this, where I was able to return to my time and remember me and not that I was inside Silindra's mind filled me with refreshing hope.

"We are getting her out of here and taking her home - to our house," Pops said. "I've already explained the situation to child services. With her father gone and the crazy stepmother out of the picture, I'm her legal guardian again. And I won't leave her in this ridiculous house another second." He paused.

I worried about my dad. What had happened to him?

Ugh, whatever the Seal was doing to Silindra and me, I needed it to be over quickly.

"Good. It's tragic, all that's happened to her and her family. First, her mother dies. Now her father vanishes. Poor Snow. She's too good for this." Dorian was sad, I sensed it even though I wasn't entirely there, in the room.

No amount of trying would wake me up until I was done with Silindra. I knew that now, though I didn't want to accept it.

But Silindra needed me.

I sensed that even though she tried so hard to remain tough - to be the queen she was born to be.

And though I knew her fate, part of me hoped that somehow and someday I could see her once again.

Because, really, was death the end?

"Agreed, son." Pops said, and I concentrated on him and Dorian.

"At least she isn't as red and glowy anymore. Do you think she'll wake up soon?" Dorian asked and my heart melted. He truly cared for me.

"I don't know," Pops responded. "Magic is strange. It's exciting, easy to manipulate if you possess the genes, but it can also be cruel and cunning."

OceanofPDF.com

NOT SANE

MY SISTER SHARRA and I had been born with wings, and at a young age, became quite adept at flying. I had a training period, a time where I learned what it meant to beat my wings against the air, turn them, or tuck them according to what kind of flying I intended and where I wanted to go. With the little unicorn, there was none of that. Once we were out of the forest, Envy leaped into the sky and soared like she'd been flying forever.

"It took me ten tries before I could fly without crashing into something," Ryden whispered.

"She's magnificent," I agreed, unable to take my eyes from her.

"This is amazing, wonderful, stupendous," Envy said, her deep violet wings beating against the bright sky.

I flew over to her. "It really is the best, right?" Her giddiness and enthusiasm rubbed off on me.

Snow White was enjoying herself as well.

I've never flown before, she squealed happily. Her voice caught.

Is it all right if I talk? I was nervous about speaking before, but now you know I'm here with you, it would be nice to have a conversation once in a while.

Of course, I answered, wondering if somehow I was only talking to myself, but was so far gone in my insanity, I didn't realize it.

Thank you, she whispered.

For whatever reason, having her with me became a comfort.

If I was crazy, then I didn't want to be sane.

We flew to the craggy mountains where the trolls dwelled, since I determined to believe in Envy and her horn. She could give it to me somehow, but once it was gone, I knew it could grow back.

Putting that worry aside, I focused on the trolls.

We could hear them long before we saw them - their battle cries, trees being torn unceremoniously from their bases, rocks carved with bare hands from the mountain.

"Their war with the elves is still raging," Ryden said.

Devoran's mission of peace hadn't worked. I pushed myself faster over the mountain peaks and along the steep ridges to Ellavera Pass. The scene we came upon twisted my gut. Death raged below. Bodies of the willowy elves and the leathered trolls were strewn across the earth, along with hundreds of trees in various stages of mutilation. Large boulders lay broken and powdery, making the bleeding bodies appear covered in ash.

"This has to stop," Ryden said, her tiny lips trembling in dismay.

"We cannot let this mayhem continue, go on, advance," Envy added. Her eyes filled with tears.

This is awful, Snow White added.

It is, I agreed, searching the battleground. Since Devoran came to this fight, I knew Titan, the leader of the trolls, would be there as well. I spotted him at the top of the pass. Angry lines etched his potato-skin face. The troll yelled orders, spraying spittle into the faces of those unlucky enough to be near. Pointy yellow teeth seemed to swallow his face. Steeling myself, I headed over.

While I was still ten feet away, Titan turned his beady black eyes on me, an angry roar sending spittle my direction. Luckily, he didn't have that kind of range, but I took that as his greeting. Ryden and Envy trailed behind.

"Titan, I have business to discuss." I stayed in the air, beating my wings to keep me aloft so I could look him in the eyes. Had I landed, I would've come to his protruding belly button, and that wouldn't do.

"Can't you see I'm busy? These senseless elves are nothing but trouble, insects to be squashed back into the earth where they came from." He focused his attention on the warriors he was talking to

before I interrupted. "I don't care if Devoran wants to talk. I'm sick of his mind games. Kill them all!" he shouted, waving his three-fingered hand in dismissal.

As he spoke, I looked back to talk to Ryden, but she was no longer at my side. Neither was Envy. The pixilette was a way off, near the battleground, hovering anxiously over something. I couldn't see Envy. "Where did she go?" I searched the sky, worry twisting my insides. I hoped she was okay. The trolls cared little for other creatures, especially when they were in the throes of battle. "This is of the utmost importance. I cannot wait."

His shrewd eyes studied me. The trolls looked dumber than rocks. Early on, I discovered that deception was one of their greatest weapons. They were actually quite competent, especially in the art of war. I believed it was because they held no remorse.

"It's for your benefit as well as mine. Otherwise, I wouldn't be asking," I continued when he didn't respond.

He growled. "You have three minutes." A troll standing to the side of Titan suddenly sprang into action, heaving a large wooden chair and placing it behind Titan just as the leader sat.

Impressive, Snow White said.

I snorted internally and said into my mind, Yeah, but if that assistant was a second too late, he'd be dead.

I felt Snow shudder.

Once Titan sat, I lowered myself, pressing my feet into the scraggy earth.

"You now have two minutes," he said, taking a goblet of liquid refreshment from the troll assistant.

I watched in disgust as he drank, sloshing the orange liquid out the sides of his mouth, down his naked chest and onto his trouser-clad thighs, and I wondered how much actually ended up in his mouth.

"I've been to see Abernathy," I said after clearing my throat.

He stopped drinking. The troll assistant took the glass. "Go on."

I had to be careful. If Titan knew I possessed a piece of Abernathy's soul, he would use his impressive strength-laden magic to slaughter me before he would allow me to leave. "He sent me on a quest to collect and save each of the seven great magics." I paused, preparing myself to slather on the compliments. "Trolls hold the greatest strength in the world, and you, Titan, are the strongest of them all." He sat up straighter. "I have been sent to collect the strength of a troll so that I may keep it safe." I didn't add, just in case the troll people were destroyed or became nothing but diluted sloths.

He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand and leaned his elbows on his knees. "And how do you propose I give you this strength, Silindra?"

The moment I was dreading. I didn't know, but I had to think of something. Where did a troll's strength come from? Sure, their bodies were large, tough like a rock, and their skin prickly as porcupine fur (not to mention their blood was black as tar and tasted like oil). But the trolls' strength was more than that. It was a deeply embedded part of their personality. After a thousand years of living in the roughest terrain on the planet, they had to be strong, or they would've died off quickly.

"Well?" Titan prodded.

"Where do you think your strength comes from?" I asked, sending the question back at him.

He guffawed, slapping his knee in glee. "I like you, Silindra. I always have." He leaned back in his chair. "The strength of a troll isn't in these." He lifted one arm and flexed his enormous biceps and winked. I tried not to retch. His bicep muscles were bigger than my head. "It's in this," he continued, tapping his hairless head. "Our brains, dear Silindra." He gave me a surly glare, as though begging me to disagree. "We are more than brute strength, though the physicality of our species is beyond measure in that department as well."

"I believe you're right, Titan," I acknowledged, hoping to appease him.

The troll stood. "I've decided to give you more time. Follow me."

I hesitated. Sure, I was interested in what he had to show me, but I also worried about Ryden and Envy. What were they doing?

Titan didn't wait to see if I followed, he just walked away. Never mind the raging battle, the slaughter happening mere feet away. He turned his back on them and me. With a sigh, I plodded along after him.

He stomped down the mountain's side through leafy trees and plants, over thick, dry roots and yellow-orange flowers. When he reached what looked like the edge, he jumped.

A hitch caught in my throat. Lifting to the air, I hurriedly reached the edge and peered over. More than four thousand feet of sheer rock went straight down until it reached a small valley below. On the other side of the grassy valley was another mountain, as high as the one I stood on.

OceanofPDF.com

CHRISTOPHER

WHOA, that's a long way down. Where did he go? Snow White asked.

I don't know, I responded.

Flying over, I scanned the valley below, searching. After several minutes I still hadn't found him, and I was almost at the bottom. Glancing up, I saw Titan looking down at me from a slight lip in the rock. He had an arrogant smirk on his face.

I worked hard not to shake my head in frustration as I flew toward him.

"Find anything interesting?" he asked when we were eye level.

"No."

"Tsk-tsk," he said. The noise sounded like he sucked spit between his teeth. It was annoying, but I ground my jaw together, holding back any comments. The troll leader turned, and I noticed for the first time the oblong door behind him. It blended in so entirely I would've missed it had I not been so close. He pushed, and the door scraped inward.

Not another cave, I grumbled. Snow White wasn't excited either, and her mind slipped through mine, pulling us forward to her time.

"I CAN'T STAY LONG. No one knows I'm here. Gabe would probably kill me if he found out. In fact, I know he would. It doesn't matter, though, not if you aren't around. I'm alive because of you. The vampire queen released me after your party. She's thrilled you killed Oberon and believes no one can stop her since the Seal of Gabriel is gone. She would be right, if not for you. You're the key, Snow. We need you to wake up. I want to thank you for saving me." Christopher sounded so sincere, and my heart ached.

"Don't let the Seal control you. It will try to keep you, make you its own. Okay?" He paused again. "Now, don't freak out, but I figured since we've tried everything else, what could it hurt if I kissed you again? Maybe now I'm your true love, and if you're no longer a vampire, then the Seal can't control you. So, yeah. I'm going to kiss you now." His lips pressed against mine. I felt the sweetness and tenderness of his kiss, but knew without a doubt, he wasn't my true love. Still, I appreciated the effort.

So did Silindra. I heard her sigh.

I TOOK my first big adventure while still an adolescent. Sharra and I dove the depths of the Mediterranean Sea. Abernathy told us many stories of a dragon living somewhere at the bottom and that if we found him, we could claim a wish, anything we desired, and the dragon would grant it. For weeks, we searched and were about to give up when we found a cave entrance. It sloped downward, and a dim blue-green light glowed within, begging us to see what secrets it held.

Hand in hand, we went down together, using our wings to push us farther, deeper. After a long time, we arrived at a glistening cavern filled with all manner of shimmering gems. They sparkled faintly from the ceiling, the floor, and the walls. There were red ones, blue ones, green, and orange ones. As soon as we entered, they began to shine brightly, like a rainbow of light. Dazzled, we sheltered our eyes until they became accustomed to the brightness. And then we saw him. In the center of the jeweled space, a sea dragon lay curled into a scaly ball like that of a white rose. Instead of clawed feet, he had fins and a long tail like petals. Two blue eyes, the color of midnight, peered at us.

"I suppose you're here for a wish, little vampires." He shook his stark white mane, making it dance in the water, and his fins and tail hovered - like a flower floating on water.

"Yes, we are," I said, admiring him.

"Very well. What is it?" He swam closer. His scales were the color of pearls, and he shimmered in the light.

I glanced at Sharra, and she nodded.

When we decided to search for the dragon, Sharra and I had long, sometimes hostile discussions about our wish when we finally found him. So, without hesitation, I looked directly at the dragon. "We wish to see our parents." We had never seen or met our parents. My first memories were of my sister and me taking care of each other. We watched the other creatures have children, saw the way they cared for their infants, and knew we must have been born of parents as well.

The dragon blinked, blowing bubbles from his nose, warming the water with his hot breath. "Are you sure that is your wish?"

"It is," we said together.

"So be it." He blinked his eyes. Instantly, the cavern became dark, as though we swam in ink instead of water. I couldn't see my hands in front of my face.

"Silindra?"

"I'm here."

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

A clicking sound started from a great distance and grew louder and louder as it drew closer. Sharra and I clung to each other.

"I'm scared," Sharra said.

I tried to calm her, stroking her hair. "Shhh, it's okay. You're safe." I was terrified as well, but I didn't dare move. I had no idea where to go or how to get back the way we came. When the clicking sound got so close, I thought it would run us through, a bright light flashed, startling us.

Two large sets of eyes, so beautiful and yet so chilling, peered at us. Light radiated and swirled around their bodies like a lightning storm. Their forms were hard to explain. They were like all creatures

and none at all. Swirling unknown entities one second and corporeal the next.

When Sharra and I talked about the experience later, neither of us could decide what we had seen.

I was frozen, my lips unable to move.

"Are you our parents?" Sharra asked. She was usually the shy one, but I was grateful for her courage at that moment.

"We are, and ever will be." The voice was like liquid, neither male nor female, and seemed to reach me to my very core.

"Why didn't you stay with us? Why do we drink blood? Why are we so different from all other creatures?" Sharra asked, moving out of my arms. She asked the questions we craved the answers to.

OceanofPDF.com

EYELASHES FLUTTERED

"DEAR ONES, you are the sum of all other magical creatures - the beginning. Blood is your sustenance because magic is strongest there. And we saw no purpose in staying. When we created you, we provided you with each other." They turned, swimming away and taking their strange light with them. We were again plunged in darkness. The clicking sound, which Sharra and I guessed came from our parents, got farther and farther away. Blue-green light filled the salty cavern once again, but the sea dragon was gone as well. We were alone.

Sharra cried.

I forced back my tears, knowing they wouldn't make a difference. From that moment on, Sharra and I became more than sisters, more than girls related to one another. And I promised to protect her, always be there for her. I became the parents she never had. That was several lifetimes ago. Since then, I found myself in hundreds of caves, and every single time I thought of Sharra and the tears she shed for our non-parents.

Standing on the precipice of another, while Titan's ugly troll face scanned mine, Sharra's image crossed my mind. The beginning of the end, I thought sadly. The pull of Snow's time called to the both of us, and I went willingly, feeling myself falling for this family I didn't know.

"SNOW'S EYELASHES fLUTTERED. Did you see them?" Dorian asked.

"Whatever is going on inside of her, I think it's almost at an end. Look at her skin. Completely back too normal. It shouldn't be much longer," Professor Pops said.

"You don't think - She isn't dying, is she, Pops?"

"I'm not sure, Dorian. I hope not. For her sake, Gabe's, and for all

of us. She has to live."

"You hear that, Snow? We aren't giving you a choice. Come back."

"WELCOME TO MY SECRET FORTRESS, SILINDRA," Titan said. "Only a select few have been inside and survived to tell the tale.

I grunted my response, walking past him to the doorway in the mountain, its entry bursting with light. The surface my feet touched was smooth and hard, like a polished rock - but it wasn't a rock. It was some kind of iron. It swayed slightly, and I grabbed hold of the rails as my eyes roamed the fortress inside the mountain.

This is incredible, said Snow White.

I agreed wholeheartedly. Metal catwalks crisscrossed each other, reminding me of a spider's web. Tall beams rose to the ceiling where millions of lights shone. It was as though Titan harnessed a portion of the sun and somehow held its rays captive within.

In the center of the mountain, reaching vertically to the top and, I guessed, touching the bottom, was a thick grated tube. Inside the tube were two sets of stairs: one used to walk up, and the other for down. A steady flow of occupants used them, exiting through archways onto the walkways like the one I was on. The walkways led to large, cylinder-shaped holes carved into the mountain.

Cautious, I glanced over the side and felt my throat drop into my stomach. A seemingly endless number of walkways weaved from the center stairs and downward.

I took a deep breath, noting the tang of something sour in the air, like curdled milk. The voices of thousands echoed as trolls, fairies, gremlins, and other magical creatures busily rushed around. It was a city.

"What is this place?" I finally asked.

"This is Varden, the place where all the scientific magic happens," he responded, pushing his bulky body past me and walking briskly along the path. The metal shuddered under his weight, and I held my

breath. Snow let out a tiny scream.

It'll hold him, I thought, hoping I was right but unable to follow.

When he reached the stairs, he turned. "Do you want the strength of a troll or not?"

"Of course I do." With feigned confidence, I reorganized my wings and moved along the metal walkway. He started down the stairs, and I followed. I was surprised to see so many different creatures working side by side in seeming harmony. They talked quietly amongst themselves. That's when I noticed each level led to at least ten different tunnels.

"Where are they going?" I asked. We were on the third level from the top and moving down.

"Each level holds a different department. When a fairy, elf, dwarf, vampire - any magical creature comes to Varden, their talents are taken into account before they are put to work. Those two," he continued, pointing at an elf and a troll walking side by side, chatting excitedly. "They work in the efficiency department as part of a team creating sustainable energy."

I was shocked. Elves were killing trolls and vice versa above, yet these creatures didn't appear to care.

I shook my head in awed amazement. A vampire could live a millennium and not see everything. But this indeed was new. Above, all species, including and especially the magical ones, kept to themselves. Elves lived and worked with elves, dwarves with dwarves, vampires with vampires, fairies with fairies. It was the way life went. Order was kept by adherence to the rules. Yet in the heart of the enormous mountain, those lines were crossed - blurred into extinction. Didn't these creatures understand they were messing with age-old regulations? Surely at some point, their blatant disregard would destroy them. And why had Titan created this place? I knew I should be worried. Instead, I was happy. All creatures working together. It seemed like an unattainable dream to me, but now I saw it in action.

"I know what you're thinking." Titan stepped off the stairs onto a metal hallway.

"Do you?" I asked, joining him.

He nodded. "You're wondering how I can allow a war to rage above while this goes on below."

"That is curious," I agreed noncommittally.

"This mountain, and what goes on down here, is of the utmost importance. Devoran and his band of elves think to take the mountain, believing it belongs to them. But, if they were to gain control, they would discover our secrets, and Devoran would never let the work we're doing here continue." His face grew angry. "The elven king is ancient and set in his ways. I won't allow him to destroy everything we've worked for in the name of old-fashioned beliefs. This is the future."

OceanofPDF.com

LOSS OF FAIRY WINGS

I UNDERSTOOD TITAN'S PASSION. I held the same beliefs for the quest I was on, to save magic, but I doubted what Titan was doing down here would matter in the long run. The term "science" was thrown around at the last council meeting. It meant little to me. "What else do you do down here?" I asked.

"Let me show you." He glanced over and smiled.

I held my tongue, working to keep my face blank of any emotion.

"You believe I'm heartless, uncaring. Is that it? You're wondering how I can put science above the lives of my people."

"Something like that," I acknowledged.

"It's simple. Down here, we take emotion out of the equation. We take a problem and use science along with our magic to solve it. Up there," he pointed one of his thick fingers toward the ceiling. I understood he meant above ground. "The trolls and the elves fight over an imaginary line - an important line, yes, but imaginary, nonetheless. The elves only desire power. We aren't oppressing them, and they have plenty of food and shelter. But none of that matters. They fight because one of the elven leaders believes the trolls should give over this land."

Titan threw up his hands, flashing long, unkempt armpit hair. "They don't realize if they worked together, used the resources from each side to benefit the other, their lives would be far better." He spun in a slow circle, his arms extended wide. "This, down here, is the true power. Down here, we have harmony, accord, a group of intelligent beings working toward the betterment of the entire world." He moved toward one of the corridors. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

I didn't speak, interested in his opinions, and shocked he even had

them. I believed him to be an intelligent brute, but he was more than that.

"You probably think none of this has anything to do with you. Vampires are lucky they can't die of diseases." He raised a finger. "But other magical creatures can, and you, Silindra, should be concerned with that." He waved his hands in a circle. "All of this should matter to you. Once you've seen what we do, perhaps you'll encourage more vampires to join our cause."

"What kinds of sicknesses?" I wanted to take the focus off what I wouldn't do and turn it toward what he found so fascinating about this place.

He gave a knowing smile. "The top rung houses the center for disease control. One ailment our scientists are working on causes the loss of fairy wings. Did you know that happens?"

Worry formed in my belly. Ryden wasn't a fairy, but a pixilette. Still, I wondered if she ever got sick, if her wings would fall off. I never knew her to be ill. "I didn't," I answered quietly, still lost in my own thoughts.

"We've discovered it's a degenerative disease found in the DNA of some fairies. But in the last few years, our scientists have found a cure."

That surprised me. And Snow White.

Cool. I never really thought about fairies getting sick or old, she said.

Me either, I said.

A troll ran up to Titan and demanded his time. "One moment, please." He walked away with the troll.

I glanced out over the railing, down, down, down. It made my head spin.

And I was suddenly being pulled into Snow's time. I sighed in anticipation. What were the brothers, Pops, and Cindy up to?

"SNOW. Merde! I'm so over not being able to get your advice. I need to tell you about Gabe. The guy has lost it. Last night I was at Warehouse Video, and he pulled up in his silver CRX wearing a sword across his back, like some kind of Knight of the Round Table. He looked sexy and completely stupid. Sexy, because I know what he is - the leader of the chayot. Stupid, because everyone else thinks he's gone crazy. I mean, really, if I didn't know what he was, I would've laughed my ass off. He didn't even notice the other high schoolers making fun of him. It was like he saw no one else, just the vampire dude who was sniffing around one of the cheerleaders. Gabe grabbed him by his coat collar and yanked him into the car. I have no idea what happened to him, but I'm guessing Gabe killed him.

"Honestly, I don't know what to think about Gabe. I'm pretty sure he doesn't believe witches did anything to you, so that's good. But, ugh, how do I say this? I guess I'll just spit it out. See, he's - I - Kuso! That's Japanese for dammit. Anyhoo, Gabe asked me out. It was weird. He came into work, sat at a table in my section, and when I brought his water and bread, he was all, 'Hey, Cindy. Want to see a movie with me on Friday?'

"I think my mouth might have dropped open. I was like, 'No way. What about Snow?' His features grew angry, and I thought he might yell or lose his temper or something. But he crumbled like his heart was fractured. He said, 'I just need someone to hang out with.' Well, I couldn't say no to that, so I agreed. I hate to admit it, but after the movie, which was all blood and guts and totally gross, he took me home, and we kissed. Like a lot.

"Please don't be mad. I'm so sorry. But that's why I need you to wake up, so everything can make sense again. See, I think I might have feelings for the stupid, arrogant chayot. Ugh! Please, Snow. Wake up."

Cindy's news didn't upset me as much as it should've. Sure, I loved Gabe, but I knew he wasn't my true love, just like I knew Heathcliff or

Christopher wasn't. Hearing her talk about kissing Gabe did hurt, though, and I found myself longing to go back to Silindra's time. Even if it was just for a while.

OceanofPDF.com

DNA

WHEN TITAN RETURNED, he was all business and took me on a tour of Varden's immense innards, winding us through the most elaborate structure. Like the inside of an anthill or a beehive, everything was precise and pristine. When we finally reached the bottom level, I sensed a change in the air, like the crackle of electricity right before a lightning storm. There was a vibe, a droning energy. It made me nervous.

"What's this level for?" I asked, moving after him into a tunnel. A reddish glow pulsated to some unknown rhythm, and a coppery smell inflamed my nose.

Titan turned back and smiled, the light bouncing off his teeth with a menacing radiance. "Down here, we extract, study, and discover the delicacies of each creature."

I stopped. "You what?" What did he mean by delicacies?

Snow shivered.

"This is our lab. It's fascinating all we've uncovered about each species."

Tentatively I hurried after him. The farther along the corridor I went, the worse the smell. If Snow could've run, she would have. I sensed her immense desire to turn back. She didn't want to see whatever we were headed into.

When we arrived, I worked not to gag. The large room contained magical creatures in varying degrees of decomposition. Some lay on tables, their innards spread out on top of their bodies. Others hung from the ceiling, their eyes open and vacant.

"What have you done?" I asked, stepping toward a fairy pinned against a piece of wood, his guts pinned around him, his chest opened

and peeled back like a banana. "This is wrong," I added, my throat dry. I couldn't swallow. All the excitement and happiness I felt at creatures working together was sucked dry. This would not do. This was cruel and evil. Even worse than what Sharra wanted.

"How can you say that?" Titan asked, throwing his hands up in exasperation, scaring the trolls busily doing whatever it was they were doing. "Without this room, we wouldn't understand how each creature works." He paused and picked up what looked like a walnut still in its shell. "This is the brain of a fairy. Right here," he touched his dirty index finger to the back of the brain. "This is where the ability to do magic is stored. Without this tiny piece of the genetic puzzle, a fairy can't do magic." Then he tapped a portion on the left. "This tells the fairy's body it's going to be small and winged." Then he pointed at the part directly in front. "Right here, this tells the fairy it wants to reproduce every six years." He stared at the thing in awe.

I was mesmerized and revolted at the same time. It was fascinating that he knew such information, but, as my eyes searched the tables, witnessing all the carnage, I couldn't join in his awe.

Titan walked over to a large container filled with a liquid that looked like dirty water. Encased within was another brain, much larger than a fairy's. He tapped on the glass. "This is the brain of a troll."

I stepped toward it involuntarily. Was this why he brought me here? Did he intend to give me a portion of this brain?

"We've studied each and every magical creature, save one." He gave the nod, and two trolls grabbed my arms.

Where had they come from? I let out a roar of anger. How dare Titan think he could capture and study me? I was Silindra, Queen of the vampires. I wouldn't be taken captive!

"You'll regret this." Furious anger roared through me. I felt Snow's fury as well, fueling me on. I yanked my arms together, using the trolls' strength against them, and flipped over, so I faced them.

Flapping my wings, I used my magic to make my wings pointy, like swords, jamming them in the eyes as I stepped forward. In unison, they screamed out in pain, lessening their grip on my arms. I slapped my hands together, knocking the disoriented trolls into each other. They crumbled to the ground. I stomped down, crushing their oversized heads into a dark, pulpy puddle.

My wings returned to normal, and I growled. Changing them like that reduced my magic significantly. It would take days for that kind of power to refuel. I rarely used my wings as a form of defense for that very reason, but the trolls caught me off guard, and I'd reacted.

Whipping around, I faced Titan. "You thought I would be taken so easily?" I stepped toward him, and a clear understanding of what I had to do sank into my stomach. He gnashed his teeth and crouched low in a fighting stance. I stepped to the left while he stepped to the right, a kind of dance, after which Titan's life would be over. In order to retrieve a portion of the trolls' strength, I would have to defeat Titan. It wouldn't be easy, but it had to be done.

Do you know where the Troll's strength lies? Snow White asked.

In his brain somewhere. That's what he said, I responded.

From the nearest table, I picked up a large, razor-sharp knife. The trolls performing their various tasks ran from the room, leaving Titan and me alone with the dead and decaying corpses. It seemed fitting the troll leader would die here, among the creatures he so mindlessly, mercilessly ordered to be destroyed.

Tossing the knife from my left hand to my right, I waited for the right moment. "I suppose I'll cut your strength from your very large, incredibly convoluted head."

Snow pulled away from me. She didn't want to be part of the death.

Don't, I commanded, but she pulled us forward, into her time.

"HELLO, my darling marked one. I just stopped by to check on you to

see if the rumors were true. You're still alive, yet you are in some form of eternal sleep. This is a variable I did not foresee."

"Sharra!" Silindra and I shouted her name together.

"I wonder if Abernathy knew the Seal would do this. Knowing him, he probably planned the whole thing with my insipid sister years ago. It's sad, really. I didn't have a second choice. Sure, the hunters selected many marked, but I always only wanted you. There were many reasons. Your beauty, intellect, the way you view the world - but most of all, I wanted you for your genetics. You're special, Snow, more than just an ordinary human girl."

OceanofPDF.com

KILL HIM FIRST

I KNEW Silindra heard all that was being said, and I was glad. Perhaps if she were able to change the past, things could be different in the future, and I wouldn't be marked.

I could just be me and wouldn't even know about vampires or magic or anything supernatural.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Sharra continued. "Whatever the Seal did, it's ruined you. The chayot, the witches, Adam Henry. Ugh, they all believe you'll wake, but they don't understand the Seal's power like I do. You won't come back, and that's for the best. I've chosen another. She isn't as great as you could've been, but she is part chayot."

No! I couldn't let her hurt anyone else.

"Besides, she's nearly ready. She's fallen in love, and her craving for her lover's blood burns within her. It's so strong I can feel it. Soon she'll consume him, and then her body will be mine." She cackled.

I tried to force myself awake. I needed to stop her.

"Stay asleep, Snow. Because if you wake, I'll hunt down and destroy everyone you care about, starting with that dimwitted child leader you call Gabe. That's right, dear one. I'll kill him first." She paused, and I heard her fingernails click against the bedside table. "Maybe I should just solve the problem and slay you while you slumber. Press this knife to your neck, sever your head from your body - "

Something was pinching me, making it difficult for me to breathe, but it only lasted moments.

Sharra screamed. "My hand. I can't feel my hand. What have you done?"

Sweat beaded at my brow as I shook off what happened in Snow's

time. My sister, Sharra had tried to kill her, which ticked me off.

But I couldn't be concerned with that now.

I had to focus on ending the altercation with Titan.

"I'm going to kill you slowly, you sick, twisted creature."

"Silindra, you're making a grave mistake."

I didn't respond. His error was thinking he could withhold what I wanted or get away with what he was doing down here.

In one swift movement, I spread my wings, stepped forward, and rammed the palm of my hand into Titan's chest, hoping to throw him off balance.

He held his ground, grabbed my wings in his clammy hands, and tried to rip them from my back.

I roared in pain and drove the knife directly into the troll's immense chest, sinking it deep into his heart.

He snarled, releasing my wings, clutching his hand to his chest. Black blood poured from the wound, through his large fingers, and onto the sterile floor.

He fell to his knees. "You realize I let you win," he sneered.

The fight seemed too easy, but I didn't care. "Give me what I want."

His eyes blinked in pain. "At the top of my brain, between the two hemispheres, is a black nodule. It's the source of a troll's strength. You'll have to use those pincers to crack open my skull. When you remove the nodule, protect it. I fear my kind won't be around much longer, especially if your sister has any say." He took a final, giant breath and collapsed dead.

Pushing back the anxiety rolling off Snow, I lifted Titan's chin and sliced off his scalp before grabbing the pincers.

This is awful. Why did you have to kill him? Snow rambled as I cracked open the skull. I felt her sadness, smelled her tears.

"I didn't have a choice," I growled aloud, wiping the inky blood

and other liquids from Titan's head and locating the black nodule he spoke of. With my fingers, I tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't come. "He's a stubborn arse, even in death." I found a set of pincers on a nearby table and used those to get under it. Taking a careful grip, I rocked back and forth to pry it loose. The nodule came out with a pop, flying into the air. I caught it in my palm on the way down. Wiping it on my fur, I studied the thing Titan said held a troll's strength, holding it between my thumb and first finger. It was perfectly round and reminded me of a black pearl. "Now what?" I murmured, wondering how I would get the small black nodule into the stone. Letting the knife clang to the floor, I took hold of the amber stone.

Touch it to the stone, Snow White insisted.

"How will that help?" I asked aloud but did it anyway. As soon as it brushed against the stone, the gem flared to life and consumed it. "Easy enough," I said, standing. "Now, I need to find Ryden and Envy."

I hope they're okay, Snow White said, her voice trembling.

I do too.

Running from the room, I entered the corridor and beat my wings, allowing them to fly me back to the top, to the door Titan brought me through. No one paid me any heed, and I was grateful. When I reached the door, I pushed it open and flew out into the sunshine. Inhaling a deep breath, the stench of battle stung my nose first, but I also smelled fresh grass, pine, and salt.

I shook my sore wings, grateful they were already mostly healed and beat them against the air, lifting higher until I passed the edge of the mountain higher than the trees' tips. The battle still raged on below, both sides suffering massive fatalities. Greasy smoke from oil-dipped arrows clouded the sky. "Where could they be?" I wondered aloud.

Finally, I spotted Envy, pinned down by a large troll.

"Get off her!" I roared, tilting my wings, aiming for the troll. On my way, I picked up a spear jutting from the gut of an elf and ferociously

tossed it at the troll's head. It slammed into his skull and went straight through. He fell forward onto Envy, covering her so that only the tips of her wings could be seen. The troll let out a groan, grabbing his head, and then he lay still.

OceanofPDF.com

SCENT OF LILACS

I LANDED with a grunt and threw the murderous troll off the unicorn. She lay on her side, breathing rapidly, blowing out air with a snort.

"Envy." I wanted to retaliate and kill everyone but I kneeled next to her, tucking my wings away.

One of Envy's legs was bent at an odd angle, and a wing was torn, several feathers ripped away.

Please be all right, Snow White sobbed. Her sadness tore through me, and I growled the pain away.

All that mattered was that I collected the seven magics, I thought, but my insides ached. It was an awful truth about myself.

"Envy, can you hear me?" I asked, gently touching her side.

She winced and opened an eye. "Yes," she said, the word garbled.

I swallowed. Regardless of my personal desires, I didn't want this poor creature to suffer. "You can heal yourself, right? What can I do to make it easier?"

She snorted. "I must do what I must, what I can, what is necessary."

What did she mean? I shook my head. "Let's get you out of here. I'll take you back to Devoran's, where you can rest and heal. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I tried to smile and was surprised when tears gathered on my eyelashes. What was this human-vampire doing to me?

Envy lifted her head, her eyes suddenly full of fear. Understanding radiated through my veins, and I yanked the spear from the dead troll's head, stood, and turned in time to jam it into another charging troll. With a loud growl, I used my magic to form a force field around myself and the little unicorn.

Envy's head fell back to the earth.

"Come closer, Silindra," she said.

I got on both knees, leaning my face next to hers. "I'm here, Envy." A faint scent of lilacs surrounded her, pushing back the stench of battle.

Envy took a deep breath. A black swirling mist surrounded her, just as it had when she gave herself wings. I hoped this time she was healing herself.

When the mist vanished, her body was still broken - except her horn. It spiraled up to a point, fully-grown and beautiful, swirled with silver and indigo. It was the most exquisite thing I'd ever seen.

"Envy, your horn. It's stunning."

She smiled. "It's my gift, present - " She coughed, and blood dribbled from her mouth.

She's dying. Oh, Silindra, don't let her die. Please. Please. Please. She can't die. No, Snow wailed.

There is nothing I can do for her, I answered, angry her profound grief affected me.

Yes, there is. You have magic. Use it. Do something.

I'm sorry. There is nothing I can do.

"Silindra, to possess the healing power in the horn, you must remove it while I still live. I don't have long. Do it quickly, rapidly, speedily." She coughed, and her lungs rattled.

I searched the terrain for something sharp. There was the spear, but it was only sharp at the tip. I needed a sword or a knife. Plenty of elves and trolls had both, but I'd have to release the shield I held over Envy and me to get to them.

"Hurry, I don't have long."

I knew what I needed to do, but it would mean causing the little unicorn more pain. Close your eyes. Shut yourself away if you can. What I have to do -

You don't have to do anything! The stupid gem doesn't save you! It doesn't help you remain queen. In fact, it lets you die, and if you don't help Envy, you'll deserve it! Snow yelled so loudly it was like she banged metal against rocks inside my mind.

Her words angered me. "You have no idea what you're blabbering about. Keep quiet."

Envy peered at me, her eyes achingly complacent.

"I'm sorry," I uttered.

She nodded and closed her eyes.

I grabbed the horn in one hand, wrapped my fingers around the edge near her forehead, and tore the horn off. Like snapping a twig from a tree, it took little effort. Envy and Snow screamed at the same time. Then the unicorn nickered and was quiet.

You are an animal. You're cruel and evil, and you should know that Sharra wins. Not you. And just so you know, you die at the hands of your lover!

Her anger swirled and pulled, and I knew she was taking us forward to her time.

"HELLO, my friend. It's Valentine's Day. I hate to admit this, but I've thought of no one but you. I want so much to tell you how I feel when your eyes are open. I love the way you look at me, the way your features are always easy to read. You have this naiveté thing going on, but I know you possess passion. I've sensed it when you're near, and I long to taste it, bring it out in you.

"It kills me that you chose Gabe, that you've swapped blood with that sleazy hunter. I have no one to blame but myself. Gabe told you how he felt, and I never said anything. Maybe you don't think of me at all, and I'm just another boy to you. But Gabe, he's an idiot. He told me he was in love with you, but he's off doing who knows what with Cindy. I think he's using her. If that's the case, he's going to be in a lot of trouble. I've seen the way she looks at him, and she most definitely

cares for him - way more than he deserves.

"Don't be too mad at her. I think if Gabe pulled his head out of his uppity ass, he'd realize Cindy is perfect for him. And that's because you are perfect for me. Snow. Sweet, amazing Snow. What can I do to help?"

I knew his voice, but I was too shocked to believe it. He felt those things for me for how long? He never said anything. Never given me a hint.

Dorian loved me?

OceanofPDF.com

HARD CHOICES

"YOU THINK I wanted to hurt Envy? I didn't. It breaks me up inside to know I caused that little unicorn pain. But I had no choice. This is the cost of war. Death." I forced the angry fear Snow's words caused to the back of my mind. I touched the horn to the gem, and I watched as it disappeared inside and rested in the center, the pointy end facing upward.

I knew Envy was dead, and I had to bury her. She deserved a more honorable memorial than what I could give at that moment, but I had to do something. I dug a deep hole with my clawed hands, then using my magic, I lined it with lilacs. Carefully, I picked her up and placed her inside. "I'm sorry, Envy, but I'll make sure your sacrifice wasn't for nothing." With more magic, I covered her in more lilacs. Tears dripped from my eyes, and I knew it was Snow crying more than me, but I let them fall. The unicorn had been a bright spot in my life for a few moments, and I would never forget her.

All around me, trolls banged against the forcefield, desperate to get in. The sound was annoying, and I ignored it the best I could until I buried Envy. "Let this part of the land never be free of lilacs," I said, as sorrow rolled off me in droves of magic. I loved the little unicorn and mourned her loss. As soon as my magic touched the dirt, a small grove of flowers grew where she was buried. "Nothing save true love can ever disturb Envy's resting place, the greatest of all the unicorns."

I stood, eyeing the trolls who were still trying to get into the force field. Angry now, I shoved them away with magic before releasing the shield. Then I killed my way from one end of the field to the other, keeping my eyes open for Ryden. When I finally saw her, I nearly fell over in relief. She buzzed above the head of a troll and dropped a tiny pebble on his head. The troll, distracted, looked up, and an elf stabbed

the troll through the eye. "Ryden!" I yelled, bashing a troll in the head with a club I picked up as I rushed toward the pixilette.

She saw me and her eyes lit up. "Silindra, where have you been? I was so worried. Gabriel is looking for you. He has news."

"Gabriel is here?" I turned in a circle, searching for him. When I found him, he was fighting three trolls at once. My skin warmed like I was set on fire, and my cheeks flushed.

He seemed to sense me because he turned, and his gaze held mine until he smirked. In three moves, he slaughtered the trolls and ran to me.

Ryden landed on my shoulder just as Gabriel wrapped his arms around my waist. He lifted me slightly and ran away from the battle using his vampire speed. When we reached the other side of Ellavera Pass, he stopped. I took a deep breath, working to forget everything that had happened, and wrapped my arms around Gabriel's neck.

"Hello, lover."

He smiled, and it was glorious, immediately lightening my mood. Snow was still upset, but I ignored her.

"Hello, yourself." Leaning in, he kissed me. Soft at first, sweet. But I needed more and pressed my lips to his, pushing open his mouth so I could taste him with my tongue. He reciprocated, his tongue circling mine.

"You two are gross," Ryden said and flew off my shoulder.

I smiled against Gabriel's lips, but only for a moment before kissing along his jaw and down his neck to the pulsing vein. Pulling back my lips, I sank my pointy canines into his soft flesh. Gabriel moaned, pressing my body tightly against his. I drank deeply, my lust for him more potent than ever before. In was several long seconds before I was finally satiated and withdrew my fangs, kissing my way back to his mouth. His lips pressed against mine fiercely. My body ached for his touch, and I pushed him into the grass. I knew we couldn't consummate our love the way humans did, but there were other

things we could do, and I hungered for all of it.

He chuckled. "Right here, my love? Aren't you afraid someone will see us?" He removed the swords at his back and lay down.

"Not even a little bit. Are you?" I straddled him, breaking open his vest so I could touch his taut chest. I undid the string on his trousers and was about to remove them when Ryden flew toward me, her hands covering her eyes.

"I can't see what's going on, I swear, but," she cleared her throat. "The King and Queen of the Fairies and their court are coming this way."

I growled, standing, gnashing my teeth against my need. "I hate interruptions!" This was a stroke of luck, though. "Ryden, would you please request an audience with the king and queen on my behalf? Gabriel and I will wait here for their response."

"You got it." She flew off.

I realized Snow hadn't said anything while I kissed Gabriel, hadn't said anything since she yelled at me after what I did to Envy.

Are you not talking to me? I asked, stomping around the grassy meadow, flapping my wings sporadically and trying to reclaim my sanity as Gabriel stood and adjusted his clothing.

I don't see a point, she responded in a sulky voice.

I guess that's true. We're almost done collecting the pieces I need for the gem. I'm sure you heard fairies are nearby. I'll take a heart, and then I'll return home to collect what I need from a vampire and a hunter. Once that's done, perhaps you'll be free.

You don't know anything, she said.

Well, then tell me. What do I need to know? I waited for a response, but none came.

Fine, if she was going to ignore me, then I would ignore her. "Ryden said you had news. Why are you here?" I asked Gabriel.

He stood beside me as we waited for the fairies to arrive. "Not

news, just information. Sharra is worried you're working against her. She wanted me to check on you, your whereabouts."

I put my hand in his. "I won't be well until I've had my fill of you in every way."

"Yes, my queen," he said, but he kept his eyes forward in the direction Ryden had flown.

Something felt off about Gabriel. He seemed less willing, less excited. Or maybe it was just all I'd gone through. Not to mention the human girl dwelling in my head. I had no doubt that was making a difference as well. I wanted to ask him about it. Knowing one word from him would alleviate my fears, but the fairies came into view before I had a chance.

Ryden introduced us.

"We heard of your plight," the king said. We would be happy to provide a heart - on one condition."

"What's that?" I asked.

"When you win, we will seek an audience with you and discuss it then. Do we have a deal?"

"I accept those terms," I said.

The queen took the heart from one of the fairies in her court, who gave it up without hesitation. As before, I touched the heart to the gem, and it disappeared into the stone. I thanked them profusely, forcing myself not to shed any tears. Snow was getting stronger, and it was difficult not to feel her emotions. Afterward, the fairies held a small funeral to honor the one who so willingly sacrificed her life.

When the funeral ended, the fairies bowed and moved on. They truly were the most giving of the magical creatures. As I watched them go, Gabriel seemed to stiffen beside me, releasing my hand.

And Snow pulled me from my time and into hers.

"EVER BEEN LET down by those you care about most? I have. Recently.

I believed something I did to be honorable, a good thing. And it is. Was. Is. But Professor Pops and my brothers don't think so," Gabe said.

He sounded tired.

"It's so frustrating. I expected them to be supportive, but they said what I did was no better than what the vampire queen is doing. I don't know what to believe anymore. The other chayot, including Holden and Jaycee, agree I did the right thing by killing the hunter. They're almost too willing to please, though. Their opinion, while appreciated, doesn't mean as much to me as Professor Pops. Dammit!"

No! Christopher. He couldn't be dead. Please no!

"Snow, there's something else Professor Pops and my brothers aren't happy about. I'm dating Cindy. I've fallen for her. I love her. While you've been like this, Cindy was there for me. First as friends. Then we became more. I hope you can understand and that if, no, when you wake, you won't be angry."

Gabe forced a harsh chuckle. "This is nuts."

I wanted to be sad, to feel let down by him, but while I loved Gabe and always would, I knew he wasn't my true love.

"Whatever is going on with you, I thought you should know," Gabe said. "And that brings me to my next point. Heathcliff, and, well, all of the guys, think I should kiss you. I told them we've kissed - a lot. But they believe if you receive a kiss from your true love, you'll wake. Once, I thought maybe I was that guy. Not anymore. Still, I'm willing to try again. It hurts to see you this way because I'll do anything to have you wake up. So, I'm going to kiss you."

I felt his soft lips feather mine.

My body stirred, but I didn't wake since my mind, and Silindra's were still fused.

OceanofPDF.com

THE LITTLE IMP

AS THE KING and queen and their court continued toward their destination, Ryden, Gabriel, and I made good time getting home.

We arrived at the castle swiftly and parted ways. Ryden said she needed to get cleaned up. I wanted to do that, as well. It was too long since I bathed. Gabriel went to report to Sharra that I was found, and all was well.

When I entered my room, two male humans greeted me. Neither wore clothing on their top halves, and their trousers hung low on their hips.

My mouth watered.

"Well-kept humans," I muttered, taking my fill of one and then the other.

No doubt, they were a gift from my sister, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

I'd be doing more than that soon enough when I proved to her once and for all I was and would always remain ruler of the vampires - when I possessed the power of all magics inside the gem Abernathy had given me.

That would be soon. I still needed the essence of a vampire and the blood of a hunter.

I wondered if I would have to slay my sister to retrieve her essence - not that I could. I also pondered which hunter I would need to drain to give the blood to the gem.

When I finished with the humans, I sent them away and had my servants bathe me. I stepped from the water, and they wrapped me in thick towels, rubbing my furry skin dry.

Once they were done, I went to my favorite golden chair, allowing

my servants to brush and groom.

Zenny, the little imp Abernathy created for Sharra and me when we were young, peeked at me from one side of the gilded oval mirror hanging on the wall. His lemon-yellow hair swirled like frosting over his head.

"Hello, Zenny. Have you missed me?"

He gave a deep bow, and I hid a laugh behind a hand. His brightly colored plaid clothing always provoked my amusement. "Of course. Did you do anything fun while you were away?"

I thought about all that occurred since I went to see the dragon. "I wouldn't use the word fun, but it's been interesting."

He leaned over and beckoned me to come closer. "I need to tell you something - privately." He sniffed his nose haughtily at the human vampires working through my sapphire blue hair and snarled fur.

"Get out," I said, waving the girls away. I didn't care that only half my long hair was combed or that my fur still looked matted.

I only groomed myself for my sister anyway.

She was always making comments about my appearance.

I thought she was too vain for her own good. Always wearing fancy clothes and peculiar shoes on her feet. When they were gone, I leaned in.

"What's going on, Zenny?"

I've met Zenny. He looks the same, Snow said in my mind.

I didn't respond to her but waited for Zenny.

The little imp was sweet, but I wondered where his loyalties lay - with my sister or me.

I would know soon enough.

"I adore both you and Sharra," Zenny began, running a hand over his tiny copper-colored face. "But you are the queen, and I feel obligated to tell you I think Sharra is planning to dethrone you." His light brown eyes darted from side to side, as though he was worried

someone would hear.

"Go on," I prodded, a thick worry forming in my gut.

"I heard her talking to Gabriel about making sure you were permanently gone before they began the war."

"What? What war? Sharra doesn't dare to go against me." But I thought of all she did in the last millennium, and my worry changed to dread.

And Gabriel? Surely, he was on my side.

If she was planning something, he would only be pretending to do what she asked. Right?

"Sharra intends to take your place as ruler of the vampires. Her magic has become so strong, Silindra. It's troubling."

Anger burned away my dread. "Don't you dare worry about me. My sister doesn't have the resolve. And if she does, she'll soon learn she has no idea who she's messing with." I wrapped my fingers around the gem hanging at my throat. "Are you sure she was speaking to Gabriel? My Gabriel?"

"Yes," he nodded, his poofy hair bobbing in earnest.

Was he genuinely conspiring with Sharra? Had Gabriel betrayed me? I remembered our times together and couldn't believe it.

I would find him and ask.

If what Zenny said was true, Gabriel would die.

Exiting the bathroom, I moved swiftly through my bed-chamber, heading to the window where I searched for Ryden. She wasn't far, speaking with another pixilette. I waited until they were finished and then waved her over.

"Silindra, I was just coming to speak with you." Ryden landed on my shoulder and nestled up to my ear. "Something is going on. I'm not sure what. Two of Sharra's hunters have broken the bond Sharra held over them, and the chayot are rumored to be coming out of hiding to go against her."

The end is coming, Silindra. I'm so sorry. I sensed an acceptance come over Snow. I longed to ask her what she knew. I had a feeling it was important, but I needed to talk to Ryden, and I needed to find Gabriel.

"Ryden, I have something to tell you too." I went back to my room and sat on the edge of my bed. Ryden flew from my shoulder so I could see her.

"I have so much to tell you, but no time to do it," I began, feeling frantic.

"I'm listening," my little pixilette friend hovered in front of me.

I grabbed the gem dangling at my neck. "See this?"

She nodded.

"I've been collecting important components that have to do with the seven magics. Abernathy said I needed them to defeat Sharra. So far, I've retrieved five. A piece of Abernathy's soul, the eternal sight of an elf, the strength of a troll, the healing horn of a unicorn, and the giving heart of a fairy."

Ryden nodded again, her gauzy wings and daffodil hair moving as one. "To what end?" she asked.

OceanofPDF.com

I HAVE A SURPRISE

I SHOOK MY HEAD. "It doesn't matter right now. What does? I still need two more magics: the essence of a vampire and the blood of a hunter." I clenched my hands together, trying not to believe what Zenny said about Gabriel.

"I'm not sure how to collect those, but I'm working on it. The thing is - " I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

It was becoming clear I would need to kill my sister to win. If that was what it took, I would do it.

"If something happens to me - " I began.

"Nothing will, Silindra," Ryden interrupted, wringing her hands.

I appreciated Ryden's belief in me. "I know, but if it does, I need you to promise me something."

"Anything." She flew around with nervous worry. "I need some watermelon juice to calm my nerves. You shouldn't talk like this."

I held out my hand, hoping she would land. Thankfully, she did but started pacing around my palm and up and down my fingers. It tickled. I smiled. "Just promise me you'll take this back to Abernathy. Can you do that?"

She stopped and put her hands on her hips. "You're asking me to willingly enter the cave of that dragon?"

"If necessary, yes, that's what I'm asking."

She took in a long, shuddering breath, her whole body and her wings shaking in fear. "Fine, I'll do it. But nothing, and I mean nothing better happen to you. Understand?"

I laughed. "I understand, my friend."

Snow sighed.

Recognizing she intended to go to her time, I went to the chair by

the window and sat down.

"What is it, my queen?" Ryden asked, concern evident in her high voice.

"Nothing, I just need a minute." My mind pulled from my time to Snow's.

"YOU'VE GOT TO GET UP," Heathcliff said. "Spring is here. I don't understand how you're still sleeping after eighteen months. I brought you some of your bloodlust tea even though I know it's a waste. I'd offer you my blood if I thought that would assist you in waking. Anything to help. Even a kiss."

His lips touched mine. He definitely wasn't my true love.

"Nope, I should've known kissing you wouldn't do any good. I love you, Snow, but we both recognize our love is more along the lines of brother and sister than that of lovers. Oh well. I tried."

I sighed, feeling such gratitude for him.

GABRIEL KNOCKED on my door and walked in. He glanced at Ryden as he placed a light kiss on my lips. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

"I was just leaving." Ryden sniffed, rolling her eyes.

After she was gone, I stood, feeling oddly nervous about being in his presence. Had he betrayed me? "What is it? Everything alright with you? You seem out of sorts." I studied his face, searching for a telltale sign that what Snow White and Zenny said was true.

Gabriel grinned, and my insides turned to mush. "Of course. I just wanted some alone time with you. Ryden is always around lately. Plus, I have a surprise." He knelt in front of me, grabbing my hands and lifting his face. I bent down, planting a kiss on his glorious lips. Gabriel wrapped his fingers in my hair, deepening the kiss, entwining his tongue with mine. My body responded with a deep hum. No way could he be plotting against me. He said he loved me. After several long minutes, he pulled back, standing. "That wasn't your surprise.

Come on." His eyes twinkled, and I couldn't resist.

I followed him out of my rooms and though several hallways. Down a dozen set of stairs, past the kitchen, and into the cellar.

Snow White seemed skittish, her thoughts a jumble of nerves until I was ready to scream.

The happy giddiness I felt from Gabriel's kisses and how he looked at me wore off, and nervous anger settled in. When we reached another door, I stopped. "Is this necessary? What kind of surprise is down here?"

"Trust me," he smiled.

Did I trust him? He'd never given me a reason not to. Always the perfect gentleman. Kind, sweet, caring. He would never harm me. But the feeling, the one that told me to slaughter the deceiving bastard, kept getting stronger. The cellar held endless barrels of wine mixed with blood. The sweet aroma and the smell of old wood and dry earth did little to settle my nerves.

Maybe he has a new blood wine to show me? I hoped that was it.

But he didn't stop when the wine barrels ended, continuing down another damp corridor. Magical blue light lit the walls, giving Gabriel's skin an odd hue. When we reached another door leading to another set of stairs going deeper into the earth, I planted my feet. "Seriously, Gabriel. What do you have to show me that would require us to go way down here? You know I'm not a fan of being this deep underground."

"Not too much farther," he said.

There's still time to kill him, I thought, knowing I would if I had to. He was strong, but he was only a human-vampire while I was an original. I followed him, working to make my breathing and my steps sound confident, relaxed. But the odd feeling in my stomach grew.

We walked past the dried meats, kept to feed our non-vampire guests, and arrived at another set of downward spiraling steps.

"I'm not going any farther until you tell me what is going on," I finally said, flexing my wings, preparing for whatever he might try to do.

He rushed toward me, kissing me with such passion and fire, my knees went weak, and my hunger for him intensified to the point of boiling over. Moments later, he released my lips and gave me a seductive look.

"You know we don't have to go so far to hide our affections. My - " My head became foggy and my body lethargic.

"Close your eyes, my queen. It's for the best."

OceanofPDF.com

HAD HE POISONED ME? I did as he said because my lids were too heavy to do otherwise, but not before noticing the wisp of a malevolent gleam cross his features.

It won't be long now, Snow whispered through the dark.

I know, I responded, letting the anger evaporate into an overwhelming sadness. I didn't know how, but Gabriel intended to kill me, and he found a way. At that moment, I understood whose blood would seal the gem. It would be Gabriel's. I didn't know how it would happen, but without a doubt, it would. I didn't believe Gabriel could betray me. It seems my arrogance has gotten the best of me.

I'm sorry, Silindra, Snow said.

"OH, man. I can't believe Professor Pops and the guys talked me into this," Daniel said.

Daniel! He wasn't dead.

A chayot had stabbed him at my birthday party.

His blood had been everywhere.

But he was alive, and I was so happy.

Relief rushed through me, and I wondered if perhaps he was a supernatural as well.

"They're confident one of us is your true love," Daniel went on. "Remember those times we used to sleep out on the tramp? I've been thinking about that a lot lately. Even then, I thought you were beautiful. And I do love you, but I'm not in love with you. In fact, I'm in love with a girl by the name of Jaycee. Okay, she isn't just a girl. She's part chayot, and I only met her through Gabe, but man, she takes my breath away. She's strong, willful, kind of a total pain in the

ass, but she's also sweet and giving. She's the most awesome - "

"Stop whining like a baby and kiss her, Daniel. I'm next."

"Salvatore, get out. This is my time with Snow," Daniel returned.

"Fine, but hurry up."

"Okay, so here goes, Snow," Daniel said.

Daniel pressed his lips to mine, but there was no spark. Not even a little bit.

"Yeah, nothing. But I'm not surprised. You know, I'm just going to say this. You don't need some stupid dude to kiss you to wake up. You know that, right? I mean, sure, we all love you, but I hope you love yourself enough to know that you are way better than all of us combined. This isn't a fairytale, this is real life, and you're way cooler than any princess from some kid's movie. So, do yourself a favor and wake the hell up."

MY HEAD WAS FOGGY, as though I'd been in a long, drug-induced slumber.

Snow was still there, inside my head, but she seemed to be hiding. Or, perhaps she was still thinking about her wonderful family, in her time.

What's wrong, I asked her.

Then I remembered Gabriel and tried to sit.

But my hands were tied above my head.

"Gabriel," I hissed. The hunter had kissed me, poisoned me somehow, and I was lying on my stomach on a slab of white granite.

The ropes he bound my hands with were stronger than any material I ever encountered, and I guessed magic was infused within the chords. I tried to lift my wings, knowing the edges could cut through anything, but my wings were also bound tightly, as were my feet. I turned my head, trying to locate Gabriel.

"I'm here," he said, though his words sounded harsher than any I

heard from his mouth when he spoke to me.

"How dare you do this to me? Release me this instant, and I might let you live." The words tore from my throat in a violent frenzy.

"As Sharra's personal assassin, I wouldn't be very good at my job if I freed you, now would I?"

Sharra's assassin?

I was such a fool.

Snow White was breathing heavily, hyperventilating.

It's happening. I can't believe it's happening, she said.

Her frantic panic calmed me for some reason.

"You know the word assassin comes from the fact that to be one - an assassin - you have to be double the ass, right?"

Gabriel chuckled. "You always were quite clever." He knelt so I could see his face. "Here's how this is going to go. As per Sharra's instructions, I'm going to kill you." A flicker of pain crossed his brow. "You know, there's still a way out of this. Take on a human body. Become the vampire you were meant to be, and then this will all be over."

I tried to yank myself out of the ties. "Never! I like who I am," I growled. "If Sharra wants to torture and kill me, tell her to come down and do it herself. I want to see her face."

I wanted to know what power, what magic he possessed to kill an original, but it seemed pointless to ask. Soon enough, I would find out.

"The torture is all me, Silindra. Sharra wanted me to end your life quickly, but how would that do any good? Accept a human body. Then we can be together, as we are meant to be." He pointed to the corner of a room.

A human girl huddled there. Her arms wrapped around her knees. She was covered in dirt and I guessed Gabriel had kidnapped her from the human realm.

"I've marked her," Gabriel said. "She is prepared for you, my

queen." At that moment, he seemed the slightest bit forlorn. Possibly even hopeful that I would do what he wanted.

But his gloom only infuriated me further, and I snarled, tugging the ropes again.

"No! You marked an innocent girl, and now you want me to steal her body? You disgust me. I can't believe I ever thought I loved you." I rocked back and forth against the ropes.

I wouldn't give up. There had to be a way out.

"Don't bother trying to escape. You're secured with cords dipped in dragon's blood and sealed with the healing power of a unicorn and something else. What the something else is doesn't matter. It's a secret I've been commanded never to reveal. Just know you will never be freed, and you will be able to feel pain unless you agree to take on a human body."

He paused, picking up a cat o' nine tails, the edges covered in jagged metal. "Only I can free you."

He bent down so I could see his face. "Just accept what's meant to be. Evolve like the rest of your kind and take on this human form." He pointed at the girl in the corner again, and she started to cry.

I had no idea how to put myself into a human form, and I didn't care to know. "Never!"

The cat o' nine tails came down against the backs of my legs.

I felt the ends cut into my thighs and waited for them to heal, but they didn't, and I realized his weapon must've been doused in magic as well.

But what kind?

Originals couldn't die, and any injury healed almost immediately.

"Stop it, Gabriel. Please. I don't want my life to end, but if that's what you're here to do, then do it. Don't torture me. It's beneath you."

Gabriel made a face like he'd eaten something sour. "The torture is for all the times my body was beneath your disgustingly hairy one. All

those times, your rough, gigantic hands touched me, and in ways, no man should be touched by an animal like you."

His words cut worse than the whip, and I felt something inside me break, shatter into a million pieces.

"You never loved me?" I whispered.

Obviously, the answer was no, but I had to ask.

It didn't help that Snow was crying.

"How could I love you while you wear that disgusting body? You're a freak!" he shouted, whipping my legs again.

OceanofPDF.com

UNKNOWN CREATURES

HIS WORDS INFURIATED ME. I was the first - an original. A creature born of all seven magics and a portion of them dwelled within me. The way I looked, the way I acted, every part of me was precisely right. "You're the freak!" I shouted. "You live only because the blood of a vampire flows in your veins. Don't ever think you're better than me. You're nothing but a whipping boy, a slave to the real master. If not me, then my sister."

He hit my wings this time, and I felt whatever was on the ends bite deep. Then his face was next to mine. "You were born first. That is true. But that doesn't make you better. It makes you old. It makes you inadequate. You refuse to see what is right in front of you. Evolution is the answer to eternal life. Instead of choosing to progress, like the rest of the vampires, you stay like this." He yanked on my hair. "In an ugly, good for nothing body. You could've been so much more. Your sister wants that for you. I want that for you. Now it's too late."

I spit in his face. With the back of his hand, he wiped away my saliva before picking up a dagger. It gleamed in the low blue light, and I knew it wasn't an ordinary dagger. Magic surged through it, but it wasn't like any I'd ever seen, and I sensed it would kill me. I thought about our parents. Those unknown creatures we saw deep in the ocean. Had they provided the means to kill me? It seemed the only logical answer.

"This is going to hurt," he said, sounding anything but mournful, and began hacking off my wings.

The cry that burst from my throat was a sound, unlike any I've ever heard. There was pain, of course, but it was more than that. It was the knowledge that my life would end, the last of my kind, and there was nothing I could do about it.

"Take me away from here," I shouted.

Snow complied at once, her mind pervading mine.

"HEY, girl. It's me, Sebastian. Gosh, this is embarrassing. I've had a crush on you for the longest time. When Gabe said he was in love with you and that you two were going out, for the first time ever, I wanted to fight one of my brothers - for real. Like literally kick his too-skinny ass. But then I saw how you looked at him, and I realized my feelings didn't matter. You cared about Gabe, and I couldn't stand in the way of you two.

"Not anymore. That jerk-face-no-good-wannabe-chayot-leader can shove it where the sun don't shine. Besides, now that he's dating Cindy, he can't say a word about how I feel toward you."

He paused, and Silindra and I waited.

"I love you, Snow. You hear me? And I know a few of the guys have tried to kiss you, so I figure, what the hell? I'm going to try it too." His warm mouth enfolded mine.

I sighed but knew he wasn't the one either.

"Snow, did you feel that? All the love I poured into my kiss? I guess not. I'm such an idiot."

Silindra clung desperately to my mind and my time, but we were being pulled back to hers.

"SILINDRA, are you awake? I'm still here, inside. Silindra! It's me, Snow White. Can you hear me?

I could hear her, but, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what she was talking about. Who was she? "I don't get it," I said. My mouth felt stuffed with cloth, and I knew I was back in the cellar with Gabriel.

"There's nothing to get, Silindra. You still refuse to do the right thing and take on a better body, so I have no choice but to kill you

now. Is there anything you wish to say before I end your life?" His face was next to mine, but my eyes were blurry. It looked like there were four of him, then two, then six.

Tell him he needs to promise you something. Tell him he needs to place one of your tears in the gem, and then take it to Ryden. You hear me, Silindra? Tell him! The strange voice was shouting inside my head, but I heard myself whisper the request.

Gabriel's face softened. "Of course, Silindra. I may be a lot of things, but I will honor this request if for no other reason than to prove that I could've loved you had you chosen to leave your revolting body behind and take on a human one." He yanked the gem from my neck and pressed it against my cheek. "Alright, you hairy leech. Cry."

I tried, I did, but the tears wouldn't come. Until suddenly, I heard the girl in my head sobbing.

I'm so sorry, Silindra. I'm so sorry this had to happen to you. I'm sorry Gabriel didn't truly love you. I'm sorry you were betrayed. But know this. Gabriel gets what he deserves. It's his blood that seals the magics in the gem. It's okay to cry. I promise it'll be okay.

Her tears reached my eyes, and I felt them pool. One dropped and landed on the gem.

"There. There, Silindra. I'll put you out of your misery." He grabbed hold of my body and flipped me onto my back.

I flinched as an agony like nothing I ever experienced tore through me. He raised a long blade above my chest and pressed slightly.

A smile formed on his wicked lips. "The last of the ugly originals - gone forever."

From inside, I felt the girl wrap her arms around me, as though she were trying to give me a hug.

I'll make everything right. Somehow, I will. I promise, she cried.

Her words brought a smile to my lips. I believed her. She would make everything all right. "Thank you," I said aloud.

Gabriel flinched, but only for a second before he jammed the glowing dagger into my body.

OceanofPDF.com

BACK TO THE FUTURE

"I, Snow White, do solemnly swear to right the wrongs." My eyes opened, and I stared into the surprised eyes of Dorian. The edges were crinkled with gladness, and he had a huge grin on his face.

"I, Dorian, swear to help you right those wrongs in any way I can," he said, his voice overflowing with emotion as tears filled his eyes.

His face hovered above mine, and I wondered if he'd kissed me. At the thought, I blushed and tried to sit up, conking my forehead into his.

"Sorry," I said, my throat scratchy. It was seconds ago that I witnessed everything happening to Silindra, feeling her pain and suffering through her anguish.

So many emotions dashed through my body.

But I was beyond glad to be back in my time and looking into the face of one of my favorite people in the whole world.

I was also sick inside at Silindra's death, the lies and deceptions Sharra had spewed, and I was determined, resolved, to accept my destiny. Silindra's death came with the knowledge that I was responsible for the fate of not just vampires, but all magical creatures.

Kenmei was exactly right when he said the Seal of Gabriel was created for me.

Did he know I actually assisted in its creation? I felt bad now for laughing in his face when he told me.

"Hey, you okay?" Dorian asked, rubbing his forehead, his face etched with concern.

"Better than okay. I'm back." I smiled, patting his cheek with my hand. His warmth reminded me it was a long time since I had any blood. My fangs pressed against the inside of my mouth.

"I'm so glad you're awake. I can't wait to tell everyone."

Dorian turned to leave, but I grabbed his arm with one hand and felt for the gem with the other. It wasn't around my neck. "Wait," I said, and he turned back.

"Yeah? Did you need me to stick around?"

"Did you kiss me just now? Right before I woke?"

He smiled, showing off all his straight teeth and the dimple in one cheek. "Wouldn't you like to know?" He brushed a thumb along my jaw, and I swallowed. My throat was parched. I needed blood.

As though reading my mind, Dorian tilted his neck toward me. "Go ahead."

"It's been a long time since I had any blood, are you sure you want me to drink from you now?" It was hard to talk because my fangs were in the way.

"It looks to me like you could use some. Take mine." His neck touched my lips.

"Holy crow, don't make me fish-slap you," I said, shoving a hand against his chest. I really, really wanted his blood. He smelled so good, like manly body wash and sandalwood, but I didn't want to hurt him.

He laughed. "Fish-slap. That's a good one. I like it better than the original."

I smirked. My fingers curled into a fist in his gray polo shirt. "Why are you always offering me your blood? What's the deal?"

A dark smile curved his lips. His mouth was so close, his Scope and Mountain Dew breath made my eyelashes flutter. "I want your mouth against my neck. I want to feel my skin part when your fangs press into me." His heart raced like a pack of wild horses.

I shook my head. "You're twisted, Dorian." But I wound his shirt further around my fist. I needed blood. My throat burned, and I licked my lips. "I'll be careful if you're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

"Then come closer," I said, my throat screaming.

He complied, pressing his neck against my mouth again.

I licked his vein, and he shuddered. Parting my lips, I extended my fangs and bit down.

His head rested on a pillow next to mine, and his clean, slightly wet hair tickled my cheek. When I began sucking, his breath caught. "Snow, it feels so damn good. Better than I imagined." He wrapped his arms around me in a tight hug.

In response, I sucked harder.

His blood tasted sweet and sexy, like sugared oranges and milk chocolate.

My mind automatically started counting while I drank.

I hit twenty before I finally stopped, and that was difficult.

The vampire part of me wanted to drain him dry.

But this was Dorian, and I refused to give into my vampire desires entirely.

Withdrawing, I pushed him away. "Are you alive?"

His eyes were glazed over, and his skin looked pale. "I'm awesome," he whispered but turned so that he was lying on his back beside me. "I'm just going to rest my eyes a minute before I tell everyone the good news."

"Sure. Go ahead." I had to smile. He was adorable.

"Hey, Snow," he muttered, his voice soft and sensual.

"Yeah?"

"I missed you."

With his words, comprehension flooded my heart. I had been gone for a long time. While my mind was with Silindra, my body stayed here.

My dad, Professor Pops, Cindy, the guys - they all suffered because

of what the Seal of Gabriel had done.

But I was back!

It had been hard on me, experiencing Silindra's life, watching events unfold that ended with her death.

But how much harder had it been on my family, the people who loved me? My body lying here, unmoving for so long.

"I missed you too," I responded.

Dorian let out a snuffling-snort as he rolled onto his stomach. One hand rested near his chin.

He was sound asleep.

"So, so much," I added, brushing wayward hair from his clean-shaven jaw.

Satisfied he was okay, I took in my surroundings.

The bed rested against a long wall, situated in the center between two bay windows. Large, comfortable-looking pillows in reds, blacks, grays, and whites were propped against each other along the window seat.

A red chandelier hung from the center of the vaulted ceiling.

The walls were a deep shade of red and pinstriped black.

The curtains were billowy and white, as was the carpet and my bedding. Distressed black furniture and a white couch with thick black stripes complimented the room.

It was lovely.

The nightgown I wore was white. Three pearl-shaped buttons held the gown closed at my neck.

Next to one of the buttons was a drop of Dorian's blood, perfectly round and red like the walls.

I tried not to think about who took care of my body while my mind was away.

Taking in a deep breath, I glanced at Dorian.

My blood haze was already wearing off, and I felt a little guilty for drinking from him. Since the beginning, he seemed more than willing to offer himself, but something or someone always stepped in the way.

Not this time.

And I had to admit his blood hummed through my veins in a way no one else's had - including Gabe's and Christopher's.

"What's your deal, Dorian?" I whispered, moving my hands through his hair.

"Please tell me you didn't kill him."

I inhaled in surprise and turned toward the sound of Salvatore's voice.

He was there as well as seven others. They all gawked at me from the doorway.

"He's sleeping," I said, a pang of happiness shooting through my veins.

"Thank goodness," Professor Pops said, walking toward the bed.

"Yeah, otherwise we would've been doing a whole other kind of celebrating," Sebastian snorted.

That's when I noticed the cake in Pops' hands. Candles glowed in the white frosting.

"Dorian, wake your lazy ass up. Snow's back," Bart said, smiling. The other guys jumped, high-fived, and hooted around the room.

Dorian groaned. "I know, and it's perfect because today's her birthday."

"No duh, doofus. We're going to sing," Daniel said.

"Care to join us?" Professor Pops asked. His gaze fell to the blood on my nightgown. I tried to cover it up, and he sighed.

Dorian started singing, his voice muffled by the pillow his head rested on. The guys joined in.

I couldn't help but laugh. Then it hit me. I had been asleep for two years. I had no doubt a lot changed, but one thing hadn't - my love for

these eight amazing men.

When they finished singing, I blew out eighteen candles.

Smoke twirled upward, writhing and winding like slow-moving dancers.

Dorian rubbed at his face and moved to sit on the bed next to me.

Professor Pops placed the cake on my lap, and several of the guys sat on the bed.

As I studied these amazing men, my eyes caught hold of a flash at the door. I glanced up and into the brilliant hazel eyes of my hunter.

"Christopher!"

OceanofPDF.com

QUEEN OF THE VAMPIRES

OceanofPDF.com

RED HOT

TIME WAS A flIGHTY fiEND, I thought as I watched Cindy rummage through my closet. Not the one at my little cottage of a house, but the one in Professor Pops' mansion.

"What about this one?" Cindy asked, holding out the dress my dad and stepmother had brought home for me.

I swallowed down the raw hurt over my father leaving. Shook my head. "What else?" I eked out.

Cindy was getting frustrated. She threw her hands up. "I need a break. Your turn." She gave me a haphazard look and I smiled, getting off the chaise.

"Fine," I said, watching Cindy fall onto the same chair I'd been sitting in.

As I pushed through all of the amazing dresses Pops had purchased for me, I considered again the strangeness of time. How seconds flickered in slow motion until an instant later, weeks simply vanished, disappearing without a backward glance.

A month had passed since I woke from my time with Silindra.

Though I was still desperate to end her - Sharra - the vampire queen, I wasn't meant to be her next victim, which took the bullseye off my back.

But she also said if I woke, she would kill all those I loved.

That worried me, but only slightly.

I hurt her somehow when she tried to kill me in my sleep, and she seemed to have gone into hibernation to heal or lick her wounds or whatever.

Still, I told Professor Pops and Kenmei all she said and that she already selected another victim.

The news sent Kenmei, Professor Pops, several brothers, and even Christopher on a wild goose chase to try to find the new marked, but so far, they hadn't had any luck.

Since my dad had left and was nowhere to be found, Adam Henry, the man I called Professor Pops, had become my guardian.

While everyone searched, Professor Pops had kindly demanded I complete the last seven months of my final year of high school.

It stung that my dad didn't want me anymore, but I was grateful to Pops for taking me in, and I reluctantly agreed to his wish.

He had talked to the principal, and after taking several tests, I was permitted to finish my senior year as though I hadn't been in an enchanted sleep for the past two years.

It was weird. So weird, but I promised him, and I was trying to enjoy life at Salem Academy and all that entailed.

When I was with Silindra, Professor Pops decided to make the Seven Magics Academy and official school and had invited a select few supernaturals to participate.

Several were witches, and one was a gargoyle while another was half-dragon. Classes were currently being held in Pops' basement. I overheard him talk to Kenmei about the need to expand, but nothing had come of that yet.

Dorian and Gabe were already graduated from Salem Academy, as was Cindy. I missed her being in school with me. It was a little lonely sitting by myself at lunch, and I didn't speak unless spoken to.

People gave me looks and whispered about me.

Instead of jokes about me falling or being klutzy, I became Mono Girl, which was worse.

Thankfully, my friends were kind of still around.

Cindy taught magic at SMA (Seven Magics Academy) now.

She was good at it too.

The few times I watched her, I was impressed by her ability to get

her point across. And she was passionate about what she taught.

She was inspiring. Of course, she still had a seriously crazy love of fashion, while I still mostly wore jeans and tee shirts.

Nothing fancy.

I kept my long hair pulled back in a ponytail, or sometimes I just brushed it and went, leaving it wild.

Classes at the human high school were simple enough.

I could've taken my GED and gotten the whole high school debacle over with, but Professor Pops wanted me to experience all that high school was supposed to be, including activities.

Oddly, Christopher also sided with Professor Pops, telling me to finish out the last few months.

I hadn't seen much of him lately, but I was glad he was okay.

Fall break was coming up. That meant a week of not worrying about school, but I agreed to go to the stupid autumn formal.

Dorian agreed to go with me.

At least that was something to look forward to though I wasn't thrilled about having to wear a fancy dress again.

"How about this?" I held out a black full-length dress. It was simple. Elegant.

Cindy huffed. "You aren't going to a funeral. Hang on." She went back to her phone. Probably texting Gabe.

I put the dress against my body and went over to the full-length mirror. I thought it looked great but that was why Cindy was here. She liked fashion. I liked to think about it as little as possible.

She locked her phone and stood. "Hang that dress up and put on this red one." She walked past me and over to where all of the dresses were hanging, removing a beautiful but short dress.

"You're a spoil sport," I said but didn't mean it. Hanging up the black one, I took the one Cindy recommended and slid it up over my hips. "Don't you think it's too short?" I made a face, tugging on the

hem.

"Nope. Try these on," she said, handing me a pair of black heels.

I slid them on and stood. They fit well and made my already long legs look even longer, but they felt like stilts. "I'm not doing it. No way. These things will be the death of me."

Cindy laughed, moving to stand behind me so she could adjust the dress. "You look amazing," she said, fiddling with the spaghetti straps.

I grimaced. I looked like something. Not like me.

While I watched, Cindy used magic to style my hair and do my makeup. I turned back and forth in the mirror, trying to find the awkward girl I was before the Seal took hold of me.

She was gone.

In her place was a woman.

One that had stumbled right out of one of Cindy's fashion magazines.

Full red lips.

Dark eyes with a wisp of silver.

Long dark hair that hung in loose waves around my shoulders and nearly down to my waist.

"Can you use your magic to make this a little longer," I asked, tugging at the hem again.

"Hell no. It's what all the kids are wearing these days. Besides, you look hot. Gorgeous. Every guy is going to want your number, and every girl is going to want to kill you."

"That isn't what I'm going for." I pulled at the sweetheart neckline, wishing it was higher. Thankfully I didn't have much cleavage.

That would've been obscene.

Cindy batted my hand away. "That's exactly what you want. Hell, if I was going to be at the dance, even I would be jealous." She crossed her arms, admiring her work.

"That's a great idea, Cin. Why don't you come? Please?" I put my hands together, begging.

"I can't. I have a date with Gabe." She made a face, and I ignored the way my heart jumped at his name.

I didn't have feelings for him anymore - at least not romantic feelings.

But it was hard seeing Cindy and Gabe together.

In a way, I felt like a failure that my relationship with Gabe hadn't worked, but theirs was.

"Besides, Dorian will be there with you," she said.

"That's true." I was so thankful he was going.

We would dance and have fun, and I wouldn't have to worry about being alone.

"Fine, but I really think I should change."

She shooed me toward the closet exit, and I found I could walk in the heels without an issue.

Vampire genes, I thought.

In my bedroom, I grabbed my clutch, the one Cindy said I had to take because it would hold my school id card, lip gloss, and a fifty Professor Pops gave me for emergencies.

I felt weird carrying the purse. Why not a backpack? That was what I asked Cindy.

She rolled her eyes.

"If I wore my Converse, I could just tuck it all in my shoes. That's much easier."

"Merde," she swore in French following after me, picking up her purse and keys as she walked past my bed.

I laughed. "Fine, but if I lose the dumb thing, you can't be mad." I held up her clutch so she would understand what I meant.

"Yes, I can. Don't lose it. I love that bag." Her blue eyes sparkled

with mischief. "In fact - " She paused and tapped her finger against her chin, thinking about something.

I guessed a spell.

"Got it." She said some words I didn't understand and then smiled smugly.

"What did you do? Will I turn into a toad if I lose it?" I shook my head in exasperation.

"No, but that's a good idea." She winked, putting a hand on the doorknob.

Someone knocked.

We both started.

Cindy recovered first and moved me out of the way.

"If it's Dorian, I'm going to tell him to wait at the bottom of the stairs so you can make a grand entrance and he can admire your beauty."

"Or catch me when I fall," I said, only a little exasperated.

She made a face and opened the door.

It was Dorian, and she sent him downstairs, then closed the door and turned to face me.

"It's showtime. You ready?" She gave me another quick once over. "Yes, you are," she said, answering for me and opening the door.

"I can do this," I said.

She nodded as I passed her.

"Have fun," she said in her sing-song voice.

I snorted and kept walking, taking hold of the banister out of habit. It really wasn't hard to walk in the heels, but it felt like it should be.

"You look like a queen. Own it," Cindy hissed.

I released the banister and moved down the stairs with as much confidence as possible.

Dorian stood at the bottom, and I smiled with relief.

He was my friend, and he loved me.

He said so while I was in and out of consciousness.

I didn't think he meant in a romantic sense.

It was more like the kind of love like I felt for Gabe.

His eyes got big as he took me in.

He looked amazing too, wearing a deep gray suit with a red tie that was slightly askew. His dirty blond hair had been cut but was still on the longer side, and his gray eyes shone intently.

When I reached the last three steps, he held out his hand.

"Damn, Snow. You're beautiful." He held a container in his other hand and I guessed it held a bracelet corsage.

"Thank you," I said, feeling suddenly shy.

"I'm only telling the truth." He opened the container and slid the corsage, which was red flowers that matched the red of my dress, on my wrist. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be." I took his elbow when he held it out.

Before we could get out the door, Professor Pops and the brothers were there, all except Gabe.

They took pics and gushed about how great I looked.

We went down the front steps and to a waiting Mercedes. Dorian held the passenger door open for me before getting in. "This is going to be fun," he said, peeling off down the driveway.

OceanofPDF.com

LOVE AND LIGHT

AS WE ENTERED THE DANCE, it was like everything moved in slow motion. I took the whole scene in at once. The crowd of students dancing and talking - most of them I didn't know. The music blasting so loud it seemed to be coming from inside my mind. The scent of several hundred blood-filled bodies pummeled into me, and I held my breath. It wasn't that I craved the blood, only that it was powerful, and a bit overwhelming. Although, when I smelled Dorian's blood, I decided I wouldn't mind a taste. I glanced at him, but he was focused on the decorations.

The gymnasium was enchanting. Thousands of paper snowflakes dangled from the ceiling. A disco ball spun from the center, filling the darkened room with white dots of light. Sparkling white bunting that was supposed to look like snow covered the walls and perimeter of the dance floor. The tables were covered in white tablecloths. In the center of each sat an oversized snow globe and chocolates wrapped in white foil.

As we skirted the edge of the gym, Dorian and I looked at each other and laughed. He took my hand. "It's like they created this dance, especially for you without even knowing it." He kissed the back of my had, his amused eyes focused intently on me. I laughed.

"I swear I didn't compel anyone," I said, swallowing down my nerves.

"If you say so," he said, pulling me closer to him. "Want to dance?" His breath smelled like his minty toothpaste, but his blood caused my pupils to dilate and my fangs to press against the inside of my mouth.

"Sure," I said, and let him pull me onto the dance floor. I wasn't a dancer, but it didn't matter. A distraction was in order.

Besides, Professor Pops would ask me if I danced, and I didn't want

to let him down.

Dorian walked us through the crowd until we were directly under the disco ball, avoiding the mosh pit near the DJ booth. Just the thought of trying to dance there gave me hives. I was glad Dorian didn't lead us over that direction.

He glanced there, though, and my eyes followed. "Please tell me you don't want to dance in the pit."

"No," he said, his eyes squinting. "It's just - " He shook his head.

I followed his gaze, giving the group a closer look.

Sharra was there. She twisted and writhed among the dancers.

They seemed to swarm around her, like bees in a hive.

She would bite one of them on the neck, suck briefly, lick the wound closed and move on.

"What the ever-loving hell?"

Sharra heard me and looked up, her fangs buried in Tanner's neck.

Her eyes sparkled with wicked mischief as she withdrew her fangs and licked her lips.

"Stay here," Dorian said.

"No." I grabbed hold of his arm. There was no way I would let him go over there and do - what? It wasn't like he could stop her, and she could and probably would kill him.

I felt the Seal of Gabriel stir inside me, not awake yet, but ready. I pulled at Dorian, making him face me.

"Don't go anywhere near her. She isn't killing them, just drinking from them. It looks like she's here to bait me into coming after her. If I do, then those humans could get hurt. We don't want that. Ignore her."

"You're kidding?" He was shocked. "She's using them like an all-you-can-eat buffet, and you're saying we should let her get away with it?"

I wrapped my hands around his waist. "What's the alternative? Try

to kill her and end up murdering innocent humans instead?"

I shuddered at the thought. "Let her drink from them. At least they'll live," I said firmly.

His hands found my hips, and I caught his gaze, knowing if I had to, I would compel him. Tension coiled through his body, humming like a new car.

He was trained to fight against evil, and Sharra was evil, but for his sake and those at the dance, we couldn't start anything.

That was precisely what Sharra wanted.

"You're serious?" he asked again.

"Completely." I tried to smile, but it didn't work.

Dorian gritted his teeth so hard I could hear them grinding. "I can't do that," he said.

I was stronger than him, and I held him firm. "I won't let you leave. If I have to make you stay, I will." I would do anything to keep him safe.

There was no way I would let Sharra harm him.

At that moment, I realized how much I cared about Dorian.

Just the thought of him getting injured brought out the anger in me, and I felt the Seal flare to life.

Dorian flinched, pulling his hands away like I burned him.

"Sorry," I said, dropping my hands to my sides. "Why don't we go? If we leave, I have a feeling she'll leave too. She's only here to make me irrational."

"We can't leave these students alone with her."

"Fine. Then you stay here, and I'll go over there." I crossed my arms and waited for his answer.

"That's not how I'm made, Snow. Where you go, I go. I won't stand by and watch you walk into danger." Dorian's gorgeous eyes held me fast, and I knew he meant it.

My hands turned into fists of frustration. "Stop being an ass. Don't you get it? I can't have you going over there because then I'll be too worried about you getting hurt."

Dorian sucked in a breath and then pulled me into a bear hug. As he did, he wrapped his suit coat around me. "Okay. Okay. I'm sorry."

I was confused and furious but drawn to his body like I was the bee and he was the honey.

His lips grazed my ear and I shivered. "You really need to calm down," he whispered. "You're glowing for crap's sake."

So that was why he wrapped me in his suit coat. "Damn." I took a deep breath and glanced down. He was right. My body was coated in a red shimmer. The power of the Seal.

I took another deep breath.

Relax, I told myself.

Otherwise my time as a typical high schooler would be over.

I closed my eyes, resting my head against Dorian's chest, allowing him to hold me a few moments.

He felt good. Safe. He smelled like expensive cologne, and under that, I could smell his blood.

My mouth watered, but I shook the desire away and took a deep breath, trying to quiet my mind.

It was challenging with Sharra so close to Dorian.

I glanced over my shoulder in the direction of the mosh pit.

"She's gone," I said.

At Sharra's absence, the tension in the room vanished, and the gym was much livelier and lighter.

"Yeah, I saw her disappear as soon as you started to glow." His hold on me softened, and he slid back, placing his hands on my waist. "I think she's testing you, searching for a weakness."

"You're probably right." I swallowed, hating that I was in this predicament.

"Damn right, I am," he said softly, his voice teasing. He kissed my cheek, allowing his lips to linger.

Electricity danced along my skin at the feel of his breath on my face. His neck was so close to my mouth.

I grabbed hold of his jacket and twisted his coat into fists, pulling him closer, his blood calling.

"You want me?" he said, finding my gaze and holding it.

I smiled, exposing my extended fangs; his eyes widened as his heart began to race.

"Right here?" he asked, pulling me against him.

I grazed him with my teeth, enjoying the feel of his skin beneath them. The vein pulsed faster and faster. I sank my teeth into him, and he groaned quietly. When I began to suck, I felt his body tense but in a different way than when Sharra was here.

"That feels so good," he whispered, his fingers working the back of my neck, sending tingles along my veins.

Dorian tasted so good, like love and light and goodness.

I reached the count of ten and had to use all of my willpower to pull away, casually licking the wound closed.

"Get a room," someone yelled.

I smiled shyly as Dorian studied me. "I want to kiss you," he said.

I wanted that too, but I knew it was mostly blood lust and physical hunger. I still had feelings for Christopher.

Complicated, lustful feelings I was still trying to work out.

Since waking, I drank from the hunter more than once, and we kissed several times. His kiss didn't wake me from the enchanted sleep the Seal placed on me, but I thought it was stupid to worry about such things.

I woke from the two-year sleep on my own, so the true love's kiss thing was probably just part of the vampire queen lore.

Christopher was special to me, and I wouldn't kiss someone else while I still considered myself bound to him.

I licked my lips and shook my head. "I can't."

"Christopher," he said, straightening and looking away.

"Sorry, Dorian." How could I explain that I thought I loved Christopher, but I also had tender and sweet feelings for Dorian, too, not to mention whatever I still felt for Gabe?

I didn't want to make the wrong move, which meant I was doing everything wrong. I sighed.

"Don't' worry about it." He put a respectful distance between our bodies, and I immediately missed his nearness.

But it was for the best.

The rest of the night, we did our best to have fun.

Dorian was easy to talk to.

He told me about college and his classes and the parties he went to. It seemed like he was having a great time there, and I suddenly wondered if I was too childish for him.

His life sounded so grown up, and I was still just a high school girl.

At the end of the night, he walked me to my room.

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you so much for taking me to the dance. I had such a great time." My belly ached with wanting him, more of his blood, and to know what his lips tasted like, but I didn't give in to the temptation.

I had enough problems without making a mistake like that. "Goodnight."

"Night, Snow."

I watched him walk to his room and disappear behind the door.

With my supernatural hearing, I heard him sigh, then proceed to get undressed before getting into the shower.

Inside my closet, I took off my dress and changed into PJs before washing my face.

When I climbed into bed, Gatsby was there, purring quietly on the end like old times. He returned a few days ago, and we made up.

I scratched his head between his ears. "Night, Gatsby."

He opened his eyes, blinked once before curling into a tighter ball, and going back to sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

COME AWAY WITH ME

THE NEXT DAY Christopher came by the house, but instead of heading straight for me, he winked before going to Professor Pops' study.

I followed, but I wasn't able to hear what was said and figured his office was probably spelled against eavesdropping.

At least until Professor Pops raised his voice. "Fine, but if anything happens to her, I will hunt you down and finish what the vampire queen started."

I felt my eyes grow wide, and contentment filled my heart.

I was so loved.

It was a feeling I cherished beyond belief.

"If anything happens to her, I'll expect nothing less," Christopher answered.

Those two and their testosterone-filled bullheadedness.

Sheesh!

Christopher yanked open the door to the study, nearly running me over. When he saw me, his face lit up.

"Hey," he whispered, taking my hand in his. "I want to take you away for the weekend - just the two of us. What do you think?"

Him and I alone? The idea sounded exciting, but it also made me nervous.

We hadn't gone all the way, but once we did, and he possessed me in every way, would he still want me?

I needed to speak with Cindy.

I wasn't sure I was ready for that next step, with him or anyone.

"Snow?" Christopher lifted my chin with a finger, his beautiful eyes searching my face. "If you don't want to go, we don't have to. I just

thought - " He trailed off and drew me to his chest, his muscled arms encircling me.

"I love you, Snow. More than I believed possible, more than I've ever loved anyone. If you need time, you can have it." His words came out anguished, and I wondered what happened in his life that made him hurt so much.

I met his gaze. "I love you, too."

Even as I said the words, I knew my love for him wasn't the kind poems were written about, but that was okay.

I was young.

There was no doubt I loved his blood and kissing him.

Maybe the rest would grow with time.

"And I do want to go away with you." I traced the outline of his chest muscles through his black button-up shirt. "But not yet. I promised Cindy we could hang out today. I need a little time to talk to her, and then we can go."

I watched different emotions flicker across his features and heard a low rumble in the back of his throat. "Whenever you're ready." He smiled, but it was more than that. It was a seductive promise.

I worked to contain my lust. "Can't wait."

He pressed his lips to mine.

Gently at first, caressing.

I opened my mouth, and he deepened the kiss.

In an instant, our kiss changed from sweet to sexy.

His hunger for me flickered low in my belly, and I almost changed my mind.

Cindy would get over it.

When his lips left mine, he blazed a trail from my chin to my jaw and down my throat.

"See you soon?"

Professor Pops' voice broke the spell. "Can the two of you move away from my office? The farther, the better, please. I've got work to do."

I nodded, mortified, and cleared my throat, covering my mouth with my hands.

"Sorry, Professor." I grabbed Christopher's hand, and we ran down the hall, through the kitchen, and to the front door.

My thoughts were conflicted.

When his lips were on mine, our bodies touching, I didn't want to stop, but I couldn't allow myself to move to the next level of intimacy either. I wasn't ready.

Christopher watched my face, his eyes dancing with amusement. "I know you're confused, your body telling you one thing and your mind saying something else. And that's why I'm going to leave. Make it easy on you, because I want you certain. I want your body and your mind on the same page." He opened the door. "No regrets," he said, tapping me lightly on the nose. "I'll see you later."

I nodded, tears filling my eyes. No idea why. "'Kay."

As soon as he left, I grabbed a jacket. I needed to talk to Cindy, and I couldn't wait until she came over.

If this going all the way business was going to happen, I needed her input.

I climbed on my purple Schwinn. Sure, I could've vampired myself to Cindy's house, but I liked bike riding.

Pedaling and the wind against my skin allowed my mind to mull over my problems.

On the ride over, a million different worries ran through my head - school, Sharra, Dorian, Silindra, Christopher, Cindy, and Gabe.

I almost turned around, realizing I hadn't told Professor Pops about seeing Sharra, but I figured Dorian would have, and if the professor had thought it was urgent, he would've said something.

Instead, I kept pedaling, turning my focus to Cindy and Gabe.

My feelings for Gabe would always be special, but I didn't want him the way I wanted Christopher.

What about Dorian, I thought and immediately pushed that away.

He was a friend.

Just a wonderful, supportive friend.

When I reached Cindy's house, I skidded to a stop, kicking down the kickstand and parking my bike in her driveway.

At the door, I knocked.

Her mom answered and said Cindy wasn't there.

That she picked up a shift at Bertilini's.

I almost gave up and went home, but once I got on my bike, I decided to head over to the restaurant. I knew I was procrastinating.

That should've been a clue as to my real feelings for the vampire hunter, but it wasn't. After locking up my bike, I went inside the restaurant.

The most delicious smells filled my nose. Italian red sauce, basil, garlic, sweet butter, and freshly baked bread swirled in the air like an aromatic cloud.

I wished I could still enjoy those flavors, savor them.

Cindy saw me and smiled. Placed a couple of water's on a patron's table and waved.

OceanofPDF.com

MY BLOOD IS YOURS

"SNOW! HOW WAS THE DANCE?" Cindy asked, slapping the menus down on the hostess table and rushing to me.

Even in a uniform - white ruffled shirt, black pants, black tennis shoes, and a black half apron wrapped around her hips - she still looked like a model.

Her blond hair was pulled back in a high ponytail, and she wore some shimmering shadow on her eyes and pink lip gloss.

"Hey, Cindy," I said, hugging her back.

"Spill. I need details." She released me, studying my face.

"The dance was fun. Dorian was amazing, but - " I glanced around the dimly lit restaurant. "Can we talk?"

"Is this about Dorian or Christopher?" She put her hands on her hips, a slight smirk on her pouty lips.

"Christopher."

"So, this is serious?" She went back around to the hostess stand, and I followed.

"Yep," I said, trying to sound like it was no big deal.

Cindy looked at her watch. "My shift ends in thirty minutes. I'll finish here and then shower and change. But I can meet you at your house in like an hour. There's something I want to talk to you about, too." She wriggled her brows.

I knew from experience an hour meant two, but that had to be okay. I needed to practice patience.

"Fine," I said. "But please hurry. This is urgent-top-secret-I'm-dying-to-tell-you stuff."

"Sounds like - "

"Cindy," her manager barked, moving toward us like his butt was on fire.

She held up a finger and focused on him. "Hey, Jake."

I didn't stick around. She needed to work and I needed to chill.

The early evening air was stick with humidity. We might get snow.

I climbed on my bike and rode home. It was worth noting that I considered Professor Pops' house my home. That made me happy. I parked my bike near the front door and went inside.

Dorian entered the foyer at the same time I did. "Hey, Dorian."

He held a thick roast beef and cheese sandwich in his hands and his mouth was full. In response to my salutation, he winked.

"That looks delicious." Smelled good too.

He nodded. Chewed what was in his mouth. Swallowed. "It's respectable. But hey, after I'm finished devouring this sandwich, I'm going downstairs to do some training. Want to join me?"

I had some time. "I'd love to."

"Cool." He stuck half the sandwich in his mouth and chewed while I followed him back into the kitchen.

I sat on one of the stools and waited, watching him eat before washing it all down with a glass of milk.

"Ready?" He patted his flat stomach.

"About damn time," I said, but smirked.

He lightly punched me in the arm as he passed me and headed down the stairs to the basement. Once he unlocked it, we went through the museum and into the training room where I picked up a pair of swords, and he took a broadsword.

"Take your stance," he commanded.

I did as he said as his sword sailed toward my head.

Moving faster than lightning, I blocked him and parried, shoving him harder than I planned.

Surprise on his face, he sailed backward, smacking into the far wall before crumpling into a heap on the floor.

"Sorry, Dorian." I ran to him and helped him stand. "Sometimes, I forget the vampire in me."

He chuckled. "So do I," he said, taking his sword in both hands and coming after me again.

For the next hour, metal clanged against metal as we practiced. I was getting better, or at least I thought so until Dorian swiped my leg, and I found myself falling.

I wasn't going to go down without taking him with me, so I knocked the dull side of my long sword into his shin.

He grunted in pain and fell.

I didn't see my mistake until he landed on top of me.

Our eyes met.

Dorian winced but tried to cover it up. "That hurt."

"Sorry, not sorry," I said, sticking out my tongue.

He chuckled as he pushed at some of the hair covering my face.

His fingers caused my skin to tingle, and training was all but forgotten.

Instead, I wanted his blood.

With one movement I flipped us, so I was on top, straddling his hips.

He let out a yelp of surprise and grinned. "I can always tell when your vampire instincts kick in." His eyes studied my lips, and I knew he wanted me to drink from him as much as I wanted to.

"Is that right?" My fangs extended, and I opened my mouth, flashing them.

He lasered in on them, and his heart picked up speed, but he didn't try to get away.

Instead, he tilted his head, pulling me down. "Go ahead, Snow. My

blood is yours."

Mesmerized by his vein, I sank my fangs deep into his skin, careful not to be too rough.

Blood filled my mouth, and I sighed with pleasure as I sucked. He wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me to him, and I drank until I counted to ten before releasing him.

His eyes caught and held mine.

"One of these days, Snow, you're going to see that I'm more than a blood donor."

I licked my lips, enjoying the blood and my haze until his words sank in.

Guilt settled over my hunger. "I'm so sorry, Dorian. That isn't how I want to treat you. I know you're more than that. You mean so much to me. I don't know what I would do without you."

He leaned toward me, cupping my butt as he pushed me against him. "You mean so much to me, too. When you're ready, I'll be here."

I knew he was serious, but I needed to lighten the mood.

Hadn't I just agreed to go all the way with Christopher?

More or less.

Allowing myself to feel like this for Dorian wasn't a good idea.

Besides, the guys said Dorian was a total flirt.

"What about your Harvard girls? Won't they miss you?"

He made a face, and I stood, pulling him up with me.

"They are sweet and fun, but they're just distractions. My heart already belongs to someone else." He picked up the swords and put them back in their place on the wall, making it impossible to see the expression on his face.

"Who's the lucky girl?" I was joking until he gave me a look filled with intensity. "Oh." He meant me. "Dorian," I went to him, resting a hand on his arm.

"Don't say anything. I know what I feel, and when the time is right, you'll know it too." He smiled. It was sad, but also showed confidence I didn't feel.

But I nodded. "I better get a shower. Cindy will be here soon, and I'm sweaty."

"Make it a steamy one," he said, winking before he left the room.

OceanofPDF.com

DREAM CRUSHER

AN HOUR LATER, Cindy finally showed.

Before she arrived, I called Christopher to tell him we needed to push our overnighter until Sunday. He reluctantly agreed, which left Cindy and me plenty of time to talk.

And I desperately needed to speak with her.

When she came into my room, a trail of magic came with her. The scent of enchantment was so strong, and I instinctively glanced at her neck.

For the first time, I wondered what her blood would taste like.

She noticed and covered her neck with her hands. "I love you, Snow, but I draw the line at you sucking my blood."

I sighed dramatically, falling back on my bed. "Dream crusher."

She tentatively sat next to me. "Are - are you going to be able to handle my being this close?"

I rolled onto my side, trying desperately to keep a straight face, but the seriousness of her expression caused me to laugh so hard tears leaked from my eyes. "I'll manage," I finally got out.

Cindy slapped my leg before crossing her arms. "You're rude. A rude, rude vampire," she said, but smiled in relief.

I sat, crossing my legs and wiping the tears from my eyes. "Sorry, Cin."

We looked at each other and started laughing again.

After a while, she cleared her throat. "It's so cool. You're a vampire, but not a blood crazy fiend. You're still you. I think people have a totally wrong impression of your kind."

"I know, right?" If she saw how I behaved with Dorian an hour ago, she might change her mind, but I let her believe what she wanted. It

was mostly right.

"It's the same with witches," she continued. "Most people think witches are green and covered in warts and wicked." She shook her head. "Not so. I mean, look at my face. It's flawless." She turned from side to side.

"You're right." I shrugged. "Maybe people come up with outlandish lies because we scare them."

She sighed heavily. "Oh, the trials of the gifted and magical," she said, resting a hand on her forehead dramatically.

Then we busted up laughing again.

Several minutes later, she carefully wiped under her eyes with her fourth fingers only and crossed her legs, so we were sitting on my bed, our knees touching. "Alright, time to get serious. Spill it. What's going on?"

I took a deep breath, collecting my thoughts.

There was no point telling her about Dorian unless she asked.

Mainly I needed to discuss Christopher and the possibility of sex. Nervous about how to begin, I pulled at a loose string on the bedspread. "Christopher suggested we go away together for the weekend. He even got Professor Pops' permission." I blinked several times, still shocked by that.

Her blue eyes shone brightly. "Holy sexcapades, that is serious." She patted my calf, checking out my face. Tilted her head. "Okay, what gives? His asking seems like it might not be great. Why isn't it great?"

I picked up one of my pillows and clutched it go me. "It is, really. I mean I love him - "

"Whoa. Whoa. What?"

"I told you already, didn't I? When I saved him, I knew I loved him."

She grew serious. "You mean it?"

"Yes, Cindy. I mean it." It didn't matter that it wasn't a forever love.

These feelings were still the strongest I ever felt.

I tugged up my socks, remembering my feelings for Dorian.

But that wasn't the same. Was it?

"You aren't quietly pining for Gabe, hoping I'll drop my guard one day, and then you'll pounce, taking back your man - the man I stole from you - are you?" She sniffled.

"Cindy, I swear." I paused. "I love Gabe, b - "

"I knew it," she whispered fiercely.

"Let me finish. Sheesh." I took her hand, but she pulled away, crossing her arms. "Cin? Are you going to listen to what I have to say?"

"Go ahead." She was pouting.

"I've loved him for a long time, and I'll always love him."

She tried to interrupt, but I put a finger on her lips.

"For a minute there, I thought I loved him like a man loves a woman, but then I felt all these feelings for Christopher, and I realized the love I felt for Gabe wasn't really that kind of love at all. I love Gabe like a brother now. That's it."

I removed my finger and leaned back. "I swear." I didn't bother to mention Dorian, hoping what I felt for him was strictly lust. It had to be.

Cindy huffed, wiping at her eyes and biting her bottom lip. "How does love feel? To you, I mean?" she asked quietly, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her fists.

I thought about it. "It's like fireworks and sleeping kittens. Cliff jumping and reading a good book on a rainy afternoon. When I'm with him, my pulse quickens, the world shifts, and my life tips into balance. It's amazing," I finished, not exactly sure I did my feelings for Christopher justice. "Isn't that how you feel about Gabe?"

She closed her eyes a moment, and tears leaked from them.

"Are you crying?" I asked softly. "Did I say something wrong? I swear I'm happy you and Gabe are together."

She shook her head. "No. I guess knowing how you feel for Christopher makes me happy. You deserve goodness. Happiness. And if Christopher gives you fireworks and sleeping kittens, then I'm all for it."

"And you and Gabe?" I prodded. If she didn't feel that way for him, then I felt terrible.

"I'm in love with him, Snow. And I know he loves me, too. The problem is, he takes his role as chayot leader very seriously. And it gets in the way of us. Sometimes when we're together, I feel like he's thinking about work, chayot problems, and I wonder if he'd rather be with them - other chayot - than be with me. A stupid witch." She sniffled, opening her eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

"I DON'T THINK SO. Maybe you should talk to him, explain how you feel." I definitely wasn't one to be giving relationship advice, but I didn't like seeing Cindy sad.

She nodded. "I should. I will." She took a deep breath. "Now, regarding your sexy-times problems," she sniffled and dried her eyes, and I knew we were done talking about her.

"The truth is, you don't have any," she said. "A completely gorgeous vampire wants in your pants. He loves you, and you love him. I see no downside."

I reddened at her blunt words. It excited me to think Christopher wanted me in that way, made me feel desirable. But it was such a big step for me.

I mean, sex.

Ugh.

That was huge.

"What?" she asked, and I could tell she worked hard not to laugh.

"It's just that I'm so nervous. What if we do it and everything changes?"

She nodded. "Everything will change for sure, but it'll hopefully be a good change. That's what moving forward in a relationship means."

"You and Gabe - " I let the rest of the question die. I couldn't bring myself to ask.

For the first time ever, Cindy blushed. "The first time was awkward." A broad, genuine smile spread over her face. "But he's my one and only," she said and bit down on her bottom lip.

She seemed lost in another time.

I watched as a contented peace settled over her.

"My mother always said to wait until I found the right guy. Of course, I thought she was old-fashioned, a complete dinosaur when it came to sexuality. So, I did what I wanted." Cindy wound one of her fingers in her hair. "Turns out, my mom is a lot smarter than I gave her credit."

"Really?" A pang of sorrow filled my heart. I envied her being able to talk to her mom about this stuff.

"Yeah, but don't tell her that." Cindy snickered. "My best advice? Make sure you want to, that you're all in - heart, mind, and soul. Because once you give Miss Virginia away, she ain't never coming back." She tapped my knee with a finger.

"Miss Virginia?" I asked, totally confused.

"Virgin-eee-aaaaaa," she said slowly, sarcastically.

I colored, and we both laughed, falling onto our sides.

"Got it. I won't give her away unless I'm one hundred percent sure that's what I want," I said, wiping my eyes.

When we sat up again, Cindy took my hand, turning serious.

"And even if you love him, it's not like there's a law that says you have to have sex with him. Well, unless you're married, then there might be a law." She paused. "Holy hot guy on a vampire girl. Please say you aren't getting married."

"What? No." I slapped her leg. "Hell no. That didn't even cross my mind." Had the idea of marriage crossed Christopher's mind?

She gazed at me perceptively. "I better be the first to know when it happens. There are ways I can make sure." She winked and moved her hand, making blue light and sparkles appear in her palm.

"You would do a spell on me?" I giggled.

She was crazy.

I was eighteen.

No wedding bells for years.

I still needed to finish high school.

Plus, there was another little item. The whole me-being-the-Seal–and-destined-to-restore-magic issue.

Cindy climbed off the bed and went to her backpack. Opening it, she took out her spellbook, The Eye of Abernathy. "See this?" she asked.

"Yeah?" I responded sarcastically. I wasn't blind.

She got back on the bed and crossed her legs. "There's a spell we can cast to make him ask you to marry him."

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ears. "I don't want to make him do anything, Cin."

She sighed, casually flipping through the pages. "Yeah, probably not."

Then she leaned forward, so her lips were next to my ear. "I found a spell to take us to the dragon, Abernathy if you want."

"You did?" That shocked me.

Talk about a total channel change of the subject.

Plus, I didn't know she was looking.

I told her I was waiting until after the school year so Professor Pops could go with me. He wanted me to learn more about the seven magics and the different supernatural creatures.

"Yep," she said, leaning back. "I can take us there right now if you want."

"No way. Are you serious?" Stunned enthusiasm coursed through my veins.

I didn't realize she could do such potent magic.

She placed her book on her legs and her hands on her hips. "Do you want me to prove it, Snow Merryweather White?" A firm line tightened her lips, and her brow was furrowed.

I didn't mean to offend her.

She was a witch, and I watched her do spells before.

I was just startled she bothered to track him down for me. "I believe you. Sorry," I said, getting off the bed.

If she could take me to him now, then I could get it over with.

Be done with it.

There were all sorts of reasons why that was a good idea.

"What would you have to do to make it happen?" I asked.

She snorted and got off the bed. "I just need to set up a few items, say the right words, and poof, we'll be at Abernathy's."

She held the book in her hands like she was in a church choir, getting ready to sing a hymn.

"You know he lives in a cave, right? With bats. He also breathes fire. And he's huge. You understand all of that?" If she took me there now, I would go. The prospect excited me.

Maybe if she and I went with magic, we could get there and back tonight, and then I could still go with Christopher tomorrow.

But using magic to find a dragon didn't seem like something Cindy would want to do - at least not the Cindy I knew two years ago.

Besides, she didn't look dressed for such an adventure.

I crossed my arms, watching understanding change her features to horror at the prospect. She glanced down at her off the shoulder pink sweatshirt with the word merde written across the front.

With one hand, she brushed her hands down her black jeans and black boots.

"A smelly cave? How cliche." Her nose scrunched in disgust.

I hid a smile. She wasn't worried about bats or the fire breathing dragon, but whether or not her clothes got ruined.

A moment later, her eyes, so familiar to me, twinkled. "You wanna go?"

"Hells yeah."

OceanofPDF.com

LIONS, TIGERS, AND DRAGONS

CINDY PULLED fourteen thick white candles from her backpack.

They were small and smelled of vanilla, cinnamon, and nutmeg - a combination that reminded me of my mother's oatmeal.

We placed them on the carpet next to my bed in the shape of a seven-pointed star.

I shut off the lights.

The sun was setting, and brilliant orange, pink, and golden rays glinted across my shadowed room.

"Is there a reason for the scented candles?" I asked as she and I sat cross-legged in the center of them. Our knees almost touched. We were super close, but the position was like second nature to her and me.

She shrugged. "No, I just like the smell."

"Me, too." I smiled. Nervous butterflies doing the hula in my stomach. "Now what?"

"Shhhhh," she said. "I'm concentrating."

"Oops." I stifled a giggle.

She placed her middle finger and thumb together, resting her hands on her knees like she was getting ready to meditate.

Then she closed her eyes.

Her face became serene.

And suddenly, the candles flickered to life.

I gulped.

She opened her eyes. "Cool, right?"

"So cool," I responded, feeling like we were back in junior high and having a sleepover.

"You're going to repeat what I say, but the spell is easy. It may take a few times, so don't stop until I say so."

"Okay." I hoped I didn't say anything wrong.

"Now, put your hands like mine."

The backs of her hands rested on her thighs. Her thumbs and pointer fingers touching.

I copied her.

"Close your eyes and remember as many different things about the cave and Abernathy as you can. What the cave smelled like, what it looked like, the color of his scales, the way the air felt. Anything you saw or felt or even tasted. Can you do that?"

"Yep," I said, swallowing down my nerves and closing my eyes.

I was with Silindra when Abernathy had given her a piece of his soul.

That piece rested within me now.

Would the dragon be able to sense it?

I saw his large eyes and heard the sound of his deep voice.

The smell of salt and the feel of bones crunching underfoot filled my mind.

The sound of the bats flying around pummeled my ears like they were in the room.

Heat rose in my throat, and I knew it was Abernathy's soul.

Cindy began to speak. "Abernathy." She paused, and I guessed I was to repeat her.

"Abernathy," I said.

"Tua Tua Dragonia," she uttered.

I repeated.

On the fringes of my mind, I sensed a shift in the room, like someone else had come in, but I couldn't open my eyes.

"Sithiperia. Groanada. Desperia," Cindy continued.

The words were strange, but I got them out.

"Abernathy," she said, and I repeated the word.

There was a whooshing sound, and I knew we were no longer in my room, but Abernathy's cave.

The smell of bat guano and the deep rumbling of the sleeping dragon was all it took to convince me, but I still didn't want to open my eyes.

I'd wait for Cindy to tell me to.

"Are we here?"

"Did we make it?"

The male voices surprised me. They weren't Cindy.

My eyes flew open.

Our surroundings were pitch dark, and even with my vampire vision, I barely perceived their forms.

"Gabe? Dorian?" I was too stunned to form complete sentences.

Cindy was surprised but grabbed Gabe's hand when he held it out to her. He helped her stand.

Dorian remained perfectly still. As though he was too shocked to move.

How had they come with us? They hadn't been inside the star. Nor had they repeated the words.

"Listeria," Cindy said, and a beam of white light appeared above our heads.

I quickly stood on my own.

"Did you do this?" Gabe asked Cindy, his voice filled with a loving wonder.

"Yeah," she answered. "But I can't believe it only took one time through the spell. Especially with the four of us. It must be Snow and the power of the Seal."

They looked at me. "What?" I asked, embarrassed.

"I just did what you said. I thought it was just going to be the two of us." I felt a little bamboozled and slightly betrayed.

She hadn't told me they were coming along.

"I didn't tell you my plan, just in case you said no, but I didn't want to come without them. I thought we could use some backup." Cindy looked guilty, and she should.

"You could've told me. I'm glad they're here too." I glanced at Dorian.

He came to stand beside me. "We should've told you," he said, his eyebrows arched in worry.

"Yeah, you should have," I answered. "But how did you guys get here? Cindy made us sit inside of a candlelit star."

"That was mostly for show," Cindy said, looking apologetic.

Gabe squeezed Cindy's hand. "When Cindy arrived, we waited outside your bedroom door until we heard the chanting. I opened it, and there was a whoosh, and here we are." He smirked. "Is this Abernathy's cave?"

I spun in a slow circle. "It's been a few thousand years since I've been here, but it looks like it."

Dorian smirked, and I guessed they overheard our entire conversation.

Heat rose into my face.

"Lions, tigers, and dragons, oh my," Dorian said softly.

I tried to smile, but it wouldn't make its way to my lips. I glanced toward Cindy and Gabe. They were in each other's arms, kissing.

Sheesh.

"Are you serious?" I put a hand on my hip. Now wasn't the time.

Thankfully they had the decency to knock it off.

"What's making the noise?" Dorian asked.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's Abernathy, and he's snoring." I took a

few tentative steps toward the entrance of the tunnel. "Dragons are lazy creatures. You want to meet him?"

"He won't eat us, right?" Cindy asked nervously.

"No. At least I don't think so." I ducked and started walking.

From the echoes and Cindy's white light, I knew they followed.

"It's hot in here," Dorian muttered.

I didn't respond. He would understand why soon enough.

As we got closer to the dragon's chamber, I noticed Abernathy's golden body, his golden scales gleaming like heaps of gold coins.

The dragon hadn't changed at all.

I stood, straightening my spine as a sense of deja vu tingled through my chest, and spread up and down my arms.

Dorian, Cindy, and Gabe flanked me on either side.

Abernathy stopped snoring and opened his saffron eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

KNOW YOUR DESTINY

"GREETINGS, little vampire. I'm surprised to see you here. If I'm right, and I usually am, you weren't supposed to come for another six months." His deep voice reverberated off the rock walls, and a few bats flew up and out of the cave.

Though I sensed this was the same chamber, it had changed over the thousands of years since I was here with Silindra.

The most noticeable difference was the large opening above our heads into the darkened sky.

Wispy clouds lazily coasted by.

Moonbeams filtered in and, while they didn't reach all the way down, they still bathed the cavern in a little light.

The dragon shook his yellow mane, like a lion after a long slumber, and the chamber lit up as if it were noon on a bright, sunny day.

"Hello, Abernathy." I was surprised he knew so much about me.

Would he be angry, I became the Seal?

Did he already know? He said he was waiting. I took a step forward. "You know who I am?"

He smacked his chops, his teeth clinking together.

I heard a collective gasp from Cindy, Dorian, and Gabe.

"Of course, Snow White. I know exactly who you are, and though you're early, I know why you've come." His liquid eyes blinked slowly.

"Professor Pops isn't going to be happy with your decision. I believe he wanted you to continue to high school and keep on training at his little Seven Magics Academy."

"You've spoken to Professor Pops?" That surprised me.

I thought the dragon hadn't left his chamber in thousands of years.

"Professor Pops and I tend to annoy each other, but we also have great respect for one another." The eye I could see blinked, and he shook his mane again. "That is no matter. You've come because you want to know if the Seal will destroy Sharra."

"That's right."

He regarded me thoughtfully.

"Destruction. Love. Hate. All words burdened with thick emotion. There's also rehabilitation, change, compassion, kindness. Words to consider, I think." He blew out a breath, and a gust of smoke filled the air.

I blanched. Was he suggesting I not destroy the vampire queen?

He went on before I could ask.

"Who do you have with you, Snow White?"

I moved to the side, preoccupied with my thoughts, but desirous to show the dragon respect. "This is Gabe. He is the leader of the chayot."

"Ah, yes. Oberon's half-human son. Aren't you a sight?" He sounded sarcastic.

Gabe stepped forward, his features stony. "You knew my - Oberon?"

"I did. A distasteful fellow. Only cared for himself and what he could gain. What he wanted. What everyone else could do for him." Abernathy yawned. "Are you like the narcissistic Oberon?"

Gabe took a step back.

He seemed unsure about what to say, and I heard him grind his teeth.

"No," I answered for him. "Gabe is nothing like Oberon. He's a good man."

Abernathy yawned, and I saw the fire in the back of his throat.

Then he smacked his lips. "I believe you're right, though he seems deeply troubled. Like the weight of the world rests on his shoulders.

What troubles you, chayot leader?"

Gabe didn't answer.

Cindy slipped her arm through his.

"No matter." Abernathy blew out another puff of smoke.

I went on. "This is Cindy. She's a - "

"The young witch who's been messing around with my book." A hint of what looked like a smile touched his lips, and he almost seemed pleased with her.

Cindy took a step toward him. "My grandmother gave the book to me," she whispered.

"Well, it's lovely to meet you, my dear. I see great things in your future."

Cindy perked up. "You do?"

"Oh, yes. It's no accident you and the young vampire are friends. It's destiny." A sound like a mammoth kitten purring escaped Abernathy's throat. He turned his attention to Dorian, who remained deathly quiet since we entered the chamber. "And last but certainly not least, we have you." The dragon blinked. "The only normal, non-magical human in the bunch, yet your destiny." He paused and sniffed the air.

Dorian stepped forward. "You know what I'm supposed to do with my life?"

I hadn't realized he didn't have a plan. I hadn't really thought that much about what he wanted to do with his life.

"Yes, young one. Very few have the capacity to love like you." Abernathy studied Dorian intently.

Dorian took another step toward the dragon. He looked tiny in comparison.

"What is it?" he asked.

Abernathy shook his head and let out a deep chuckle. "It's never good to know your destiny before it arrives, but I think you will find

out soon enough."

Dorian sighed.

His shoulders sagged, and he stepped back.

Melancholy weighed heavily on him.

"And you." Abernathy focused his large eyes on me. "You've become the Seal of Gabriel. The seven magics dwell within your body, including a piece of my soul. And it seems Silindra might be with you as well."

My heart raced at the thought of Silindra still being with me, but that was the least of my worry. I nodded, surprised he knew so much. "That's right."

"You expect a specific answer, but there are several, and all of them depend on you."

My throat went dry. What was that supposed to mean?

He considered me intently for a long time until I almost believed he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. "Snow White. Vampire. The daughter of an elf and a human. You're fated to bring - "

"Hold on." I carefully moved closer to Abernathy, so I had a perfect view of his giant mouth. "My mother wasn't an elf."

Abernathy shook his mane. "She is. I met her once when she was much younger before she escaped Sharra and moved to the human realm."

"I've seen elves. They look a lot different than humans. I would've remembered if my mom looked like an elf." Images of my mother flicked through my mind.

She was soft-spoken.

Her hair was long and beautiful. I used to say it was the color of starlight.

Her skin was pale, and she had long, elegant fingers.

"My mother was human," I finally said, facing him.

Smoke trailed from his nostrils. "She appeared human, but she

wasn't. Like the caterpillar that appears to be nothing more than a stick, your mother seemed human but was an elf. She was an anomaly, different from all other elves. And they hated her for it. Teased her. Called her an abomination. Even her parents didn't like her. They were embarrassed by her."

His words reminded me of the way the unicorns treated Envy.

Abernathy went on, "After many years, your mother came to me, desperate to start somewhere fresh. I helped her escape the magical confines of Sharra and the elves."

"You did?" My heart ached for what she must've gone through. "Is that why she died - because she was away from Sharra for too long?" The image of Pava the pixilette, and the way she turned to ash after a short time outside Sharra, harassed my thoughts.

He stood, his scales clanking together like old metal.

The top of my head barely reached the top of one of his legs.

Cindy, Gabe, and Dorian scattered back into the tunnel, which was the smart move, but I held my ground.

If Abernathy knew what happened to my mother, I wanted the answer. Besides, he still hadn't told me if I could destroy the vampire queen.

"Well?" I asked, the word forced out between my clenched teeth.

"It's time you know the truth, I believe." He smacked his lips together. "Care to take a trip?" He stretched his golden wings wide.

Each wingtip touched a wall, blocking out the opening above.

Then he shook like a wet dog.

Old scales sailed from his body like giant discs.

They smacked into stalactites and stalagmites, knocking them to pieces.

One flew toward my head, and I ducked just in time.

It crashed into the wall behind me, leaving a hole.

Powdered rock filled the cavern-like smoke, and the smell of sulfur

tainted the already pungent air.

"What kind of trip?" I asked when he finished.

He laughed, loud and hearty.

Thousands of bats woke, circling like phantoms, their high-pitched screeching like nails raking a chalkboard.

Abernathy lifted his head and roared, sending a rush of fire at the bats. They fell, their bodies charred and smoking, and I moved to the tunnel entrance, out of the way.

When the bats were all dead, he closed his mouth, extinguishing the fire and smacking his lips. "Bats are worse than rats - flying mongrels, really."

He bent his front paw under and leaned his body toward me. "Climb on, vampire. And the rest of you. Hurry up. I'm late for my nap."

I didn't know if it was a vampire thing or a Snow White thing, but I hated flying in airplanes and they had seatbelts, pressurized cabins, and electronic gadgets.

This would be worse.

"Where are you going? We can meet you there. Since Cindy has magic, we can use that." I glanced back at Cindy, who came out of the tunnel and moved to climb on Abernathy's back. Her face shone with excitement, and I sighed. We wouldn't be using her magic. She wanted to fly on the back of the dragon. Dorian and Gabe seemed excited about the prospect as well.

Me? Not so much.

Abernathy shook his head. "There's only one way to get to your mother, and the journey requires I take you there. Come on. Don't be afraid."

I gulped. If she was dead, how did he plan to take us to see her? "Can't you just explain what happened? You don't need to show me." The others were already on Abernathy's back. Gabe next to his head,

then Cindy with her arms around him, then a space I guessed was for me, and finally Dorian.

Dorian patted the spot in front of him. "It'll be fun."

Fun wasn't the word I would use. Horrendous. Terrifying. Those words seemed more accurate.

"Climb aboard before I change my mind. It isn't every day one rides on the back of a dragon."

Hesitant, I climbed up his side, using his scales as grips. My insides shook uncontrollably by the time I was seated in front of Dorian. He wrapped his arms around my waist. "I've got you, Snow."

His breath against my ear tickled. "Thanks," I responded. It seemed nuts that I was afraid, but I couldn't control it.

"Hang on tight. I won't come back for those left behind." Abernathy let out a laugh.

My bottom lip trembled. I was going to fall, roll off his scaly back, get flicked in the head by his tail, and end up a permanent fixture in one of the chamber walls. I heard Cindy whimper. It seemed she was having second thoughts. I touched her shoulder, and she turned back, trying to smile.

Gabe growled. "Let's do this."

Abernathy pounced into the air, his wings tucked at his sides, and then he burst through the opening into the clear sky. His wings spread and caught hold of the wind like a giant kite, and we were flying.

My fear vanished. I felt exhilarated.

Abernathy twisted and turned like a corkscrew, and I heard him chuckle. "This never gets old." He shot through the air, curled his body into a ball, then cannonballed toward the ground. I was having too much fun to be scared.

A few minutes in, something occurred to me. "How are we not falling off?" I shouted the question at Abernathy.

He barked happily, letting out a long stream of fire. "Magic,

vampire. Always magic."

I tested the theory, releasing my death grip on one of his scales. In the same second, Abernathy flipped out of the ball and expanded his wings.

We all should've shot into the air.

No matter how tightly we held on, the suddenness of the stop should have sent us sailing off his back.

None of us moved.

It was like we were seat belted to the dragon.

"Woohoo!" I shouted and sensed the others relax.

Cindy glanced back and, though her features were tight, she tried a smile. "Are you glad we came?"

"Yeah," I said, unable to help a surge of pleasure gurgling in my chest. Flying reminded me of Silindra and how she swore she would rather die than lose her wings. At that moment, I understood her a little better.

It was more than that, too. Flying helped me forget why we were going. That my mom was still alive. I didn't want to think about what that would mean.

OceanofPDF.com

BORDERS OF MIZU

I PEEKED over Abernathy's side and saw the deep darkness of the water below. It seemed to be in every direction, along the sides and above us too. The illusion made me a little dizzy.

Cindy grabbed hold of Gabe tighter.

He touched her arm. "It'll be okay, Cin."

She nodded but didn't respond.

They were sweet together.

"How is it possible we are surrounded by water?" Dorian asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "Abernathy, where are we?"

It was like we were inside an enormous raindrop.

"Do not be alarmed. We are within the borders of Mizu. Your mother is here."

I didn't appreciate him continually acting like my mother was alive. Perhaps it was because he was asleep a hundred years or even a thousand, but it hurt that he acted as though she was still around.

"Abernathy, my mother died a long time ago." Tears stung the edges of my eyes, and I closed them briefly, working to make them stop.

"You were told your mother died," Abernathy responded. "Doing so was for your safety, but now that you are the Seal, none of the secrets matter."

He paused. "Do you want to see her or not?" he asked, though he continued to fly in the same direction even though I didn't answer right away. Then he laughed like he made a joke. "Shall I continue?"

"Yes," I whispered, feeling sick.

My teeth chattered, and I couldn't slow my racing heart.

"Good." He angled his head downward, shooting toward the water like an arrow.

Despite his words telling us magic held us in place, I clutched one of his scales, holding on like my life depended on it.

In school, I saw a video of a Cape Gannet, which is this amazing species of bird. The species could dive from great heights and would shoot down into the water like a torpedo. And they accomplished the feat without injury.

But they were covered with feathers and fat to make the violent entry survivable.

As we rocketed closer to the water below, I debated whether the dragon intended to kill us.

At the same time, I couldn't stop thoughts about my mom.

Did my father know she was still alive?

Had he been keeping it a secret all these years?

We entered the water, and I had another moment of panic. But immediately, a bubble appeared around us, keeping the water away and allowing us some much-needed air.

"This is nuts," Cindy whispered. "I can't see anything." She cleared her throat. "Listeria," she said softly. Light filled the bubble and the surrounding water.

"You will need to put that out shortly, witch." Abernathy coasted slowly downward like a golden submarine. At first, we didn't see anything but water. After several minutes, a random fish darted by, then a large pod of dolphins. A few minutes later, a giant, strange-looking whale swam alongside us. Abernathy's eyes glowed in front of him like twin headlights, and, as we continued down, there was a colorful reef with all manner of plants growing on it and creatures living amongst the twisty coral.

"It's beautiful," I said.

Gabe, Cindy, and Dorian all spoke their agreement.

"But why are we down here? Elves don't live in the water. On its shores, sure, but never in it," Gabe said.

I knew what he said was true. When we went to see the elves, they were near the ocean, but that had been a long time ago. Since then, Sharra had created her land and ordered all magical creatures out of the human realm. Maybe some of the elves had created a secret land within the water.

Cindy touched Gabe's arm. "Let's see where Abernathy is taking us. If he says Snow's mother is down here, somewhere, then it must be true."

Yeah, because dragons may be lazy, but they're honest. I hoped.

Dorian wrapped his arms tighter around my waist. Part of me felt guilty for being in the arms of another guy, but I consoled myself. This was an extenuating circumstance, and Christopher would want me safe.

Further ahead was what looked like the top of an enormous snow globe, only without the snow. Upon closer inspection, I was shocked to see roads and buildings within.

"You seeing what I'm seeing?" Gabe asked, his voice filled with wonder.

"I see it. It looks like a - a city," I said, blinking my eyes several times to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

"Is this real?" Gabe asked.

"As real as you and me," Abernathy said. "The city is known as Atlantis by some, but is actually called Mizu Atlantica, or the City Under the Sea."

"Okay, where's the mermaid with long hair? What's her name?" Dorian tried to sound nonchalant, but it was apparent by the tone of his voice that he was as surprised as the rest of us.

"Ariel," I answered softly. "My mother's name is Ariel."

OceanofPDF.com

MERMAIDS ARE FISH

AS I STUDIED the city coming into view, I thought about love as an emotion. How it was like a pyrotechnics display. The vibrancy and beauty were not truly appreciated until after the fireworks erupted, when the sparks burst in radiant color and seem to gloriously proclaim to the sky, "This is what you're missing. This is what you've lost."

That was how it was with my mother. I had adored her, loved the way she sang while she cooked, how her eyebrows came together when she read something interesting, and the way she snuggled into my neck when she tucked me in at night.

Those memories were priceless, and I wished I cherished her more while I had her in my life. I should've cuddled with her longer. Hugged her tighter. But then, I didn't know she was going to die.

The knowledge that she was still alive after all this time but chose to stay away filled me with a pain I hadn't known before.

I was devastated and angry, and if I was honest with myself, excited to see her.

"Promises are lies spoken from the heart," my mom used to say. "Never make a promise unless you're one hundred percent sure you can keep it." I hadn't understood what she meant, but, as Dorian, Gabe, Cindy, and I got closer to the city my mother called home, I thought she must've known all along she would leave.

Some of my pain changed to resentment. Towards her.

She allowed me to be raised by a mean stepmother and a father who kowtowed to her every whim. A man who wasn't strong enough to be there when I needed him most.

How could she do that? Why? I hoped I would get the chance to ask.

"Is Snow's mom like an elf-mermaid?" Dorian asked Abernathy, bringing me out of my contemplations.

Abernathy laughed. "Mermaids are fish. Elves are land dwellers. Snow's mother is not a fish, but an elf. Please try to keep up."

"It may not be possible," Gabe said over his shoulder and loud enough so Dorian could hear.

"Watch it, brother," Dorian said, reaching over Cindy and me and punching Gabe in the shoulder.

"Hey, none of that," Cindy hissed. "I don't want to fall."

"You won't," I whispered, leaning into her.

"You doing okay? You must be freaking out about your mom," Cindy murmured.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." I swallowed, afraid if I said more, I might cry. I still didn't totally believe she was alive, and I wouldn't until I saw her again with my own eyes.

And maybe she was an elf but since she looked human while she lived with me, wasn't it possible she could become something different while under the sea?

Could she be a mermaid, too?

"Here we go," Abernathy growled.

I glanced ahead. We were nearly to the large bubble surrounding the city. "How are we going to get in?"

Abernathy's response was flippant. "How are we in this realm to begin with? How are you four able to breathe or, more importantly, how are you able to keep from being crushed? The answer is the same for all questions. Magic. I have it, and I know how to use it." He shook his head, and his amber mane danced slowly in the water like a golden man o' war.

When I thought Abernathy would crash into the bubble surrounding Mizu, he yelled, "Opherium!" And he glided through, the rest of us watching in awe.

The bubble around the city was thicker than I would've believed. As we passed through it, my body felt tingly, as though each cell was being tickled.

Once we passed the protective barrier, I relaxed a little, admiring the tall, vibrant buildings in colors similar to the coral I saw earlier - turquoise, hot pink, salmon, neon blue, lime green, yellows from creamy to vibrant, tangerine, and lavender.

Various types of trees grew in rows along the perimeter of the buildings.

The trees reminded me of a combination of kelp and seaweed.

The heat from above warmed my skin, and I glanced up.

Though it was night outside the perimeter, within a yellow sun shone brightly in the sky. Wispy clouds sailed across a blue firmament.

"How?" I began and stopped. I already knew what Abernathy would say. Magic.

OceanofPDF.com

EEL SKIN

ROADS AND SIDEWALKS intersected and meandered along and around the fantastical buildings. The streets sparkled in the sunlight, and I guessed they were made from pearls.

All manner of supernatural creatures, including trolls, elves, fairies, and even humans, moved around below.

Several streams ambled lazily in different sections of the city, and surrounding the city's outskirts was a vast ocean.

Did mermaids dwell here? I strained my eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of one. The idea of mermaids brought up another concern.

Where exactly had Abernathy brought us? What was this place?

The dragon said the city was called Mizu Atlantica, but what was the town for? Why did it exist?

Abernathy flew us above the buildings in search of an unknown destination.

None of the citizens below shrieked or screamed.

Instead, most waved to Abernathy and greeted him like an old friend.

The whole scenario was wild, and I pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Up ahead, in the city's center was a large, circular patch of green.

It wasn't grass, but it could've been moss or algae or even dried seaweed. "Do not climb off," Abernathy said, tucking his wings along his back and to the side.

"We are going below."

As he spoke, a screech reverberated through my body, like metal scraping against metal. I peered over the side and realized the circle Abernathy stood on was descending.

Cindy clung to Gabe, and Dorian tightened his grip around my waist. I leaned into him, thankful for his need to protect me even though I was much more likely to defend him if there was an issue.

Still, it was nice being near him, and I realized a friendship like his rarely came along. I turned back to him and smiled.

"Thanks, Dorian."

"No worries." He nudged me with his shoulder.

After several long, nerve-wracking moments, the metal elevator we rode on came to a halt, and a blue-green light flickered on above us.

With the light came a rigorous hum as the large hole above us sealed shut. As soon as the gap closed, there was a click, and a door in front of us slid open.

Standing in the doorway, flanked by two bodyguards, was a woman who looked startlingly like my mother.

She wore slick black pants and a matching top. It reminded me of a scuba suit, but with more flair. On her feet were boots with sparkling black buckles that went midway up her calves.

On her back was what looked like a large gun.

Her long hair was in a braid, hanging down her back.

"She's kickass," Dorian whispered.

A glint of a smile crossed my mother's lips, as though she heard him.

I couldn't say anything. I was too shocked.

Physically, she looked like my mom, with her long hair, the color of spider silk, and a lithe body, but she also appeared more hardened.

There was none of the softness I remembered.

Instead, she looked as Dorian said, like a kick-ass, no-nonsense woman.

"Ariel," Abernathy said, his voice low and soothing. "It's lovely to see you again."

The dragon and my mother spoke in hushed tones.

Ariel glanced my direction several times, her smile lighting my insides with happiness. Dorian wrapped a protective arm around my shoulders.

Cindy tried to strike up a conversation with me, but I didn't respond.

Gabe climbed down from Abernathy's back first, then Cindy, and then Dorian and finally me.

I couldn't focus on anyone but my mom and all of my unanswered questions.

After adjusting my clothes, I debated whether to talk to her or not.

"Go on," Cindy said, giving me a shove, but I couldn't make my feet work.

It was like a dream, and I couldn't believe she was there, talking to Abernathy in front of me.

When they finished, she patted him on the nose before heading over to a panel on the wall where she pushed a button.

Instantly, the access doors above us began to open, making a clanking sound. Abernathy glanced at me before unfurling his wings and ascending.

When he was halfway up, he spoke. "I'll return when I'm needed, vampire. For now, I need a nap," he said.

I noticed my mom flinched at his use of the word vampire.

I waved nervously. "Okay," I said, my voice echoing against the peculiar walls.

A strange odor radiated from everywhere. It took me a minute to place it, but I realized the most potent smells were hazelnut and saltwater.

Inclining her head to each of us, my mother directed we were to follow.

My feet began to move of their own volition.

We crossed the doorway, and the door slid closed behind us.

The blue-green lights lit up the hallway that appeared to be made out of something black. It sparkled like black diamonds.

None of us spoke.

The only sound was the swishing of our clothes and the rhythmic padding of our shoes.

When we reached the end of the hall, a door glided open. We went through and entered a formal living room with a fireplace, couches, chairs, end tables, even a piano.

But the materials were different somehow.

I touched one of the sofas as I passed and was surprised by its softness.

"The furniture is made of eel skin," my mother said. She didn't turn but kept walking forward.

I pulled my hand away. Should I be disgusted?

"Everything you see here is from Mizu, created from the animals, minerals, and plants found in this land. Nothing is from the surface," Ariel said, answering the question I hadn't asked aloud.

Dorian walked next to me and gave me a look that said all of this was crazy.

I shrugged.

After the living room, we came to the kitchen.

An overwhelming heat radiated from an enormous fire in the center.

Men and women of all shapes and heritages moved as though in a dance, preparing food.

My mother stopped, and I nearly ran into her before I halted.

She turned back and grinned like I remembered, and her vibrancy touched the innermost secrets of my soul.

I breathed in and waited for her to speak.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

OceanofPDF.com

"STARVED," Dorian answered.

Gabe agreed.

"I could eat," Cindy said, her hands in her pockets as she studied the room.

Blood sounded good, I thought but said nothing.

"Please, have a seat." She indicated a wooden table. The centerpiece was filled with radiant purple flowers I didn't recognize.

When we were seated, plates were positioned in front of us.

The food smelled divine.

It looked like fish covered in a creamy yellow sauce, green beans, and freshly baked rolls. My friends looked at me before shoveling it in.

Obviously, it tasted good, but I didn't even try to fake it.

My stomach was already in knots. I wouldn't add human food to the mix.

My mom ate a little too, but mostly she answered questions from random people who came in and sent wary glances at my friends and me.

I stared at my plate, and I caught my mother watching at me.

When they finished, my mother addressed us.

"Better?"

"Yes," Cindy said, giving me a sidelong look. She had that look on her face. The one that said I was wasting an opportunity.

But I didn't know how to begin.

"Good." Ariel rose and eyed two elven men who appeared to be her bodyguards. They stood against a wall, out of the way. "Will you escort these children to their rooms?" she asked. "They should get

some rest."

The bodyguards moved forward in one fluid motion - as though their brains were connected.

Gabe, Dorian, Cindy, and I began to follow.

I wasn't tired and had no desire to relax. I wanted to stay with my mom.

There was a lot I wanted to discuss.

But I didn't know how to voice my wishes.

I was still shocked that she was alive and standing feet away.

As we trailed the bodyguards down the hall, my mother grasped me by the elbow. "Can we talk? Just the two of us?" Her voice was light, soft.

Dorian and the others turned back, waiting for my answer.

I shrugged. "Sure," I said, my shaky voice betraying my nervousness.

Cindy shot me a look, but I flicked my chin, indicating I was fine. She nodded, and they continued to follow the guards.

My mom and I went back to the living room.

"We should have privacy here." She walked over to the fireplace.

At the touch of a button, flames sprang to life, and she rubbed her hands together a moment before crossing her arms.

I couldn't stop watching her, unsure this was real. At the same time, I wanted her to hug me, but I was scared.

She was focused on the flames when she began talking. "From the day you were born, you were special. Even as a baby, you were this little black-haired, blue-eyed force to be reckoned with." She paused.

My mother was alive. That thought kept repeating itself in my mind.

I waited, watching her in awe. I wanted to tell her my eyes were no longer blue, but I didn't.

When she spoke again, her voice shook with emotion. "Every day, every second of every minute, I thought about you, wondered how you were growing, if you were happy." She sniffed and suddenly turned. "Are you happy?"

I winced, hesitant to reply. A part of me wanted to comfort her, ease the agony evident in her eyes. But memories flooded through my mind of all the times I had needed her, from knee scrapes to birthday parties to the first time I got my period, and Vivianne just laughed, telling me to suck it up.

Then there was everything else. I was bitten and transformed into something new and wholly fantastical.

First, a revenant - not quite human, not quite a vampire - to what I was now, a vampire, and more.

The Seal.

And I was given the task of restoring balance to all magical creatures.

In the past thirteen years, I had experienced moments of happiness. I'd laughed, enjoyed time with friends. Had a first love and a second one too.

But there were plenty of miserable times as well.

Most of them were typical teenage girl problems.

Human problems.

Like whether or not I'd trip up the stairs.

Would I ever get a first kiss, pass chemistry, or go to college?

I still didn't know how to drive - not really.

And what about when I needed to talk to her about my craving for boys and blood?

And kissing?

Or just needed my mom because I was having a horrible day?

It was one thing when I thought she died.

Something else entirely that she chose to stay away. Living in this place.

I glanced around the room again, admiring the clean lines and the otherworldly look of all of the furnishings.

Was I happy?

My mom had been hiding. When I needed a mother, she ran.

She reached out a tentative hand, but I pulled away.

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Snow." She turned back to the flames. "If I could have stayed, I would have. I swear. I know what I've missed."

Finally, I found my voice. "Do you? Really?" I shook my head, swallowing back my sadness. "How did leaving, pretending to be dead, help me in any way?" The words tumbled out, filled with aching grief. "I needed you in so many ways. You leaving didn't stop Chris - my hunter from biting me. It didn't stop my need for human blood. All your absence did was tear a hole in my heart. You left me by myself, afraid all the time. I didn't have anyone. Dad and Vivianne were barely around, leaving me alone in that house, and not just for a few days. For weeks or more. If it wasn't for Professor Pops - I mean, Mr. Henry and his sons - I would've died from loneliness. So, tell me how it helped. Tell me why leaving was so noble because I don't buy it." I breathed heavily, my chest rising and falling rapidly.

Tears were streaming down my face, and I let them.

My mother was wrong to leave, and I wanted her to know it.

OceanofPDF.com

I HAVE A DRAGON

"I UNDERSTAND, Snow. I do. Leaving you has weighed heavily on my heart since the day I left. But look at you." Her eyes sparkled with awe. "You're magnificent. A leader. A creature destined to save us all."

I let out a noise somewhere between a snort and a sob. I wiped at my tears, wishing they would stop. "How can you say that? I'm a wreck." But I had to admit her words made me feel better.

She came over and gently wiped my cheek with the back of her hand. "Maybe you are a bit of a wreck, but aren't we all? Isn't that what life is about? The mess."

My hands trembled. I listened to her words, heard the tenderness of her voice, and all it did was make me angry. How could she console me or tell me anything? She didn't have the right.

"I don't know," I whispered through clenched teeth.

She rolled her shoulders. "Do you want to sit?" she asked, trying to take my hand.

I shook my head, moving my hands behind my back.

"Fine." She crossed her arms. "Abernathy told you the name of this city, correct?"

"Yes," I answered, and cleared my throat, working to force down words and emotions I wasn't ready to share. If I said more, it would all spill out.

"Did he tell you the city's purpose? Why we're here, under a million tons of water, in a different realm?"

"No," I said, knowing something big was coming, something I didn't want to hear but couldn't stop.

My mother nodded. "It's here, so Sharra, the vampire queen, can't find us. It was built to protect those who stand against her. In a way,

we're refugees, people, and creatures without a home of our own. We stood against Sharra, and she nearly slaughtered us all." In a lower voice, she went on. "It's also here to protect you."

My hands shook. I didn't know what to say.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit?" She indicated a couch.

I wanted to yell. Tell her she was mistaken. Call her a liar and a coward.

But I got the feeling she carried a whole lot more than the strange-looking gun on her back, so I agreed.

I followed her to the couch, sitting across from her. She looked sad but also determined. It was apparent she believed in her cause.

"When Silindra died, Abernathy knew right away because Ryden brought him the necklace, the Seal of Gabriel. The others found out rather quickly. Devoran. Oberon. But they believed Sharra's words, intrigued by her attitudes for a new world, one where we were all the same. That the lion and the lamb could lie down together and be friends." She shook her head, disgusted.

"The problem is that a lion is a lion - a predator who must hunt to survive. And the lamb is a lamb - the hunted. Can the lamb eat the lion? Of course not. But Sharra spoke of progress, saying that a unicorn could be a unicorn, but he could also be a horse. A fairy could be a fairy, but she could also be a butterfly. And so on. 'Evolutionary advancement' was the term she used most often."

She glanced down at her hands. "It wasn't until many of the magical creatures were nearly extinct and became devoid of magic that they began to realize Sharra's plan wasn't one of peace and friendship, but of power. Total domination. She didn't want any of the other creatures to have any magic because she wanted it all for herself."

"I get it," I said, interrupting.

Silindra had talked to Abernathy and Devoran about such things, that she believed Sharra wanted all the power. She was right.

"Do you?" my mom asked but continued before I could reply. "Devoran understood her plans long before anyone else. He kept his people as far away from her as possible. When her lies and deceit started to seep into his kingdom, he was frantic. With the help of Abernathy, the elves built Mizu's realm, desperate to save magic and the magical races. When Sharra caught wind of what was happening, she created the land of Sharra. Most were trapped there, but those of us who escaped came here."

Abernathy's words came back to me: The answer is the same for all questions. Magic. I have it, and I know how to use it.

My eyes grew big, and I realized the dragon wasn't lazy at all.

Magic was a whole lot more than words and spells, and I wondered how witches were created.

They didn't exist during Sharra and Silindra's time.

At least they hadn't possessed one of the seven magics.

Witches used Abernathy's magic.

Obviously.

Cindy had his spellbook.

But how did that all come to be? How was the first witch created?

"Snow," Arial prodded her hand on my shoulder.

I shrugged it away. "So, what does this place have to do with me? Or you, for that matter?" She said they were refugees, but why choose to come here when she would have been safe in the human world?

She licked her lips, a very human gesture, and I caught myself staring at her, checking to see if she had any hint of elf in her.

Her frame was thin, willowy like the elves, but that's where the similarities ended. Her skin was the wrong color, as was her hair. The way she spoke did remind me of someone from while I spent time with Silindra.

"What's wrong?" she asked, studying me intently.

And I remembered the mannerisms, the particular way she had of

speaking. "You're Devoran's daughter," I breathed as the realization hit me. Many of her mannerisms were the same as his.

A look of amazement splayed across her features. "Which means you are his granddaughter, Snow." My mother gazed at me in earnest. "Do you know what Sharra would give to have your lineage as her own?"

Devoran was alive at the same time as Silindra and Sharra, which made me question how old my mother was. But I shook that away.

"I still don't get why that knowledge meant you had to leave me. If what you say is true, why didn't you bring me with you?" Images of what life would've been like living here with my mother filtered through my mind. I could've helped her. At least spent my life with her.

And I wouldn't have been bitten. An eerie tension coursed through my body.

My mother sighed; her shoulders turned in. "The city isn't to protect you from those out in the world, but to keep those who would kill you, in."

"Oh." A light bulb clicked on inside my head.

The day I ran track with Christopher. It was raining, and I was trying to catch up with him. Then I felt a prick in the back of my legs, and they went numb, making it impossible to move them.

Christopher said I was poisoned.

And he told me some wanted me dead.

Did he know about Mizu? I had no doubt he did, which meant Sharra probably knew as well.

My mother must've read the confused expression on my face because she elaborated.

"Specifically, my father swore he would kill you if I didn't leave you and return." She sniffled, and I watched her eyes fill with tears. "He said he would kill you to punish me."

I was so confused, I clasped my hands together, hoping to alleviate some of my irritation. "So, Devoran is still alive?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"And he's here in Mizu with you?"

She nodded again.

"But I thought Abernathy sent you to the human realm to get away from him and your family. Why trap you down here with them?"

"Excellent questions," she said and swallowed.

I ground my teeth together, remembering Devoran's interactions with the unicorn, Envy. He was kind to her, took her in when no one else would. My confusion grew. "He tried to have me killed anyway," I said through clenched teeth. "Or at least there are those in the human realm who want me dead."

She shook her head. "It couldn't have been him. He's been down here with me the whole time." But she didn't sound convinced. Her words sounded hollow, and I sensed she knew as well as I did that she was lying to herself.

Besides, why would Devoran be honest with her? I thought of the stories Abernathy shared about her parents rejecting her. If they mistreated her before, why would they change now?

"I still don't understand why you're here. Why you left me." Really though, what did I know about anything?

Was my mom - Ariel - lying to me? I couldn't put it past her. "There was this unicorn. Her name was Envy. Devoran was so kind to her," I said slowly.

She nodded. "He brings up that story all the time, about how he's so empathetic, but the truth is he's only accepting when it comes to other people's problems. If anything in his own life is imperfect, then he wants nothing to do with it."

"Except you're here. You chose to be with Devoran over me. What made you leave me?"

She didn't answer right away. Her eyes were hooded like she didn't want me to see something in them.

"Mom?" I asked.

"I'm bait," she finally said.

"Bait?" I sat back in the chair, trying to wrap my head around all she was saying. "Help me understand."

She brushed her hands down the front of her pants. "Snow, I'm so sorry, but the truth is my father wants you here so he can use you to help him destroy the vampire queen. He wants to rule all magical creatures. He craves power just as badly as, if not more than, Sharra. And he knew someday you would come for me."

"What the hell?" I stood, gulping down confused fury. What was it about power? Once they're given a little, they craved more - a lot more. I exhaled heavily. "It seems that if you live long enough, you become evil. Right?"

I walked over to the fire.

Did Abernathy want me killed too?

Was that why he brought me here?

"I've had enough. I'm tired."

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll take you to your room."

"Oh, I'm not staying. I'm getting my friends, and we're leaving." I moved to the hallway, but my mother grabbed my arm.

"He won't let you. Now that you're here, my father will stop at nothing to make you do what he wants."

I twisted out of her grasp. "For one thing, I have a dragon. There is very little doubt he can leave whenever he wants."

Once we were safely back home, I would ask Abernathy why he brought me to Mizu when he knew my grandfather wanted me dead.

"And another thing, Devoran has no say in the matter. I'll leave when I'm damn good and ready. I'm not a pawn. I won't be doing his bidding any more than I intend to do Sharra's." I paused and studied

the woman who gave me life.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mother. You're as big a coward as Dad."

I wondered what that made me. If I was the product of my parents and my upbringing, did that mean I was a coward too?

My thoughts turned to my stepmother.

The way she was always such a bitch.

It seemed she might've helped me more than I realized.

"I don't think you understand," my mother started, and I noticed her bottom lip quivering. "This city won't allow you to leave unless Devoran commands it."

I snorted. "We'll see about that."

OceanofPDF.com

YOU'RE GLOWING

BURNING ferocity coursed through my veins, and I felt the power of the Seal ignite. The palms of my hands radiated red.

Was this truly what Devoran intended when he gave his eternal sight to Silindra? He said he thought everything through.

Did he know I'd come for him one day? It seemed highly unlikely.

Maybe he didn't realize the power would become part of me.

Or perhaps it was because a few thousand years passed, and he forgot the details.

Abernathy knew what I would become. Though the dragon had a lot of explaining to do, I felt confident he brought me here for a reason, and it was most likely because he knew what I was capable of.

That knowledge and the fact that I still trusted him shocked me. Whether that was a good idea or not remained to be seen. If he brought me, surely, he could help me escape.

I glared at my mother. "I don't think you understand, and neither does Devoran. Maybe he hasn't heard what happened to Oberon, the chayot leader when he tried to take the Seal from me." I was sure they didn't know that I burned Sharra when she tried to kill me those many months ago. "No one will tell me what to do. I make my own choices."

"Your skin," my mother began, her breath caught in her throat. "Your eyes. You're glowing."

I blinked, glancing at my hands. "I'm angry, Mother. And sad. And more let down than you can possibly imagine."

She started to cry. It didn't look right coming from the woman in front of me.

Everything about her said she was hard and unfeeling, but the

tears leaving her eyes were big.

"I didn't want any of this to happen. I believed my father when he said he would make sure you were never bitten, that you would be kept safe, and away from all of this. I should have listened to the Unknowns." She covered her mouth with a hand, trying to push down the sobs racking her body.

"It looks like you believed in the wrong person," I said, my voice stiff, though my mind grabbed hold of the word she used.

Unknowns.

I thought of those beings floating around Sharra and Silindra when they were little.

She sucked in a large gulp of air and blew it out slowly. "You're right." She went back to the couch, and even though I still wanted to leave, I found myself trailing after her.

Because despite everything, she was my mother, and I wasn't ready to never see her again.

"I don't know if this will make sense to you." She turned to me and smiled sadly. "But I thought Devoran felt bad about the way he treated me when I was younger. At least, that's what I wanted to believe. See, he was embarrassed that I look this way." She pointed at her very human form. "He and my mom weren't the most loving of parents."

I sighed and sat next to her.

How many years had she been harboring this pain?

She could've been eight or nine hundred years old.

When I was five, I hadn't cared.

My father said she died when she was thirty-five, but she didn't look a day over twenty. "Abernathy told me what happened. The way your - they treated you," I said softly.

As I spoke, the power of the Seal faded, and my skin stopped shimmering.

My mother blinked back tears. "I'm sure it was nothing compared

to what you've had to go through."

I doubted that was true. Even though she wasn't around, I had others - Professor Pops, the brothers, Cindy.

She went on. "Growing up must've been so hard on you, but there's no denying you're incredible. I don't think I could've helped you become any more amazing than you already are."

"Really?" My insides fluttered as a surge of emotions rose to the surface. For so long, I needed to hear her say those words.

"Oh, yes. You radiate power - everything beautiful and glorious as well as evil and terrifying. But there's still so much humanity in you. Truly spectacular." A worried expression pressed her brows together.

What did she mean? I wondered if her words were real or if she was trying to make me feel better. "Thank you," I said softly.

My mother leaned away as though really taking me in. I immediately missed her nearness.

"I'm really - " I began but stopped.

I wasn't sure how to express all the feelings bottled up inside. Disappointment filtered into longing for my mom.

She sniffed. "May I hug you?"

The question seemed out of place with all of her gear on, but I nodded.

She moved closer, so our knees were touching. Then she wrapped her arms around me. Her cheek pressed against mine.

We stayed like that for several seconds, until I finally hugged her back, tentative at first, but then I pulled her closer.

Tears clouded my vision, and my heart swelled with sympathy, care, and even love.

Yes, I loved her. So, so much.

And I missed her.

Holding her in my arms filled me with joy. For a brief moment, I was happy. In the next, I understood why Abernathy brought me into

a city where the ruler wanted to either kill me or use me. He wanted to give me back my mother.

"Mom," I whispered, hugging her tighter. I breathed in her scent, like wildflowers. And the feel of her soft skin against my cheek. The way her fingers tightened against my back.

After several more minutes, she began to pull back. As she did, she whispered in my ear. "I'll do what I can to help you and your friends leave. The Unknowns were right all along."

She smiled, and it was radiant.

A surge of affection cut through my heart, leaving it raw and tender. I wouldn't be used, but I wanted to be with her, too. "You're coming with us, right?"

A look, one I couldn't read, crossed her features, and vanished immediately. "If that's what you want," she said.

Until she asked, I hadn't known my real feelings. "It is."

She nodded. "Then I'll come with you."

OceanofPDF.com

SOMEPLACE SAFE

WE STOOD TOGETHER. She grabbed hold of my hand and squeezed.

"I'll take you to your friends," she said.

I expected her to move toward the hall we went down before. Instead, she went to a set of what looked like elevator doors. "Where are you going?"

"This is the way to your friends."

I felt my pulse pick up. "But, I saw them go down that way." I pointed down the hall.

"True, but I had my guards take them out of here and someplace else. Someplace safe."

I wanted to believe her. "Okay."

The doors slid open, and she stepped inside. "It's fine," she said.

I stepped in with her. Immediately, the doors closed. With a jolt, the elevator moved upward and then started moving sideways. After a few seconds, it began to slant downward.

"What is this thing?" I asked, hoping to ease the tension I was feeling.

"Basically, it's a multi-directional elevator." She smiled. "You might as well settle in. We'll be inside a while."

"It reminds me of a rollercoaster, only not as bumpy."

"Yeah, like that one at Coney Island," she said and smiled.

The memory flooded through me, but we didn't have time to reminisce. Something kept niggling at me. "You've mentioned the Unknowns twice now. What are they?" I thought I knew but wanted to verify.

My mother appeared startled. She glanced down, brushing her

hands over her slick black clothing. "The Unknowns are what we call Sharra and Silindra's parents."

"Oh?" I was right. They didn't seem real, more like ghosts or apparitions.

"No one knows what exactly they are, so we call them the Unknowns. Kind of a silly name for them, I guess." She shrugged.

"But you saw them? Like, with your own two eyes."

She studied me a moment before responding. "A couple of times. They came to me right before you were born, and again a few days ago." She sucked in a deep breath. "They're a little creepy."

I nodded. I wanted to say more but didn't know how to explain the link Silindra, and I possessed. Before I could decide what to tell her, she spoke.

"What's it like to be a vampire?" she asked, changing the subject.

I blinked, unable to answer. The question was so surprising. Her lips danced as though she was fighting back a laugh, but that didn't make sense. She flinched when she heard Abernathy call me that.

"It's fine," I answered, wondering how much she knew about vampires.

Her face grew serious. "How far along are you in the process?"

I bit down on my lip. "What do you mean?"

"Have you fallen in love? Did you drink your true love's blood? You're eighteen. You must be relatively close."

I blushed. "Um - "

"Talk to me." She crossed her arms, seemingly uncomfortable. "I know you don't know me - not anymore. But I'd love to hear what's going on with you."

"There is someone," I said, and my face burned with heat.

"And you love him?" she asked. "Who is he?"

I glanced at my feet, uselessly studying the tips of my Converse. It wasn't that I felt defensive, but I was nervous. "His name is

Christopher Charming. He had hazel eyes, but now they're sort of a silvery violet color, and hair the color of a soft, sandy beach. He's tall and really nice. He - " I thought about what word to use to describe Christopher. Sure, he was completely gorgeous, caring, and utterly kissable, but he was so much more.

"He what?" my mother asked.

"He gets me," I finished. That was it. More than anyone, he and I were alike. He understood my craving for blood, what changing was like. He accepted every part of me.

"I see," she said, her lips tight. "And have you drunk from him?"

My face got hotter. If I became any more embarrassed, I might turn into a fire.

"Well?" she asked, her voice concerned.

"Yes, but it's no big deal," I responded. It was crazy that I hadn't seen her in thirteen years, but she was still able to make me feel like a little girl. "He and I are - " I paused. I didn't want to say made for each other. That was just too cheesy. Cliché. But it felt right.

"Have you kissed him?" There seemed to be some hope in her voice. And I remembered Professor Pops said if I kissed my true love, I would be changed back. Become a human again. I nodded. "Yes, we've kissed." I touched a hand to my burning cheek.

Her eyebrows lifted. "But you're still a vampire."

"Probably because of the Seal or, I don't know." It was all so complicated.

The whole idea of kissing my true love.

Drinking his blood.

I kissed Christopher before I was the Seal, and nothing happened.

If anything, I craved blood, his blood, more.

At first, I didn't love him, only lusted. Now I knew it was love, though not true love.

"I care deeply for Christopher. The whole true love thing is a moot

point because I've become the Seal." I spoke with pretend confidence, hoping she couldn't see through my charade.

Did I even want to be human again? Go back to the girl I was before?

"You're probably right," she said, interrupting my thoughts. "You'll never be human again."

And there it was, the truth I was trying to avoid, spoken aloud. I don't know why, but her words made me angry, and I lashed out. "Yeah, but I was never wholly human anyway, so no biggie."

She sighed, leaning her hands against the rail in the elevator. "I'm sorry," she said, her words heavy with regret.

I released the tension in my shoulders. "I'm sorry too, but it doesn't matter anyway. Sharra doesn't want my body anymore. She's set her sights on another marked."

"Really?" She didn't look convinced. "I would think now more than ever she would want your body. With the Seal, she could become the most powerful being in the world."

I thought of that, but she couldn't get in. The last time she touched me, the Seal burned her.

"All that's left is for you to drink your true love's blood. As soon as that happens, you'll become the next vampire queen."

"My body will be a part of the vampire queen, but it won't be me." What would happen to me? My consciousness? I still didn't know. And I wondered if anyone knew.

"Perhaps." She moved toward me. "Do you want to be the vampire queen?" she asked quietly.

What kind of question was that? Of course not. I wanted to be me. Snow White. I had no desire for power or to be anything else. "No." I shook my head.

"But you know you'll never be just a girl ever again. Besides, you were destined to be more from the moment you were born. So why

not be the vampire queen?" There was something about her questions, and the way she spoke that didn't add up.

"Do you want Sharra to take over my body?" She made it sound like I should become the next vampire queen. Was she okay with everything but the body of her daughter being gone?

OceanofPDF.com

PLANS FOR THE CHAYOT

"THAT'S THE THING," she began, her voice soft against my ear. "With the power of the Seal, I don't think Sharra will be able to push you out. And when you destroy her, someone will need to rule in her place. You must be resolved to rule, Snow. It's your destiny."

"Do you know this for a fact?"

"No."

I snorted, crossing my arms against my body. "I think destiny is just another word people use to force others to do what they want." I studied her, wondering if it was a good idea to trust her.

"You're wrong," she said, turning away. "Destiny happens despite your choices. One day you'll understand."

There was no point arguing, but I was sick of the word - destiny - and the others that went with it.

The elevator stopped. A bright rectangle of light pulsed on the other side of the opening. I remembered how Silindra journeyed by light to get to Crystal City, the elves' original home. Silindra hadn't liked it.

"Are we going somewhere by light?" I asked, pointing.

"Yes, it's how elves travel, and this is the only way to reach your friends." I started to speak, but she quickly continued, "Travelling by light doesn't hurt. I promise."

I snorted. "That's not what Silindra said."

She made a noise like a gasping fish. "How would you even know that?"

I leaned my shoulder against hers. "I spent some time with her."

My mom's eyes widened. "That. Isn't. Possible." She enunciated each word as though that would help me comprehend that what I said

was a lie.

"It may seem that way, but it happened." I decided to tell her the truth. "I was with Silindra when the Seal was created. I went with her to see your father in Crystal City. She traveled by light. And it didn't tickle, that's for sure." I eyed her, waiting for her to come clean, but she was still stuck on the fact that I supposedly was with Silindra

"Silindra died seven thousand years ago. Last I checked, you're barely eighteen." My mother gave me a pointed look.

Should I tell her the rest, explain how, after the Seal killed the chayot, Oberon, its power connected me to Silindra and took me back in time?

That I helped Silindra create the Seal, that I witnessed her death?

That would take more time than we had.

"Believe me when I say it's possible, it happened, and the events I witnessed while with the vampire queen's twin sister won't be easily forgotten."

She smiled nervously. "That's a story I'm anxious to hear." She tucked a piece of wayward hair behind my ears. "Let's get your friends and get out of here." She pointed toward the sheet of light. "Ready?"

I forced back a shudder. "Not really."

My mother grasped one of my hands in hers. "Let's do it together."

As one, we stepped into the ring of light. I closed my eyes. Gritted my teeth. The smell of daffodils filled the air. My mother was squeezing my hand like her life depended on it.

The light vanished, and I glanced over.

Her features were scrunched in pain.

I opened my mouth to tease her.

By her expression, it was obvious the method hurt - even though it hadn't really hurt me, just felt weird, like I was pulled apart and put back together again.

But my gaze fell to her other hand, the one not squeezing mine. It

was wrapped around the handle of a knife protruding from her chest.

Blue blood obscured her fingers and dripped down her wetsuit-like clothing.

"Mom!" I cried, hanging onto her as her knees buckled, and she fell into me. My heart was racing, but I gritted my teeth, lowering her to the ground.

Frantic, I looked to see if anyone was around, but we were alone.

"Snow." Blood gurgled from her mouth. "You must find the - "

"The what?" I asked, kneeling next to her.

I just got her back.

No way would I be losing her.

The power of the Seal would heal her the way it healed Christopher.

I just needed to do like Kenmei said and focus on using the power with love in my heart.

"You've got to," she tried again but couldn't finish as she coughed, sending a spray of her blood over my face.

I flinched, debating whether to pull the knife from her or leave it in.

"It's okay, Mom. I can fix this." I grabbed the handle of the knife in my hands and yanked it out, ignoring the disgusting sounds it made when it released.

Her blood smelled of honeysuckle.

The knife was thin but sharp.

I tossed it away and noticed my hands were covered in her blue blood. They were shaking. So was my voice.

"I just found you, Mom. I can't lose you again." I put both hands over her wound. The power of the Seal surged through my hands. "It'll take a minute," I said, blinking back the tears distorting my vision.

Her eyes closed, and my heart lurched.

When I healed Christopher, I hadn't realized that's what I was doing.

It was the same experience when I hurt the vampire queen.

I hadn't wielded the power with intent, but the Seal responded anyway. This time I would focus.

"Stop!" A voice shouted.

I looked up. Devoran was standing a few feet away.

Two guards had Gabe and Cindy by the throat, and the elf king held Dorian in the same position. I hesitated.

Behind them, a rectangle of light twinkled and evaporated.

"Remove your hands from my daughter. That freak of nature doesn't deserve to be saved by your power. She's fulfilled her obligation. I allowed her to live so that one day I would be able to meet you, my granddaughter." His face contorted in a malevolent grin.

My blood boiled in rage at his words. How could he speak about his own daughter that way?

"Do as I say, or I'll kill these three where they stand. It won't be hard. Believe me, I know."

He looked exactly as he did when I was with Silindra.

Had I not known it was Devoran, I would've thought he was just another guard.

He wasn't wearing anything special: white trousers and a matching shirt. Both elven guards wore red.

My hands twitched, but I wasn't too worried.

Gabe was a chayot, and Cindy was a witch.

It would take a lot to kill them. I snorted, compelling more of the Seal's power into my mother. Devoran nodded toward the guard on his right, the one holding Gabe. He twisted Gabe's neck. There was a snap.

Gabe's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he dropped.

I screamed at the same time Cindy did, but my hands remained right where they were. My mother would not die today.

"Gabe!" Cindy let out a howl and electricity pulsed between her fingers, but she couldn't use it. Her hands, her body seemed tied up by an unseen force.

"Do you want the girl to die next?" Devoran asked. He glanced at the guard holding her. "Well?"

"No," I whispered, and pulled my hands from my mother. "I'm sorry, Mom. Hopefully, that was enough," I whispered.

I thought her lashes fluttered. "Mom," I said, shaking her shoulder.

She didn't move or respond. She looked dead.

"Get over here," Devoran yelled.

I stood. The world was hazy, as though it shifted, and everything was sideways. I had a hard time focusing.

With great effort, I stepped closer to Devoran and Dorian. "Let me make sure Gabe is okay. You know he's a chayot." The words sounded far away like they came from someone else.

"Of course," Devoran said, but a bewildering surprise flickered across his face. He hadn't known, and he intended for his guard to kill Gabe. I would remember that.

The guard who twisted Gabe's neck picked Gabe up.

"Take him to the infirmary and keep him under close watch. I've plans for the chayot," Devoran said.

I caught Cindy's eyes.

They were filled with tears.

I tried to nod, to convince her everything was okay, but I just lost my mother and watched Gabe's neck get broken.

Nothing felt okay.

"I'm sorry," Dorian mouthed.

Dorian. Handsome Dorian. He didn't have anything to be sorry for.

I reached out to take his hand. It looked like he wanted to grab hold but couldn't. And I finally realized that was why my friends weren't fighting back.

Something had them restrained.

"Dorian," I said. The edges of my vision faded, and I tasted blood in my mouth. Was it mine? It had to be. The darkness around my view got thicker and thicker, and my body seemed to get heavier and heavier.

I glanced back at my mom. She was still on her back, unresponsive.

OceanofPDF.com

SACRIFICE YOURSELF

"SNOW."

"Snow White."

"We are waiting for you."

"It is urgent we speak with you."

I opened my eyes and noticed a tiny blue light shining above my head.

It flitted around like a pixilette but was much smaller.

I was in what looked like a black box. No windows. No doors. Just four sparkling black walls, a ceiling, and a floor.

"Snow, please hurry."

"This is urgent."

I reached out a finger to touch the light. The voices seemed to come from it, but it darted away.

"I can't get out. There's no door," I whispered, standing. As I spoke, a door appeared, and I gasped, hoping for escape.

But my hope was short-lived, for on the other side of the door was more darkness. As my heart fell, the dark became a tunnel.

I took a tentative step, and as I did, more of the tunnel appeared.

"Where am I?" The blue lights flicked down the shaft, making it obvious they wanted me to follow.

After a few moments, I stopped and looked back the way I came, but there was nothing to see.

One of the blue lights returned, flicking in front of my face. "You want me to follow?"

In response, it headed down the tunnel toward the other blue light.

Desperate to escape, I followed until finally, the two lights led me

to another room before disappearing.

With my vampire vision, I was still able to see.

A quick peek inside revealed it was exactly the same as the room I came from, except for one thing. In the center of the room was an altar.

It was white and stood out against all of the black.

Something inside me told me to run away, but I couldn't. An intangible pull emanated from the altar, and I had no choice but to move toward it.

When I was near enough to touch it, two strands of smoke rushed through the walls and hovered in front of me.

They moved like water, their features indiscernible before they shifted into something vaguely animalistic. Like clouds, they changed into a girl who looked like me, then a werewolf, a dragon, and a skeleton.

The Unknowns, I thought, trying to look away, but unable to.

"You are Snow White."

"Daughter of Ariel."

"Born of Silindra."

"Our daughter."

I didn't respond, unsure whether they wanted me to.

"You are the Seal."

"The restoration bringer."

"And your time has come."

"Okayyyyy," I said slowly, wondering why they were talking.

They weren't asking questions.

Their words didn't make sense.

Plus, it was hard to focus on their changing faces.

It wasn't like their voices came from mouths. Their lips didn't move. Sometimes they didn't even have lips.

But as I heard the words, they circled around me, ever closer, though they never touched me.

"What do you want?" I asked, my voice quivering.

At that question, their bodies took shape. Their color stayed the same - one was silver and the other gold.

Each possessed a face, arms, legs, and body, but I couldn't tell what kind of creature they were. Everything and nothing.

"Close your eyes."

"Let us show you."

I did as they said because whatever force held me made my eyes close.

This can't be real, I thought. It must be a dream. Like those ones where you try to run, but your body seems to be stuck in quicksand.

Their fingers touched my eyes.

I tried not to wince at the chill that ran through my body.

Immediately images shot through my mind.

And I was on the altar.

My blood flowed from my body, spilling over the sides and dripping to the floor.

Something round and red and pulsating hovered in the air above my chest.

It beat in a slow rhythm.

Sparkling red flowed from it, and I immediately knew it was the power of the Seal.

A swirling vortex of energy and blood, like pieces of tangled yarn.

They lit up the room, dipped and twirled.

It was beautiful.

Magical.

And horrifying.

After a time, the combination of the Seal and my blood produced

seven large gems. Within my line of sight, they pulsated like living things.

One gold: The magic of the dragon.

One blue: The magic of the elf.

One green: The magic of the fairy.

One brown: The magic of the troll.

One indigo: The magic of the unicorn.

One silver: The magic of the vampire.

And one red: The magic of what?

To complete the Seal, the blood of the hunter was required - Gabriel's blood.

"What does this mean?" I asked, a little terrified at seeing myself bleed out.

"To restore the balance of the seven magics, you must sacrifice yourself."

"It's the only way to regenerate the cycle."

"Allow the seven magics to return to the beginning."

"The way magic was before Sharra disrupted it."

"But - " I didn't want to die. "What about Sharra? If I'm gone, who will stop her? The Seal has made me more powerful. I can stop her. But not if I'm dead."

"Once the Seal is broken, the seven magics will be reborn. When that happens, Sharra will be destroyed."

"She'll become nothing."

"We know what she's done."

"And her power will be stripped."

"How," I asked, watching the gems throb steadily as they grew. I realized the gems were a similitude of the magics being reborn. Each possessed a heartbeat. Each thumped in time with the others.

"The Seal is connected to Sharra - to all touched by her blood.

Once the Seal is shattered, those who've been tainted by Sharra, including Sharra herself, will cease to live. And a new breed of magical creatures will be born."

"What are you saying?" I didn't want to be in this dream any longer. I wanted to escape.

"Your death will bring forth new life, Snow White."

"You are the purest of the pure."

"The best of the best."

"The fairest in the land."

"That's unacceptable. You can't kill everyone. It's - it's - " I stammered, feeling frantic. "Ludicrous."

"Death begets life."

"The cycle of the living is to die."

"No! What about all we've learned?" I opened my eyes, and the beings shifted and floated away, their forms once again smoke and light.

"It's how it must be."

"It will be."

"You said it yourself."

"If a creature lives long enough, it becomes evil."

"That includes you!" I yelled, desperate to get away or wake up.

A tornado of energy surrounded me, holding my body firmly.

I was lifted in the air and placed on the altar as though everything started over again. The beings hovered over me. I wasn't able to move or speak.

A wicked knife, the blade twisted like a unicorn horn, appeared above my chest.

The wispy individuals started chanting words I didn't understand.

My skin changed from a too-white-white to the colors of the seven magics.

I tried to struggle and to get away, but I couldn't even scream. I thought of Christopher and decided I should've said yes. If I had, I wouldn't be here. Instead, I would be in his arms.

"We aren't wicked."

"We aren't good."

"We are beyond the living and the dying, no longer like those who dwell on Earth."

"We are the creators."

Deep down, I knew the Seal would do what I wanted. I thought of anger, hate, fear, anything to break the bonds that held me, but I couldn't access its power. It was as though my brain and my body were separated.

OceanofPDF.com

IF YOU LOVE ME

THIS IS IT, I thought. I'm going to die.

A profound gloom curled its way around my heart.

Never in a million years did I imagine my life would end this way. If I pictured anything, it was that I disappeared into nothingness as the vampire queen took over my body. Dying like this? No one would know.

And I thought of Silindra on an altar, her blood drained from her body.

Sacrificed for Sharra's whims.

I never would've guessed my fate would be so entwined with hers.

I didn't want to die. I didn't want those I loved to die. I wanted to live!

The knife hovering above me abruptly descended and sank deep into my chest.

If I could have, I would have cried out in pain. I felt every rip, every tear, every shredded vein, and vessel as the blade entered my body.

But I was unable to move.

The knife retreated as quickly as it dropped and once again hung above my chest.

Blood slid from the blade and on to my shirt.

The scent of copper stung my nose. I wanted to cry at the injustice of it all.

And, in a way, the knife did that for me.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Red tears of mourning.

A glittering red mist appeared above my wound, hovering, and swirling into my blood.

It was happening.

The Seal was breaking.

Soon everyone I loved would vanish.

No!

That was my last thought as I drifted into oblivion.

I DON'T KNOW if I was unconscious for a second or a day, but when I came to, it was to the sound of someone shouting.

"I don't care. Let her go. I'll take her place."

The Unknowns responded one by one:

"That isn't part of the plan."

"We can't allow it."

I opened my eyes.

"Dorian?" I asked wearily, surprised I could hear his voice and the sound of my own.

I had to be dreaming.

"Snow!" he cried.

His voice broke as his face appeared next to mine, but he turned in the Unknowns direction. "You can't stop me. It isn't her time to die."

I blinked several times, unable to believe. "What are you doing? How did you find me?"

He climbed on the altar, placing his body between the dagger and me. It had already stabbed me a hundred or a thousand times. I didn't understand why it kept going, kept stabbing, but it did.

The Unknowns spoke, and they didn't sound happy:

"We can't control him."

"He is too strong."

"What is this?"

"Madness!"

I didn't know what they meant.

Dorian was human, perhaps the weakest of all creatures.

How could they not control him? How was he too strong for them?

Dorian's eyes found mine.

"How?" I asked again, relieved to see him.

He kissed the tip of my nose. "I followed my heart," he said. The last word came out in a rush, and I knew the sharp blade drove into his back.

I couldn't let this happen. "Dorian, you need to leave. Go. I don't know how you did it, but - "

A hiss escaped through his clenched teeth and I knew he'd been stabbed again.

A sob caught in my throat as the blade sank and withdrew from his flesh again, and tears filled his eyes from the pain. "Go. Please."

He held my gaze. "No. Don't cry. Shhh-hh."

The knife went into his back again. I noticed the dazzling red of the Seal winding around the room. It was still glowing but didn't seem as strong. Its potency lessened as it spun and dipped into Dorian's blood instead of mine.

"You can't be here." Even though I was so happy to see him. So relieved, I wasn't alone. Did that make me weak?

"I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be." His words caught as the blade went in and out again.

"No," I whispered, closing my eyes.

He touched my face, his fingers pressing against my jaw slightly when the blade buried itself in his back before it retreated. "Do you remember what Abernathy said? That I would know what I needed to

do when the time was right?"

"Y-Yes." Tears stung my eyes and burned a path into my ears and hair.

"Tonight, I was pacing in a room without a door when one suddenly appeared."

Had these beings - the Unknowns - brought Dorian here as well? "Was there a blue light?"

He gave me a strange look. "Not blue, but a bright gold. I tried the door handle. It opened into a golden hallway, and I followed it. On, and on, and on. Until I found you. I'm so sorry I didn't get here sooner." The knife tore into his flesh again. He closed his eyes and his fist at the same time. "As soon as I saw you lying on the altar, I knew. My purpose, the whole reason I was born, is to save you."

"You can't - "

He stopped me, covering my mouth with his fingers.

"I've always known. From the moment you tripped up the stairs to Professor Pops' front door. I looked into your beautiful eyes and thought, this girl is meant for me."

"We were eight the first time we met," I whispered. "You were into cars and video games. Girls were the last thing on your mind." I smiled, remembering the look on his face that day.

I finally understood all those moments in my past when I was curious about Dorian and what he wanted or was thinking.

He was there, regardless. No matter what.

"Please don't do this for me," I begged, knowing if I lived and he died I would never be the same. Living without him wouldn't be living at all. "Dorian, please."

When the knife entered his back there was a smacking sound and I knew it was the blade hitting his pooling blood.

While I was still in Silindra's mind, Dorian said he loved me. For some reason the words to a freaking scripture came to mind and I

wasn't a church going girl. It wasn't all the words either, but as I stared into Dorian's beautiful face, I knew what it meant to be loved.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. Love never fails.

"Dorian," I said his name so soft.

"It's okay, Snow. Let me do this for you." He closed his eyes a moment.

My sadness turned to anger. "If you love me, you will freaking do what I say. You'll go."

OceanofPDF.com

I NEED YOU

"ALWAYS DESPERATE TO SAVE OTHERS, but not this time." Dorian's voice was soft, and I knew it was because he was bleeding out. Dying.

"No, please," I begged.

He shook his head, forcing a smile. "Can I kiss you?"

I closed my eyes, wishing this was all just a dream. "Anything," I said. If only he would go. I couldn't watch him die.

The blade went into his back, that damned noise making me want to throw up.

"I love you, Snow White. Always have and always will." He gently pressed his lips to mine and moved them tenderly.

The blade went in again. And he caught his breath.

I cried out, kissing him back with all the gratitude and love in my heart.

For all the years he cared for me without ever asking me to reciprocate.

Images of each time he was there and loved me unconditionally flashed through my mind.

The night I told Professor Pops, the brothers, and Kenmei, I never wanted to see them again. I awakened with my mother's blanket over me.

At the time, I hadn't realized who had done it.

Now I saw Dorian. He brushed tendrils of hair from my face before covering me.

Or the night I got scared, right after I saw the vision of myself drinking the blood from the heart. Gabe came over, but Dorian stopped by as well. To make sure I was safe.

The night I was first bitten. Dorian demanded I stay in his room, and he checked on me several times during the night.

There were so many images I couldn't keep track of. He was in the background, looking out for me, since the day we met.

And one thought filled me up. Every crevice, and cranny.

This is truly what it means to be loved.

At that moment, something peculiar happened.

Brilliant sparks burst from Dorian and into me, starting with my lips and moving through my neck, my arms, torso, legs, and feet. Right down to my toes. It moved like lightning.

Fireworks, I thought.

And I sucked in a breath at the strength of their heat.

Love. Astonishing love. All-consuming, glorious love.

In the background, I heard the Unknowns shriek and groan, as though they were suffering terrible pain.

"This is unexpected."

"The plan has changed."

The blade above Dorian and me vanished.

Dorian no longer moved, the entire weight of his body resting against mine and I guessed he passed out from loss of blood.

The Seal's glittering red still swirled lightly, bathing Dorian's peaceful face in an extraordinary glow.

My limbs were released from their invisible restraints, and I pushed at Dorian, moving his body. The hole in my chest near my heart healed instantly. "Dorian," I said, shaking him. "You did it. They're gone." I patted his cheek with a hand. "Dorian."

He didn't stir.

The room began to quake, and chunks of black rock fell around us.

I tried to move him, to get out from under him.

His body slid to the side, but he didn't wake.

"Oh, please. Dorian. No. Don't be dead. Please don't be dead." I felt for a pulse at his neck.

He didn't have one.

I jumped off the altar.

Dorian's body rolled so that he was on his stomach and I saw all the knife had done to him. His shirt was sticky with blood, a gaping hole in his back.

"No. Dorian. No."

I had a flash of Gabe when I thought I killed him.

Briefly, my feet wanted to run, but I kept myself planted in place.

I was different now.

I wasn't the girl I was with Gabe.

But, I was a vampire - the Seal - and I could save Dorian.

But only if I stayed.

Sucking in a ragged breath, I climbed on the altar, kneeling next to him.

I placed both hands over the wound and poured all the love I had for him, all the love he gave me, into my desire to heal him.

The colors of the seven magics rushed from my hands into him. They lit the room and beat slowly under my hands.

"Come back, Dorian. Come back. I need you," I pleaded.

The colors grew stronger and surged through his body until he was bathed in them. "That's it. You can do it. If your love saved me, then let mine save you." I choked back my fear. "Please."

His body glowed as the colors grew brighter and brighter, until I had to look away as an eruption of light flashed, and my hands fell onto the altar.

Dorian was gone.

I stared at my hands, covered in Dorian's blood, and screamed, and screamed, and screamed. The sound vibrated through the crumbling

rock. One rock struck me on the head, and I tumbled off the altar.

I tried to stand but kept slipping in the blood.

There was so much blood.

It streaked the altar and pooled around it.

My shoes, jeans, and arms were covered in it, a mixture of my blood and Dorian's.

As I sobbed, desperate, unsure what to do next, something began to form on the altar.

Frantic, I moved closer.

To my astonishment, a black gem appeared.

It was spinning fast and grew bigger and bigger until suddenly it stopped, hovering above the flat stone surface.

It was the size of an egg. Specks of silver, green, blue, red, brown, gold, and indigo covered it - the colors of the seven magics.

"I see her." Cindy's voice cut through my anguish and the falling rocks.

I snatched up the gem and shoved it in my pocket. I didn't know what the jewel meant, but I wasn't leaving it behind.

A large boulder fell from the ceiling and struck me on the shoulder, sending me to the ground.

"Come on," I heard someone shout, and I turned toward it.

Rocks continued to fall from the ceiling, but Cindy was there. So was Gabe. I wanted to tell them to leave me. I didn't want to face them. Because that meant I'd have to tell them about Dorian. That he died. Because of me.

"She's over here," Cindy said.

I tried to stand, but another rock struck my leg, and I stayed down. Grief overwhelmed me. The Seal was supposed to be all-powerful and should've saved Dorian. But it didn't.

"Snow!" Cindy shouted, tossing rocks out of her path with magic as

she made her way over. She knelt down, and I saw Gabe move to the other side of me.

OceanofPDF.com

SAVED US ALL

I LOOKED at Cindy and then at Gabe before closing my eyes. "I couldn't save him," I said in a voice that wasn't my own. "I tried. I did. Kenmei said, use love. I swear, I tried."

Gabe knelt on the other side. "Who?"

"Dorian," I whispered. "He protected me, all of us, but he's gone. I don't know where." The words came out choppy and garbled, but I couldn't make myself stop crying.

"It's okay. You're okay," he said, but I heard the anguish in his voice.

Cindy pulled me into a hug. "It isn't your fault, Snow."

But that wasn't true. It was my fault.

I thought of dying.

Would there be rest?

Could I shut out the agony?

The way Dorian looked at me. His kiss. What he did. Saved me. Saved us all. Abernathy's words to Dorian rang in my mind: "Very few have the capacity to love like you."

"Where could he be?" I wailed.

"Let's get her out of here," Gabe said to Cindy, and I felt his hands pull me into his arms.

"My mom?" I asked as they pulled me from the rubble.

"She's alive. They brought her to the infirmary while I was there," Gabe said.

The weight on my spirit lifted a tiny bit. At least my mother hadn't died. "We need to help her. She's in danger." I tried to climb out of Gabe's arms, but he held on tight.

"Right now, we need to leave. This is our one shot."

Cindy grabbed hold of my hand. "Eradicus seemungus." There was a rustle of wind, and the three of us went from the rocky debris to the colorful streets of Mizu Atlantica.

In the distance was the rushing sound of giant wings beating against the night sky.

Gabe set me on the ground, but I leaned against him. My body was healed but emotionally was another story.

I breathed in deeply, trying to pull in some clean air, hoping it would sustain my devastated soul. The air was wet and smelled of brine, but there was also a hint of fragrance - honeysuckle. My mother.

Gabe held me steady. "Abernathy's coming," he said. "We need to go right away before Devoran realizes we're missing."

I wasn't leaving without my mother, but Gabe was right about one thing. He and Cindy needed to escape Mizu Atlantica. With them out of the way, I wouldn't worry. I shuddered. Another death would end me, I felt sure.

Abernathy landed. "Where's the human?" he asked, searching my grief-stricken face.

I placed a shaky hand on one of his golden scales, near his mouth. He was so warm.

"He's gone. Something happened. I'm not sure what."

I knew, but I couldn't make my lips say the words.

The dragon grunted. "It's just for now," he said without a trace of grief.

I wanted to punch him. Light him on fire. Not that it would do any good.

He went on, his voice was urgent. "Climb on. I can hear Devoran and his guards preparing to come against us. They know you've escaped."

Gabe lifted Cindy onto the dragon's back, then he reached for my hand. "I'll help you," he said kindly.

I shook my head, and his jaw flexed in frustration. "I can't leave my mother. You guys go. I'll find another way to get her out."

Abernathy huffed, and smoke swirled from his nostrils, sending the smell of sulfur into the air.

Gabe shook his head, angry. "Dorian is dead. You nearly died. We need to regroup, figure out our next move. We can't do that if we're trapped here, fighting for our lives."

"Snow," Cindy began, crossing her arms. "We don't know anything about this place. Staying behind is crazy."

"I know," I said, absently patting Abernathy's cheek. "That's why you need to go." I swallowed. "I'll be better off alone."

Abernathy shook his mane. "You need your friends, your family. Without them, you'll lose."

I cleared the emotion from my throat. "Dorian is dead because of me. I can't be responsible for any more."

The dragon snorted. "You're alive because of that boy. Don't destroy Dorian's selfless gift by going into battle without preparation."

Tears stung my cheeks. "I can't leave my mom."

The screeching of metal on metal rang through the night. I turned toward the sound. The green circle Abernathy landed on when we first arrived slid open. At least a hundred armed guards slowly exited. Each held bizarre guns similar to the one my mom had worn on her back. All of them were aimed in our direction. Devoran stood in the guards' midst, an arrogant ferocity on his face.

"On my life, I swear we'll come back for your mother, young vampire. But now is not the time." Abernathy growled, sending a stream of fire in the direction of the guards. I got the feeling it was less about fighting and more about frustration over my unwillingness to cooperate.

Gabe reached out for my hand. "Come on," he said.

A shot ripped at the skin on my forearm. The bullet appeared to be made of pure light. I stared at it, mesmerized, as it sizzled and turned to ash, momentarily leaving a burn mark until my skin recovered.

More of them hissed past me. Several hit Abernathy, and he roared.

"Get on my back, you stubborn girl!"

Another bullet struck my thigh. I looked up and noticed Cindy was bleeding from a wound in her shoulder. Gabe's chest was bleeding, and so was his arm and his thigh.

They weren't going to leave without me.

"Fine!" I yelled and jumped on. "Go!"

Abernathy shot into the air. He swung his head at the guards who were running toward us and let out his fiery breath. I thought for sure they would all burn, but at the last second, a rectangular door of light appeared, and the guards vanished into it. Abernathy growled and flew toward the bubble suspended over the city.

I kept my gaze on the street, on Devoran. He stood on the pearlized road, his hands on his hips, his feet wide apart, his chest heaving in anger.

"I'm coming back," I whispered.

OceanofPDF.com

FRESH PAIN

"HOME IS where your heart can flourish." My mom used to say those words to me when I was a child.

As Abernathy circled Professor Pops' sprawling mansion, my heart clenched.

After I told Professor Pops and the brothers what happened with Dorian, would they continue to let this be my home?

From the air, I made out the little cottage-type house I lived in with my mom and dad, and then my dad and stepmother.

Happy memories sprang to mind.

Like the times my mom would bake cookies while she hummed the latest popular song. Or when she would let me help her plant flowers in the spring and fall.

The house where I grew up was minuscule compared to Professor Pops' extensive grounds and house.

Through the dark, I was able to distinguish the tennis court and putting green. Behind the mansion, which seemed somehow larger from the sky, lay a sculpted, manicured lawn, and a rectangular pool - lit and giving off a cyan glow.

If I hadn't left my mother in captivity in Mizu and Dorian dead, I would be excited to be home.

But I wasn't.

I was sick inside.

My heart was broken.

I leaned against Cindy. She, Gabe, and Abernathy were melancholy as well. None of us spoke. Too much had happened.

On the flight back, I healed their wounds with the Seal and told them what Dorian had done.

That I tried to save him, but he vanished.

I told them all of it without an ounce of feeling, as though I was relating events that happened to someone else.

When I finished, it was apparent Gabe and Cindy were hurting too. Broken like me.

Abernathy kept mostly quiet. "The Unknowns are strange creatures. They see things much differently than we do," he said.

And that was it.

We flew the rest of the way home in silence.

Honestly, I was grateful. Soon enough, I'd have to tell Professor Pops and the remainder of the brothers about Dorian. That because of me, they would never see him again.

Dorian, I thought, wiping at fresh tears.

Abernathy's wings pounded against the night sky several times before he landed gracefully on the back lawn. It was winter, so the yellow grass crunched and crackled under his weight and enormous size of his paws.

Gabe slid off first and helped Cindy down. He didn't bother with me. Probably too upset about what happened. That I took one of his brothers from him.

"I have to speak with the other chayot," he said, giving Cindy a quick hug. "Let Professor Pops know I'm back and safe. Please?" He glanced at me then, and I nodded.

Without the slightest noise or even a flicker in the wind, he was gone.

That was new. Apparently, Gabe and his chayot skills were getting stronger.

"I should get home. My parents are probably freaking out," Cindy said.

"Okay," I whispered as I slid down.

Cindy patted my arm. "I'll see you tomorrow. We'll figure out a

way to get your mom back." Though I sensed her trepidation, her exhaustion, I knew without a doubt she would help.

"Tomorrow," I repeated and tried to smile, but my lips wouldn't cooperate. She jogged toward the house and skirted it. I knew she was headed for her car, parked in front. As I watched her go, I wondered if it was wise to be close to the people I loved. Being near me seemed to cause them pain.

Abernathy let out a gust of smoke through his nostrils. "You mustn't worry so much, vampire. Yes, your friends may suffer, and sometimes it'll be your fault. But you should ask yourself, would they be happier knowing you went into danger alone? Would they feel safer?" He shook his head, making his golden mane swirl around his face.

I didn't know how to respond. He was right, of course. But it didn't make me feel any better. Accept that you're going to cause people pain. That's what it felt like he was saying. How could I consent to that? The answer was simple. I couldn't.

"A hundred questions are swimming around in your head. Ask them so I may return to my home and get some sleep." He lay down, resting his chin against his front paws. Somber eyes studied me.

Had I not wanted to put off talking to Pops and the brothers, I would've found an excuse to leave. "I do have questions," I began. "Like why would you take me to Mizu when you damn well knew Devoran wanted to kill - " I stopped. At the edge of the woods, between my house and Professor Pops', stood Christopher. But that wasn't what gave me pause. For the briefest moment, I thought he was Dorian.

My heart shattered all over again.

Gulping down my pain, I leaned against Abernathy, my question forgotten.

A rumble, like a purr, came from deep within his body. "Stay strong. You still have much ahead of you."

His words made me ill. It was true. I still needed to find a way to save the seven magics, preferably without losing my life as the Unknowns intended. I needed to rescue my mother, tell Pops and the brothers about Dorian, and determine whether I was meant to be the next vampire queen. Each thought weighed more heavily than the one before until I wished I could disappear, vanish into nothingness.

"He's waiting. You should talk to him," Abernathy said. I sensed a hitch in the dragon's words. He knew way more than he shared, and there was something he wasn't saying.

I studied my hunter. The man I decided to go all the way with. He was handsome, excessively so. And before that moment, it hadn't dawned on me how much Christopher and Dorian looked alike. They both had hazel eyes - at least, had before the Seal changed Christopher's to a silvery violet. Both had sandy-colored hair and were tall and tan, with well-defined bodies. They could've been fraternal twins. Brothers, at least.

Maybe it was because their personalities were so different that I hadn't noticed their physical similarities before now. Where Christopher was serious, Dorian was more laid back, playful.

"How long were we gone?" I asked Abernathy.

"A few days. They've all been worried. I sent word to the professor you were visiting your mom after I left you with her. So, he knows a little, but that only increased his concern."

"Great." And I missed more school. Would I ever graduate?

"Agreed. The hunter is the most upset." A question lay behind his words, but he went on, and I forgot to be worried. "He wanted me to fly him to you, but I told him no. He isn't too fond of me at the moment." A soft chuckle escaped the dragon's throat. "Go on. I'll rest my eyes while I'm waiting."

"Alright." I took a step toward Christopher before pausing. "Aren't you worried someone will see you?"

He already closed his eyes but opened one. "Do I look the least bit

concerned, little vampire?"

"No, you really don't. And I'm hoping it's because you know what you're doing and not because - " I trailed off. I didn't want to call him crazy. That would be rude.

"I'm not crazy - well, at least no more than can be expected after six thousand plus years of life. I do possess a good deal of magic, remember." He closed his eye. "Trust me. The only reason you can see me is because I want you to."

"Right." I kept forgetting about magic, even though I was part of that world now - a supernatural creature. Shaking my head, I moved briskly toward Christopher. The closer I got, the faster I went, until I was in his arms, my face buried in his neck. It was good to see him and feel his body against mine, giving me a sense of security. My heartbeat quickened with happiness at having him near.

But he wasn't Dorian. At the thought of him, pain radiated through me.

"Don't ever leave without telling me," Christopher said fiercely, his fingers winding through my hair.

"I'm sorry," I responded, forcing away the tears stinging my lashes.

"What's the dragon still doing here? Doesn't he have someplace to be? A nap to get to?" he asked, his words filled with irritation.

"I need to talk to him. He's waiting until I'm done with you," I said softly, trying to smile.

Christopher met my gaze, his eyes filled with longing. "If I have my way, we'll never be apart again."

I hugged him, though it didn't feel the same. Things changed. It didn't matter that Dorian was gone. I felt what real love was supposed to be and knew that wasn't how I felt for my hunter. "I won't be long."

"Promise?"

I watched his face, the way he looked at me and was grateful he cared so much. "I need to speak with Abernathy. Alone." I looked

away, hoping he wouldn't be upset but determined to stand my ground. It wasn't that I didn't want him to know about the black gem in my pocket. I wanted to understand what it was first. Created on the altar from Dorian's blood and mine. I needed to know what it meant, and I knew if anyone had the answer, it would be the dragon.

"Fine," he replied after several long seconds. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I pulled him close, kissing his cheek. "Thank you, Christopher."

He cupped my face in his hands, brushing my cheeks with his thumbs. Electric shocks of longing coursed through my body. "You can tell me anything. You know that, right?"

I swallowed, nodded. "I will. Later."

He pressed his lips to mine, a kiss filled with promises. Compared to what I felt with Dorian, there were significant differences. When we separated, he sighed. "Tomorrow, Frosty," he said, brushing the tip of my nose with his finger.

OceanofPDF.com

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

WHEN I WAS sure Christopher was gone, I hurried back to Abernathy. He smacked his lips and opened one eye. "Awww, young love." He paused. "We both know it isn't real."

I sighed, crossing my arms over my chest. It wasn't his place to say anything. After Dorian's kiss - the love that had surrounded me, filled me - I knew the dragon was right. But Dorian was dead.

"Love is dense," Abernathy continued.

I snorted; grateful I could jump on his unusually lousy comment. "That's romantic."

A laugh resounded in his throat. "What I mean is, real love, is more than what you see, what you feel, in the moment."

"Really?" I asked with thick sarcasm, but I was interested. It wasn't like I ever had someone to talk to about love.

"Certainly," he said with a wink. "Think about a lush forest, rich with all manner of foliage. A person could spend eons discovering its secrets and still not find them all. It's the same with love. True love, anyway." He gave me a pointed look. "Deep, abiding love is discovering something new and wondrous about the other person, even after spending a lifetime together."

"I like that," I said, my mind wandering back to Dorian and our kiss. "What about true love's kiss?" My face grew hot. I was embarrassed to be talking to a dragon about something that sounded so juvenile.

He laughed again, and it sounded like thunder. "You want to know if you will become human again if you receive it."

I nodded, blinking back tears. Juvenile or not, it was in my thoughts, and I craved an answer.

"Hmmm." He extended his wings, turned, and looked at them. "Is that what you want? To become human - at least partially so - since you were never fully human to begin with."

I didn't. Without a doubt, I knew that. "No, but what would happen if I received it now? Since I'm the Seal and a vampire." I coughed, trying to work through my feelings. Things were so different, and true love's kiss didn't matter anymore. I knew that. When Professor Pops told me about true love's kiss, the Seal wasn't even in the picture.

"Ah." Abernathy smiled and licked his teeth. "That's a good question." He closed his eyes. "I have theories, but not exact answers." He opened his eyes, catching me off guard with his stare. "There has never been another like you, Snow White."

"That's what I figured." I scanned the sky, searching among the brilliant stars for courage.

Abernathy clicked his claws against each other. "Enough of that. What do you really need to discuss with me? I know there is more."

There was. A lot more. "It's - " I paused, readjusting my inner turmoil. I hadn't meant to bring that up, about the kiss. But I was glad I did. There was no going back to ordinary. Abernathy made that clear.

Reaching a hand in my pocket, my fingers found the gem. Its smooth surface was slightly warm. I pulled it out, holding it up for Abernathy to see. The flecks of color glistened in the moonlight. "This," I said timidly.

Abernathy shook his mane, tilting his head to one side. "Unexpected," he said slowly, his voice filled with wonder. "Tell me how you came to have that in your possession."

I explained what happened and how it formed on the altar from my blood and Dorian's.

"Did you show the hunter?" he asked, his voice so low, I wondered whether he said the question aloud.

I shook my head. "No. Only you." It was apparent whatever it was,

the gem was something special.

"Good." Twin wisps of smoke plumed from his nostrils, and he breathed out heavily.

I waited for him to say more, but he didn't. "What is it?" I asked, placing a hand on a hip.

A palpable current of energy churned the chilly air.

A snap, like a fierce worry, rolled off the dragon. Whatever the gem was, it didn't fill Abernathy with joy, that was for sure.

"Between your fingers - that gem - it is the beginning and the end. I cannot tell you more. I will say this, though. Keep it with you at all times, understand?" He stood, and I had to tilt my head to see his face.

"I don't. Why can't you be more specific? Tell me what it is." I stuck the gem back in my pocket, afraid that having it out in the open was somehow wrong. Dangerous, even. Abernathy was infuriating. "The beginning and the end tells me nothing."

"If I'm more specific, then it's likely others will find out what you possess. Once the words have been spoken, they can't be taken back."

"Fine." I tucked my hands in my back pockets. If he weren't forthcoming on the gem, maybe he would be more helpful with plans to save my mother. "What about my mom? How are we going to get her out of Mizu?"

He lowered his head. "Quite simply, you aren't."

I started to protest, but he went on.

"You must confront the vampire queen, convince her she's made a mistake, strip her of her power, and return magic to the other creatures. She must allow you to take over. When she is no longer a ruler, you can release those in captivity. Once those two things are done, the balance of the seven magics should be restored."

He paused as though deep in thought, and I waited. "Killing her won't solve anything. You must make her see the harm she's causing and make her step down."

I huffed. "Yeah, right. I'll just show up in her land and have a conversation with the vampire queen. She'll be more than happy to acquiesce. I'm sure she'll be thrilled by the idea of me taking over and releasing all supernatural creatures under her control."

"Sarcasm is unbecoming," Abernathy quipped, smacking his teeth together with a snap.

"Stop kidding around. I need to save my mother, and then I can go after the vampire queen." I held out my hands in front of me, pleading with him to do as I asked. "Tell me what I need to know about Mizu Atlantica." My bottom lip quivered at thoughts of what Devoran might be doing to her. "My mom! I can't leave her there."

Abernathy closed his eyes. "You know all you need to know of Mizu. It was created to protect magical creatures from Sharra. Once you've dethroned her and her magic is no longer viable, Mizu will cease to matter, and those within will be returned to this realm. Simple as that."

I gasped. "You promised me." His words sounded like excuses, like what a lazy dragon might say.

He growled. It was soft but menacing. I crossed a line, but I didn't care.

"I think it's time I tell you a secret," he said.

"What secret?" I threw my hands in the air, exasperated.

This conversation wasn't going anything like I expected. I thought he would tell me about the black gem. I hoped it was a way to stop the vampire queen or, better yet, a way to restore balance to magic.

I thought it was the answer to all my problems. Something that would mean Dorian's death wasn't meaningless. Though I already knew that wasn't true. His sacrifice saved me and all of Earth's creatures.

Instead of enlightening me, Abernathy made the gem out to be something sinister. I swallowed back a string of curse words that floated through my mind.

Abernathy let out a roar.

Startled, I fell backward.

My hands crunched against the hard, dead grass.

A stream of fire went into the sky, and the air became thick with smoke and the stench of sulfur. It stung my nose.

A golden shimmer surrounded the dragon, so he glowed.

The light became so bright I had to look away.

After several seconds the light diminished. I coughed and squinted, trying to see the dragon through all the smoke. But he was gone, and a man came forward.

OceanofPDF.com

SECRETS REVEALED

"KENMEI," I whispered, bewildered. "What happened to Abernathy?"

"Take my hand," he insisted.

I shook my head. "Where's the dragon?" Had Kenmei killed him? Was everything the vampire queen said about him right? Was Kenmei evil?

"Shiryo-san, it's me," he said and crouched, so we were level. His eyes flashed, and the endlessness that was in Kenmei's eyes vanished. Instead, his eyes glowed amber.

Abernathy's eyes.

"That's impossible."

"Not impossible. Let me show you." He held out his hand again. Nervously I took it, and he pulled me to my feet.

"Does Pro - Adam Henry know?" I asked, searching his face, trying to see Abernathy in there. Even though the dragon was a hundred times my size, I felt more at ease with him than I ever felt with Kenmei.

"Yes, he knows. After so many years, how could he not? Even the vampire queen knows."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why's that?" And then I understood. The vampire queen had bitten him, changed him. He was the first hunter. She tasted his blood, probably more than once. "Yet she changed you anyway. That must've been quite a feat for Sharra. Having a dragon do her bidding."

He smiled sardonically. "I was never in my dragon form while in her service. When she changed me, I was in this form." He pointed at his very human-looking body, that of a middle-aged Asian man. "It wasn't until much later that she realized what I was, but I refused to

take on my dragon form for her. It was a constant battle between us."

"Why would you even allow it?"

He chuckled lightly. "It was a rough time in my life." He gave me a sideways look.

"Did it have to do with love?" I was only half-joking, but his eyebrows raised.

"Very perceptive." He clasped his hands behind his back and turned his attention to the sky.

I wanted to ask him more. Get the details. It was weird to imagine dragon love or even Kenmei in love.

"May I take you somewhere?"

"Sure," I said, in no hurry to face the realities that lay inside Professor Pops' mansion. The truths about myself that I would have to tell him and the brothers.

"Thank you." He squeezed my fingers. "Don't let go."

"Okay." My stomach felt a little queasy.

Kenmei moved one hand in front of him.

Professor Pops' mansion and yard began to blur like watercolors in the rain.

IN AN INSTANT, Kenmei and I were on a dirt road. The sun hung high above, and, off in the distance, I saw a golden dragon circling in the air.

"Is that you?" I asked, still unsure about where we were and what I was seeing. More than that, I was still having a difficult time believing Abernathy and Kenmei were the same. My mind ran through the different times I talked to the dragon, even with Silindra and Kenmei. The strangest recollection was when Kenmei told me to speak with Abernathy. Which meant he was, in fact, sending me to talk to himself. I shook my head.

Maybe the dragon was crazy.

"Yes," Kenmei answered, bringing me out of my thoughts. I watched his features soften. "Listen."

I clamped down on another question and strained to hear what he wanted me to. Finally, I heard it. Singing, like the song of a beautiful bird, but the voice was that of a girl.

As one, Kenmei and I glided closer, like moving in super-fast forward. We went off the dirt road, passed some wild daisies, and entered an orchard filled with apple trees. The scented blossoms made everything fragrant. I spotted a girl only a few feet away.

"Won't she see us?" I asked, ready to hide behind a tree.

"No. This is one of my memories." A hint of a smile danced on Kenmei's lips. He was happy. I felt it flow off him.

I took a step closer, mesmerized by her song. She seemed so innocent, carefree. Her hair was long and golden blonde, the color of Abernathy's mane. She wore a brown skirt and a white shirt. The sleeves were long and poofed at the wrist. Her feet were bare. On one arm, hung a basket. As she filled it with apples, she sang:

Carry me up to the clouds.

Let me soar like the birds.

I want to fly on the wings of love.

Birds of all kinds fluttered around her, but they were silent. Even they seemed enamored by her voice.

If I had feathers. A tail too.

My love will ascend,

carrying you and you and you.

As she sang, she pointed at a different bird.

Her song was like magic, calling to everyone who could hear. "Who is she?" I asked.

"Can't you tell?" he asked, distracted.

I felt like I should know, but I didn't. "She has a beautiful voice."

"That's Aurora," he said, nodding, his eyes never leaving her.

"No," I began, but regarded her more closely. She looked almost exactly like the girl in the fairytale-inspired figurines and pictures my stepmother used to keep in the house. "Wow," I said.

"She's exquisite, isn't she?"

She was stunning. "Yes," I answered, keeping a step behind Kenmei as we moved nearer.

"Aurora is the reason I first took on a human form." He chuckled. "Before I met her, I didn't even know I could transform. It was my love for her that inspired the change."

We both watched as Aurora plucked an apple from a tree and placed it in her basket.

"Wow," I said again.

"I had all this magic, but no one to love. It was her song that drew me. And once I heard her laugh, that was it. I was gone. In love."

"She sings beautifully," I breathed, trying to understand how a dragon could fall in love with a human.

"If those birds possessed my magic, they would've become men as well."

I snickered, checking his features to see whether he was serious.

OceanofPDF.com

"I'M NOT KIDDING. Even now, I can remember the love that beat in their tiny hearts for her."

I saw the look on his face and knew he wasn't. Even I sort of loved her now. Her words swayed in my head and filled my heart. "Does she possess magic?" I asked, shocked I could be twitterpated after a few seconds of hearing her sing.

"Yes, Shiryo-san. Aurora was the first enchantress, though she didn't know it. Her song bewitched all who heard her but not to the extent that I lost control of myself. Her magic awoke my amorous feelings, and I wanted to experience them. With her. So, I took on this form and became Kenmei."

"Did it work?" I asked, surprised. "Did she love you back?"

His brow furrowed, and pain changed his expression.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He cleared his throat. "Don't be. Though she didn't return my love, we became great friends. Even after she married, we often visited together. I taught her how to use her magic. And she assisted in creating the book your friend Cindy keeps. The Eye of Abernathy."

"Ohhhhh."

"That's right," he nodded, and a whimsical smile smoked across his lips. "She loved me, but it wasn't the kind one feels for their eternal mate. Still, I wouldn't trade a second of the time I spent with her."

Loneliness oozed out of him. But I knew he had family, though I only met his grandson, Hiro. "Your grandson loves you, though."

"Oh, yes. And I love him too." He sighed.

"Surely, you've fallen in love more than once since Aurora?" Obviously, since he had at least one daughter.

"Yes, I've loved a few times, but none were so great as when I fell in love with her."

That made me sad. Unrequited love sounded awful. "I'm sorry," I said.

He shook his head. "Don't be. Perhaps it's the heartbreak of first love, or maybe dragons love differently than humans." He chuckled again. "Either way, my heart has and will always belong to Aurora." He paused and wiped at his eyes. Was he crying? "It was the love I felt for her that finally allowed me to break free of the vampire queen's grasp."

That was interesting. "How does that work?" Christopher kind of told me, but I was still a little confused.

"The token must have significant meaning for the hunter. It's different for each of us."

For Christopher, it was the bear he carved. I wondered what helped Professor Pops. Someday I might ask him.

"I shared this memory with you because I wanted you to understand the power the vampire queen holds," Kenmei said.

"What do you mean?" I'd completely forgotten everything but being in this moment.

"Sharra drank from me at my weakest moment, when Aurora shunned my romantic affections for another. I was angry, filled with hatred, consumed by grief. When Sharra found me, I believed I was using her - at first. Of course, once she changed me, I realized my folly."

I was still confused.

Kenmei noticed and went on. "By drinking my blood, she stole some of my magic." He paused. "Each time you allow Christopher to drink from you, you're giving him some of your magic as well. And when you healed him?" A darkness passed over Kenmei's features.

I wouldn't change what I did. Letting Christopher die was out of

the question. But now I understood. Before I was the Seal, Christopher only took what little magic I possessed as a vampire. Now? I shuddered. Some of the Seal's power passed from me and into him every time I let him drink from me. Holy crap. "Why didn't you just tell me that from the beginning?" Frustration oozed from my pores.

His eyes softened. "Would it have made a difference?"

Such a simple question. I wanted to give him a haughty yes, but as I searched Kenmei's face, I knew that was a lie. Before Dorian showed me the truth, I had thought I loved Christopher. "No," I whispered. "But - " I began, and Kenmei held up a hand to stop me.

"You may not be in love with him. He may not be your true love, but you do love him. And I believe he loves you, too. He's - " Kenmei turned away and fixed his gaze on Aurora. Her basket was almost full of apples.

"What?" I got the feeling Kenmei wanted to tell me something important. He either couldn't or wouldn't. And where Christopher was concerned, my feelings were confusing.

Because of Dorian. With him. On that altar, I felt what real love was. Not that it mattered. Dorian was gone. Still, the experience, his lips on mine - I didn't think anything else would ever compare.

"Did you speak to her in this memory?" I asked, turning my attention back to Kenmei.

"No. This was before we officially met."

The landscape smeared like a ruined painting once again, and then I was home. Abernathy and Kenmei were gone.

But his voice whispered in my mind. "Seek out Sharra immediately. Finish this, little vampire."

My thoughts heavy, I went to the back door of the mansion. It was unlocked, and I walked in. Glints of moonlight cut through the windows, bathing the kitchen in its glow. The clock on the microwave said four-thirty. Everyone would be asleep.

Quietly I tiptoed up the stairs and entered the bedroom that used to be Dorian's. Gatsby jumped off my bed and wound his body around my feet.

"Hi, boy." I picked him up. "You're freezing." His fur felt like he came from the blistery cold outside. I went to the window. It was open slightly, and I closed it but didn't move away. Through the trees, I could see my house. An ache filled my heart, and I wiped the tear sliding down my cheek. Placing Gatsby back on my bed, I sat and removed my shoes. Weariness weighed heavily on my shoulders.

Even though the room was redecorated, in my mind's eye, I could still see Dorian's football posters on the walls, his clothes strewn over the desk and on the floor, his laptop flicking through Patriots photos.

"Dorian." I spoke his name like a prayer. It hurt to realize I finally grasped the power of love when it was too late to do anything about it.

"Sorry to interrupt." Professor Pops stood in the doorway, his gray hair rumpled like he hadn't combed it in days, his clothes the same he wore the night Cindy and I decided to go see Abernathy.

"It's okay, Pops." I swallowed. "I mean, Mr. Henry." Once I told him what happened, would he hate me and throw me out? "Have you seen Gabe?"

Professor Pops flipped on the light and rubbed a hand over his tired face. "Not yet." His eyes darkened. "I'm glad you're back. Safe." He extended his arms to give me a hug.

"Dorian's dead," I blurted, clinging to him like he was my only lifeline.

Pops froze in my grasp. His arms went lax and hung at his sides. "I don't believe it."

I stepped back, desperate to see what he was feeling. His eyes glazed over, and pain convulsed through him. My heart broke again. For him. For me. "I'm sorry, Mr. Henry." It didn't seem right to call him Professor Pops anymore, not when that was what Dorian called

him. Not when I was responsible for his death.

Pops sat on the edge of my bed; his shoulders turned in wearily. "How?" he asked quietly.

I went over to the loveseat as though space would protect me from the agony he was feeling. Then I explained. When I was finished, he met my eyes. His were filled with tears, and his cheeks were wet. "You didn't see him die? He just disappeared?"

"Yes." I didn't want to give him hope. "He didn't have a pulse, though. I checked."

Pops wiped at his eyes and sat up straight. "If we don't have a body, there's a chance he's still alive." He must've seen the disbelief on my face because he raised his eyebrows. "You should know by now, considering the supernatural world we know exists, that it's not over until - " A smile broke on his face. "Until we have our Happily Ever After."

I blinked. My lips parted.

Was he serious?

Happily Ever After was a stupid ending to stupid fairytales.

More appropriate would've been Happily Next Chapter, or Happily Ensuing Life. Or –

"What do you mean?" I asked, wondering if his grief corrupted his thoughts.

He stood and went to the door before facing me.

A little bit of light shone in his eyes. It didn't matter that I tried to dissuade him. The man still held out faith that his son wasn't dead.

"I have some research to do." He rushed over, wrapping me in his arms. "We'll work this out."

Without prelude, the waterworks flooded my face. I hugged him back and held on tight.

"It's okay," he cooed softly, stroking my hair. "It isn't your fault. It's okay." I clung to him. His words were exactly what I needed to hear.

He didn't hate me, and he wouldn't banish me from his house or his life. I was loved, no matter what. It was a sensation I needed and treasured.

Several minutes later, he released me. Professor Pops' smile was kind. "Get cleaned up. Get some rest." He paused. "We'll get him back." He glanced around the room, noticing the candles on the floor in the shape of the star. Wax had melted and left blobs on the carpet. I doubted they would come out. "Perhaps Cindy can assist with this?"

I tried to return his smile. "I'll ask."

He nodded. His confidence was contagious. "Don't worry about the others. I'll tell them what happened. When you're ready, come down, and we'll make a plan."

"Okay," I said.

He closed the door, sank onto the bed, grabbed one of the pillows, and squeezed hard.

A plan, I thought. If the others helped, that would mean more opportunities for those I cared for to get hurt or die. I couldn't allow that to happen. I would face the vampire queen, and I would do it on my own.

OceanofPDF.com

LIGHT SOME CANDLES

I TOOK A QUICK SHOWER, brushed my teeth, put my long hair in a ponytail, dressed in jeans and a red tee-shirt, and put on my red Converse. When I finished, I went to the bed and stared at the star on the floor beside it. I was still a teenager, still not a high school graduate, yet none of it mattered. I had a plan.

It was simple. Find a way into Sharra. Speak to the vampire queen, and if she wouldn't listen, destroy her with the Seal. Once that was finished, if I was still alive, I would have Abernathy take me to Mizu, where I would rescue my mother and bring her home. She and I could live in the little house next door. The one I grew up in. It would be perfect, and everything else, including school and life, would fall into place.

Gatsby climbed on my lap. I scratched behind his ears. "I'm going to fix it. Promise." The cat purred in response before jumping off the bed and leaving the room.

Taking a deep breath, I followed him until I reached the kitchen. There, I opened cabinets and drawers, searching for a lighter or matches. Something to light the candles.

"What are you doing?" Gabe's voice echoed from a dark corner, carrying a hint of amusement.

I turned. "Hi, Gabe." Telling him my plan was out of the question. I needed to make something up. "I was going to take a bath and wanted to light some candles. Do you know where to find a lighter or matches?" I shrugged, hoping the movement was nonchalant enough.

He smirked and moved over to a cupboard I hadn't checked yet. He opened it and pulled out a black lighter - a long-necked one used for lighting a grill - from the top shelf. "Here you go," he said lightly.

When I took it, our fingers brushed, and I had a quick flash of

drinking from him, the night we almost did more than kiss, and he told me he loved me.

"I'm sorry, Snowflake," he whispered.

I searched his features, trying to discover what he was sorry for. He seemed so much older than me now. Hardened. Matured. His green eyes were still vivid but darker.

"For what?" I asked, running my fingers along my wet ponytail.

"I'm a coward. I should've been a champion for you, fought for you, loved you the way you deserve."

I crossed my arms. He didn't need to apologize for that. "You are a man with a lot on your mind. I get that. You've got the chayot to lead. Cindy." I sighed. "You did what you had to do. We all did."

He brushed a strand of hair from my face. "I didn't love you for the right reasons."

That surprised me. "What do you mean?"

Gabe stepped back. "The two years you were gone allowed me to see that my love for you was mostly driven by my hate for my father."

I was confused.

"Not Professor Pops, but Oberon. My birth father." He spat out the word like it tasted terrible. "My desire to rebel against everything he was and all he stood for." He blew out a breath. "It was immature. I'm an idiot. And I'm sorry I hurt you."

I swallowed. What he said made sense. I loved him, and always would. But it had been a crush, sweet and innocent; it wasn't lasting. Definitely not what I felt for Dorian in those moments when he kissed me. "I get it. And you didn't hurt me. I'm glad you're with Cindy. She really loves you."

A fragment of a smile curled over his lips. "She's a pain in the ass, but I love her, too." His eyes caught and held mine. "I really do."

"You better," I said, smiling back. "Otherwise, she might turn you into a frog."

He chuckled. "Life is weird, isn't it?"

"That's an understatement," I responded, shaking the lighter in front of us as a reminder of why I came down. "Well, I better get my bath."

"Oh, right," he said, slightly embarrassed. "See ya later."

"Yep, see ya."

He moved out of my way, leaning his back against the island. I smiled and walked by. Without thinking, I reached back and hugged him, hard, acknowledging all he was, all he did for me. "Thanks, Gabe."

"For what?" he asked, wrapping his arms around me.

"For everything. Being a great friend, an amazing boyfriend, and, well - " I pulled back so I could see his face. "Thanks for being you."

He blinked in surprise. "You're welcome, Snowflake."

I CLOSED the door to my bedroom before kneeling in the middle of the star. Then I lit the candles. When I had them all burning, I tossed the lighter outside the circle and sat.

It occurred to me that I was breaking my promise to Christopher. He asked me not to leave again without telling him, but it couldn't be helped. I wouldn't put him or anyone else in jeopardy.

Plus, my idea might not even work.

I had no clue how to get into or leave Sharra.

In the past, it just sort of happened.

But I needed to try.

It hadn't escaped my notice that there were seven points to the star, and there were seven magics. That meant something. It had to. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on the realm of Sharra. The gardens around the castle.

The castle itself. The different rooms I was in, including the bedroom where I kissed Christopher. The bathroom where I spoke

with Zenny in the mirror. His flamboyant clothes. I focused on the smells of Sharra - magic, and rosemary, and the blood I craved.

I don't know how long I sat like that, visualizing everything I remembered, but after a time, my mind started to wander. I started thinking about the little cottage near the edge of the forest: the trees and foliage, the bush where hundreds of pixilettes rested. I recalled the earthy smells, the babbling brook, the soft ground covered in moss.

And suddenly, I could hear the brook.

Cautiously, I opened my eyes. I was in front of a cottage - the place Christopher brought me when I was poisoned. My heart lurched with joy because I'd done it. I was in Sharra.

Standing, I went over to the hut and climbed the steps. Dirt covered the window, and I used a hand to wipe it away. Then I peered inside. It was small, smaller even than my house, but it looked homey. A little kitchen with a stove, a sink, and a tiny wooden island with copper pots hung above it. The floor was wood. To the right of the kitchen was a living area. A wooden rocking chair stood next to a rock hearth. Beneath it was a furry rug in the shape of a bear. A table rested against the wall under a window. In the center was a vase. Inside were two dead flowers. They could've been daisies, but it was hard to tell. Most of the petals had fallen and lay scattered on the tabletop.

For some reason, the children's song, "Ring Around the Rosie," came to mind. I learned in World Civilization that the supposedly sweet song, taught to small children everywhere, wasn't sweet at all. It was about the bubonic plague and death.

Perhaps it was how the petals touched each other, as though they were holding hands like the children did as they sang the song. Or maybe it was the wilted stems in the vase. I didn't know, but it filled my stomach with dread.

Maybe I should've brought Christopher with me, I thought

nervously. But it was too late. I was already in Sharra, and I wasn't leaving until one of three things happened: I was dead, the vampire queen stepped down, or she allowed me to rule in her stead. I snorted, my confidence waning, but I couldn't go back. I wouldn't.

"Snow." The voice was high, like a light gasp wind. It still made me jump, and I spun in its direction and saw a pixilette. But not just any pixilette. It was Ryden. The pixilette had been alive for thousands of years. Back when Silindra was alive.

"Ryden?"

"How do you know my name?" She placed her teeny fists on her tiny waist.

There was no time to explain my linked consciousness with Silindra. "My name is Snow White. It's a long story, but I know you helped Silindra."

"Then, it is true." Her voice filled with wonder, and she came closer, studying me like I was a new plant. "Silindra kept a journal. After she died, I hid it away and read it, hoping for answers. In it, she mentioned a girl called Snow White and that you would be the key to Sharra's undoing." She rested a hand on my cheek. "You can imagine after a few thousand years, I thought Silindra had gone crazy when she wrote about you. But here you are." As she spoke, a flurry of hundreds of pixilettes, including Arianna and Eon, came in behind her. I watched them, admiring their colors as they seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. I thought of Pava, the little pixilette who came into the human realm to talk to me. She was yet another who had died needlessly at my expense.

"You were a good friend to Silindra," I said to Ryden. The pixilette looked surprisingly young, considering. "There was no one she trusted more than you." I blinked back tears as I thought of Silindra's death.

"Thank you." She kissed my nose, but I barely felt it. "If you don't mind my asking, what are you doing in Sharra?" She landed on my cheek, and I went cross-eyed.

"How about my hand?" I asked, holding it out for her.

She flew over and landed on my palm before sitting cross-legged. "I'm too old for continuous flying."

I glanced at the others and wondered how old they were. Instead of asking, I answered her question. "I'm here to stop the vampire queen." I swallowed, hoping they wouldn't stop me. Abernathy seemed to believe Sharra could be reasoned with. If it was possible, I would certainly try. "I'm here to help her see the truth," I said, my voice quivering with determination.

Ryden laughed, but it wasn't because she was happy. "Glad to hear it," she said with a grunt as she stood. "Well, we will assist in whatever capacity we can."

I glanced at the others and further, beyond the trees. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of magical creatures - elves, unicorns, fairies, and trolls - hovered in the shadows. Listening. Waiting.

"I want to do this alone," I said. "You can help by staying out of the way. I don't want anyone getting hurt."

Ryden lifted into the air and turned to face me. "I see. Well, we are here if you need us. And remember, their fates are in your hands". She pointed at the creatures in the forest, and I swallowed back the sudden fear in my throat.

I was a child. Barely eighteen. What made me think I could defeat the vampire queen? I swallowed again. "I know. I'm going to speak with Sharra, see what she has to say. I will do right by them." I waved a hand toward the trees and those within. "I'll do right by you," I added. "One way or another, I will end this."

Ryden bowed. "Sharra is at the castle. She's completely out of sorts, worse than usual. Until last night. I don't know what's changed, but my spies inform me she's ecstatic about something. So be careful."

"Thank you, Ryden." I stepped off the porch and headed down the dirt path toward the castle and my destiny.

The pixilette landed on my shoulder. "Do you want me to come

with you?"

I was touched by her offer, and I did want her company. But I wouldn't be putting her or anyone else in harm's way. I was the Seal. Dealing with the vampire queen was my responsibility. I would handle her alone. "You're welcome to come as far as the castle. After that, I'll go by myself."

OceanofPDF.com

MADE OF STONE

AT THE CASTLE GATES, I said goodbye to Ryden. With as much confidence as I could muster, I used the Seal to melt the wrought iron portcullis before stepping through. I expected to see guards or be rushed by Sharra's drone vampires. But there wasn't a single living creature around.

With each step, I realized there wasn't a sound except the clop of my Converse on the cobblestone walk. It was eerie, and I steeled myself for whatever came next.

When I reached the large front entrance, I thought of knocking, but pushed that aside and I threw open the doors. Sharra stood in the entryway, waiting for me.

"How lovely of you to come, Snow White. Although, if you had any manners, you would've knocked."

"I guess I don't have any," I said, trying to sound tough. Nervous jitters fluttered inside my stomach. I took my stance, my feet apart and my shoulders squared. My hands were at my sides, poised to strike if necessary.

Sharra didn't move, almost like she was made of stone. It was like one of those old American cowboy standoffs. We were both waiting. For what, I wasn't sure.

The entryway was extravagant, with heavy red material draped along the tops of the windows. An enormous chandelier, lit by lanterns, hung in the center. From the foyer diverged four different hallways. A double staircase circled to the second floor and a landing above.

Finally, I decided to speak first. "You know why I'm here. What I want." It was a statement. I could see by the conceited haughtiness on her face she knew this was the end. After today, our lives would be

altered. She believed my body would be hers, and I would die before I let that happen.

The power of the Seal pulsed through my veins, spread through me like wildfire.

"Why don't you step into my drawing room? I can see it's been days since you've had blood. You shouldn't starve yourself so." She tsk-ed me as she moved toward one of the halls.

Until that moment, I hadn't realized how long it was, but she was right. The thought of blood caused my fangs to press against my lips.

Sharra nodded, and a goblet filled with red liquid appeared in one of her hands.

I knew it was blood. The scent wafted to my nose, and my fangs extended further.

"Here," she said, smiling sweetly.

"I don't want it, Sharra." I shook my head and held my breath.

Her lips were painted a bright red. Thick but perfectly placed eye shadow adorned her eyelids. Her long black hair had been curled and was piled atop her head. A single tendril snaked down either side of her face, and a slight rosiness covered her otherwise porcelain complexion. She wore a floor-length red velvet dress. A black leather corset bound her waist and ribcage, pushing her breasts together, giving her all kinds of cleavage.

She smiled as I glared. "Fine, then. More for me." She tipped the glass, gulping down its contents. A drop fell on her chest. She snapped her fingers, and a vampire appeared from one of the hallways. He placed his arms behind his back and slowly licked the blood from her skin.

I turned away. My throat burned with longing. "Are you ready to call it quits?" I asked as soon as she sent the vampire away.

She giggled like I told a hilarious joke.

I felt like an idiot. Why would she abandon her way of life? She

had been winning for more than six millennia. Why change what worked so well? Especially when her only obstacle was me.

"Is that what you want? Me to quit?" She took a step toward me.

"Yes," I said, anger and fear blazing through me at once. "Let the creatures be freed from this place. Allow balance to be restored."

"And what happens if I agree? Do you kill me? What's your plan, dear Snow?" She had her arms crossed, and a sultry smile splayed over her face.

I turned my attention to her pointy black shoes. I couldn't meet her eyes. The truth was, I didn't know what would happen to her. Up to this point, I did what I was told. Someone said I was the Seal and that I needed to rebuild the magics. I believed them. Someone said to see Abernathy, I did it. Someone said, go confront Sharra, and I agreed. And now, here I was. What did I want? What was right? "Ugh." Sharra was messing with my head. I stepped toward her. "You got any more blood?" Might as well build my strength.

Another glass appeared in her hand. "Of course." Her smile grew bigger when I took it and chugged every drop. When it was gone, she took the glass, and it vanished. "Before we begin all of this unpleasantness, I have something to show you." She wrapped her chilly fingers around my forearm, and we whooshed into a round room. I was there once before.

Hundreds of female worker vampires sat on what looked like stone bleachers. Opposite the door were two thrones. To the right was a group of girls, and a sheet of ice blue magic surrounded them. The girls seemed tattered, beaten down. Their clothes were dirty, as were their hair and bodies.

Shocked by the sudden movement, I touched my head. "Who are they?" I asked, but I knew as soon as the words left my mouth. They were the remaining marked. She rounded them up like cattle. Girls like me who were marked at a young age and then bitten by their hunter. Some were already full-fledged vampires. They must've drunk

from their hunter and true loves. The rest were still revenants.

In particular, one full-fledged vampire stood out. She was regal. Tall, creamy brown skin and curly black hair. Her eyes were the color of liquid night. Her face seemed familiar somehow, and I realized she was the other marked Sharra had chosen.

Her face hardened when her eyes found mine, and she glared at me like I was the enemy.

"These are the marked. Destined to die," Sharra said quietly.

Some of the girls began to cry and wail. Some tried to escape. Others stood like soulless zombies, allowing themselves to be pushed around. They were awake, their eyes open, but they saw nothing. Except for the regal girl. The one I knew was Sharra's second choice. Sorrow pricked my heart, and Abernathy's words filled my mind. "You need your friends, your family. Without them, you'll lose." Not that his words could help me now. I hadn't listened, and I was already here. My friends and my loved ones weren't. And that was my plan. To keep them from any more harm.

Raising my chin, I rotated away from the girls, focusing on Sharra. "That's crap, and you know it. I'm here to prove you and your stupid words wrong."

She went over to the girl with curly black hair and touched her cheek. "Pocahontas, would you sacrifice yourself for me?"

Pocahontas bowed. "Of course, Sharra."

"See?" Sharra cackled, a chilling, mirthless sound. "I suppose I should've known you would never be ready to understand what I'm trying to do, but this one." She pulled her hand away, pressing her lips into a tight line. "They're marked, but I can only choose one. Many haven't even gone past the revenant stage. They are beautiful and sweet, but they haven't completed their transformation." She spun and stalked over to one of the thrones, sitting with a huff. "You think this is what I want? For them to die?"

"I don't think you care one way or the other."

Sharra smirked. "Perhaps you're right." Discomfort carved across her face. "These many years I've suffered, knowing what had to be done." She slammed her fists against the armrests. They shattered. Her emotions shifted so quickly, I struggled to keep up.

"What else can I do?" she continued. "To live and continue to rule, I need a new body. That means marking and choosing as necessary." She raised an eyebrow. "Vampires were the first. I am the oldest and wisest creature on the planet. If anyone understands the tough decisions, it's me." She raised a brow. "And I am one of the seven magics - an original vampire. Without me, there won't be balance. Have you thought about that?"

I hadn't. And she made sense, sadly. Maybe that's why Abernathy wanted me to talk to her instead of killing her. He understood there couldn't truly be balance without her.

It didn't change the fact that she wasn't sharing, but consuming. Stealing. Keeping magic for herself. That was unacceptable. If I learned anything, it was that tyranny never won out in the end. People would always fight against oppression.

"It is your choice," I said. "You've been alive for a long time. When will it be enough?" I leaned toward her, my hands out, imploring. "Release the supernatural creatures. Allow them to roam freely once again. When your time in the body you possess is finished, then be done. Go your way." She would die, but it was about damn time. No one should live as long as she had, especially since she did so at the expense of others. It was absurd.

Sharra leaned back against her chair. "Perhaps you're right. Maybe I should stop. Life is hard, and it just gets harder." She snorted. "I've accomplished all I could possibly want anyway." She closed her eyes.

I took another step toward her. Behind me was a flurry of voices. The worker vampires were restless. Sharra's words disturbed them. Or excited them. I couldn't tell. Sadly, I understood their excitement. She said everything I wanted to hear. "At least step down," I pleaded.

OceanofPDF.com

SENSELESS DEATH

"YOU ARE A SENSELESS, foolish girl, Snow White," Sharra said quietly. Her eyes were still closed, but her words tore through me and held on like a vise. When her eyes finally flashed open, they blazed with fury. "How about I start killing the marked now? Liberate them from their miserable lives." As she spoke, three of the girls fell forward, out of the sheet of magic surrounding them.

"Noooo!" I yelled, rushing over to the nearest body. I knew before I reached her that she would be dead, but I had to try anyway. Her face was frozen in terror, eyes wide as though they witnessed horrors even in passing. I felt for a pulse on her neck, but she didn't have one. Nausea rose in my throat.

The remaining girls screamed and tried, once again, to escape. But the magic held them fast. Each tear, every cry of pain, tore at my insides.

More senseless death, I thought.

I moved over to the next girl, hoping against hope she still lived and checked for a pulse. Nothing.

"Listen to them die. Their screams are like music," Sharra shouted.

She looked deranged as several more girls fell forward. One smacked into my shoulder, knocking me off balance and onto the floor. The rough surface scratched my arm, but it healed immediately. I gently lifted the dead girl and laid her on the ground next to the others.

"Stop. Stop it," I ordered.

"Make me," she hissed. Four more girls fell.

I pushed aside my devastation and stood. My whole body shook with frustration and fear. I had no idea what I was doing. I'd been

alive for eighteen years, had almost zero life experience, and I decided to go up against a vampire more than seven thousand years old. Sharra was right. I was a senseless girl. But as those thoughts swirled inside my head, another image flashed strong. It was when Sharra brought me to her realm, and I killed some of the workers.

I could retaliate - a death for a death. The power of the Seal burned through my fingers. I whipped around, lifted my hands, and shot two bolts of red light into the workers nearest me. They immediately began to burn, flames engulfing their skin as they screamed in agony. I held my breath against the stench of their burning flesh. "Stop," I shouted, looking at Sharra.

She snickered, and four more girls fell to the ground. "Kill them. They know their place and will gladly die for me."

I lowered my hands. I wouldn't kill uselessly. "But you did care for them the night you brought me here. You screamed when they started burning. You were upset. You were - "

"Faking it," she finished with a shrug. "It was for their benefit," she said, waving a hand in the direction of her vampires. "Yours as much as theirs."

I stared at her in disbelief and heard the alarmed whispers of the worker vampires.

Sharra sighed as they began to work themselves into a frenzy. "I do care, of course," she said to them. "Settle down. You were created for a purpose." Then she looked at me. "Despite what you may think, every creature in Sharra and on Earth is important to me. But I must take cause and effect into consideration." She smiled genially at the workers who weren't quite as aggravated as they were moments before. "My need for a new body far outweighs anything else." She pointed at her workers. "That includes them." She pointed at the girls who were marked. "Or them." Then she pointed at me. "Even you, dear Snow. But the difference between you and the other marked is they understand what I'm trying to do."

I shook my head. "But why? You've had over seven thousand years to live. What more do you need?"

She threw her hands in the air, exasperated. "I don't expect you to grasp my rationale. How can you? Your life is nothing but an infinitesimal blip on the timeline that is my life." She steepled her fingers, resting her elbows on the arms of the chair that somehow reformed. "If you agree to become the vampire queen, allow me to have your body, I will free the rest of the marked. If you don't, I will kill them all."

"What about me?" Pocahontas shouted. "You chose me!"

Sharra ignored her.

I didn't know what to think about the girl. Why would she willingly subject herself to the queen's wishes?

"Well?" Sharra asked.

If I agreed, Sharra could do what she wanted. I wouldn't know whether she kept her word or not. But if I disagreed, they would all die now. If I said yes, Sharra would possess the Seal. No one would ever be able to defeat her. My mind whirred, back and forth. I didn't know what choice to make. "Give me a minute?" I turned away, my hands against my head. I needed help. As soon as I thought that, Christopher appeared.

Like an apparition, he walked toward me wearing his hunter's garb, a sword strapped to his back. "Christopher?" Relief flooded through my body. He broke the queen's hold on him. He could help me make the right choice.

But he wasn't alone. Another person shuffled along in front of him. His hands were bound, and a burlap sack was over his head. "What are you doing?" I asked, relief replaced with worry. "Who is that?"

He gave me a lazy smile, like this wasn't a life or death situation. I reached out to take his hand, but he pulled away, walking his prisoner past me and over to the queen.

"Christopher?" I saw what was happening, but my mind was in

denial.

He released the prisoner. A smirk creased his lips as he lifted Sharra off her throne and kissed her deeply. On the mouth.

I blinked several times. My eyes had to be deceiving me. But he continued to kiss her, and she was kissing him back. Passionately.

"What the hell?" I wanted to run away. I wanted to hide. Go back to the night I was bitten and have everything, all of my memories wiped clean. "I don't understand," I finally said, even though I was beginning to. Christopher betrayed me. When he first bit me, Professor Pops told me he wasn't to be trusted. That he desired power above all else. I hadn't believed him. I didn't want to.

After several minutes that felt like hours, they finally broke apart. But Christopher kept his arm around Sharra, his expression one of gloating.

I still couldn't believe it. "Are you really Christopher?" I asked, knowing I wasn't making sense but too shocked to care.

Sharra pushed him toward me. "Show her what you brought her, my love," she said.

Christopher walked over to the bound man he left standing next to the throne and ripped the burlap sack from his head.

My breath caught in my throat, and two black spots blurred my vision.

"Dorian," I whispered. My fingers covered my mouth, and they trembled. It couldn't be.

OceanofPDF.com

MISSED YOU

HE WAS BARELY RECOGNIZABLE. One eye was bruised shut. His bottom lip was split, and dried blood stained his mouth and chin. His shirt was shredded down the front like a five-fingered lion had ripped into him.

But it was Dorian.

He wasn't dead. Beaten? Battered? Yes. But alive. My heart leaped with joy. I said his name again, balling my hands into fists at my sides. "Dorian."

He grunted as though I awakened him where he stood. His good eye peered at me, and a smile spread across his glorious, broken face. "Snow?"

An aching sob tore at my throat. "What are you doing with him?" I demanded through gritted teeth, my gaze flipping from Christopher to Sharra. "Give him to me," I demanded.

"With pleasure," Christopher said, shoving Dorian toward me. I caught him.

"Missed you," Dorian whispered, his voice hoarse; he coughed up some blood.

I fought down the urge to cry. We had to get out of here. He needed a doctor.

He needs you, my inner voice quipped.

And a light bulb flicked on in my head. Casually, I put my hands under his shirt, touching his skin. Happiness and joy at knowing he was alive poured out of my fingers, along with the Seal's power, and into Dorian. At my touch, I felt his ribs heal. His internal bleeding stopped. The bones of both wrists knitted back together.

Dorian took a deep breath, as though there was an invisible weight

pressed against his chest, and it suddenly disappeared.

Sharra finally noticed what I was doing. "Retrieve the boy!"

Christopher lifted Dorian and punched him in the face in one movement. Then he grabbed him by the shirt collar and brought him to stand next to them.

"Here is my final offer, dear Snow." Sharra grabbed Dorian under the chin. His nose was bleeding. "Give me your body. In return, I will allow the remaining marked to live as well as this human." She squeezed his face between her fingers. "It seems you have a soft spot for him. I would hate to kill him while you watch."

My knees buckled. So many emotions pummeled my mind. I felt betrayed by Christopher, relieved Dorian was alive and terrified I wouldn't be able to help anyone.

"Don't agree to anything. She's a - " Dorian began, but Sharra backhanded him so hard I heard his nose break.

"And his death won't be quick. It'll be painful." She tossed Dorian to the floor near my feet.

I knelt beside him, touching him. Healing him as best I could while they watched.

"This first thing I'll do is rip out his tongue," Sharra continued.

"Fine," I said. "You win."

Sharra's evil grin became filled with glee.

I looked at Dorian. "It's going to be okay," I whispered, but I didn't believe it. Perhaps I was just cowardly. If Sharra took my body first, I wouldn't have to witness the evil I felt sure she would bestow on Dorian, the other marked in the room, and all those I loved. What else could I do, though? Pretend I didn't care? Watch hundreds die?

"Fight her," Dorian said, his voice quiet but filled with strength. "You're stronger than her. You can win."

Sharra squatted down on the other side of Dorian, so our noses nearly touched. I could reach out and grab her. Make her suffer. Kill

her where she knelt.

The wicked feelings twisted through me like a snake. If she died, then no one else would. If she died, all of our problems would be solved. If she died, the world would be a better place.

Before I comprehended what I was doing, my hand went around her neck. Squeezing like a constrictor. With that anger, I sent the power of the Seal pulsing into her. Sizzling red burned into her flesh.

She screamed.

But Dorian yelled out in pain too.

I looked down and saw that Sharra had dragged her nails across his chest. Blood filled the wounds, leaving a red trail.

"Do - " She took a ragged breath. "Do we have a deal?" she growled.

I released her neck, my eyes trained on Dorian's blood. "Yes," I whispered.

"Good." Sharra stood. Her neck, the place I touched was blackened with my handprint.

Christopher moved to stand closer to her. He smiled, and my body swayed in agony as though he struck me. Every word he spoke, every kiss we shared, every touch - had all been lies.

The knowledge rocked me to my core. Like Silindra, I was betrayed by one I loved. But at least I hadn't loved him as entirely as Silindra had loved Gabriel. At least I was privileged to witness and feel real love.

Sharra stepped forward. The smirk on Christopher's face grew. He was proud of himself, confident in his deception, and in his place as Sharra's second.

"Give me your sword," Sharra commanded.

Christopher raised a brow in question but did as she asked. He slid the blade from the sheath strapped to his back. His lips parted as though he wanted to question her, but he remained silent.

Sharra planted a kiss on his lips when she took the blade from him. Then she turned to me.

"Are you in love with your hunter?" she asked, a knowing smile on her lips.

I stood facing her. It was happening. My body would belong to Sharra.

She thought she knew the answer, but she was wrong. "Yes," I lied.

In an instant, Christopher's smirk changed into horror. He understood what came next. That Sharra used him, betrayed him as he betrayed me. He meant nothing to her, except what he could do for her. He told me the kind of vampire she was. He should've listened to his own warning.

"Lips red as rubies. Hair dark as night. Drink your true love's blood. Become the Vampire, Snow White." The worker vampires chanted the words. With each repetition, the air became heavier with tension.

"Why?" Christopher asked Sharra, his eyes pleading. "I did everything you asked." His voice broke in desperation, and for a moment, I felt sorry for him. "Snow is here because of me. I did everything," he repeated.

Sharra rolled her eyes, giving me a knowing smile before turning her attention back to him. "I know, and that is why you must die. She loves you. In order for the ritual to work, she must consume the blood from your heart."

"I've already consumed the blood from my true love's heart," Pocahontas yelled. "Pick me. Allow me to be your next vessel."

The vampire queen paused, as though considering her words. "That's true. And you were my second choice. But this one - " she pointed at me. "Snow White is the Seal, and she is the granddaughter of the elven king. Her body contains a lot more power than yours does."

Pocahontas glared. Sheesh. If a look could kill, I'd already be dead. She should be happy. Didn't she get that once Sharra claimed my

body, I wouldn't exist anymore?

Forcing myself not to shudder, I refocused on Sharra.

Christopher used Pocahontas's interruption to his advantage and ran to the door. He was nearly through when Sharra used her power to lift him into the air and deposit him directly in the spot where he was a moment before.

"Don't leave. Cowardice doesn't look good on you." Sharra shifted the sword and held it like a dagger, the blade facing me.

I gave her a curious look. She spun and lifted the sword.

Everything intensified and sharpened while the events unfolded in slow motion.

Sharra's red dress flared out like a tulip as the blade sliced through his neck.

Christopher made a choking sound as he fell to the ground, his head rolling away like a macabre kickball.

Sharra faced me again.

The chanting became muffled. Each word dragged out, making it hard to understand what they said. Except I knew. The words were seared into my very being.

Still, in slow motion, Sharra dropped the sword and kneeled beside my hunter's bleeding body and pried open his chest with her bare hands. I knew magic was involved. Otherwise, what she was doing would be impossible. But I still couldn't move. I watched as she removed his heart and turned, her body and bloodied hands facing me.

With a pop, the world around me returned to normal.

"Drink the blood from his heart. Do it while it's still warm." Sharra held Christopher's heart out for me to take.

OceanofPDF.com

BROKEN AND BRUISED

MY STOMACH TURNED. Christopher's heart still beat. It sounded like a bass drum inside my ears. My body twitched in fear, and I wanted to run. Escape before she did that to me. She was so quick. I was nothing against her.

Worst of all, the vampire in me wanted Christopher's blood. My fangs grew, and I opened my jaws, allowing them to extend. The scent caused my mouth to water. Stepping over Dorian, I took her hands in mine.

"That's right," Sharra cooed, encouraging me.

I barely heard her. Every inch of my body craved his blood as she placed the slowing heart in my hands. Sickened at seeing Christopher so broken, I turned away. As I stared at the heart and smelled the blood, my body wanted one thing. To do exactly what Sharra wanted. Consume the blood from his heart. The rational part of my brain kept telling me to stop, that I was falling into the vampire queen's trap. But the rest of me didn't care. As in my vision, the heart was all I could see, all I wanted. Slowly I lifted the heart closer to my mouth. The warmth and scent nearly pushed me into a frenzy.

Before it reached my mouth, there was a noise, and my eyes caught hold of Dorian's face. Tears tinged his lashes. His mouth was twisted with words I couldn't hear. His arms reached out to me. I felt my head tilt, and I paused, waiting, Christopher's heart only inches away.

Images of Dorian rushed through my mind.

His smile.

His mischievous comments.

The way he always watched out for me.

He told me he loved me the last time I saw him.

And he kissed me.

Not the kiss of a friend, but one of pure love.

My heart lurched at the pictures, at the way my soul burned with comprehension.

Dorian wasn't dead. My true love was actually alive, and he wasn't Christopher. Christopher's love had been pretend, false, and superficial. Dorian's was deep, real, and everlasting.

I needed to ask Dorian why he never told me how he felt. Why he waited until we were both about to die to reveal his true feelings. His love was potent, and I would spend the rest of forever showing him I was worthy of his love.

"Dorian," I whispered.

"I love you. Forever, and alw - " His voice cut off as a needle and thread appeared from thin air and sewed his lips shut.

Damn vampire queen. Anguished fury I didn't know I possessed rose inside me and, without completely realizing what I was doing, I reached out a hand toward her. My only aspiration, at that moment, was to crush her. Destroy her. Make her disappear so she wouldn't hurt those I loved, ever again.

As I moved, a red light shot into Sharra's stomach, and she screamed, clutching at herself in pain. Disbelief crossed her face, and bloody tears dripped from her eyes. "What are you doing?" She fell back, tripping over the bodies of her latest victims.

I quickly placed Christopher's heart back in his chest. Professor Pops said that to kill a drone vampire, the head had to be severed, but Christopher wasn't a drone. He was a hunter, and I'd already healed him once with the power of the Seal. Picking up his head, I set it next to his body.

"Anya, come to me, child," I heard Sharra say.

From the corner of my vision, I watched the red-headed marked

step over the dead girls and kneel next to Sharra. "I'm here to serve, my queen."

"Nooooo!" I screamed, and a pulse of red shot from my hands and into the girl. She tumbled back without a word.

Sharra's eyes were wide with shock. "You will do what I command, or I promise you this." Her voice shook with fear and rage. "I will spend every waking moment making your life a living hell. I won't rest until every last person, creature, and being you've ever loved or cared about is destroyed."

I stepped toward her. "No," I said, knowing the vampire queen's threats were only that - threats. She would be defeated, and I would be the one to beat her.

"Workers," Sharra moaned. "My dear workers. Save me, darlings!"

I heard the buzzing and glanced up. They were talking, but unmoving. They sensed her weakness and knew her end was near. I faced the queen. "The only way you can harm me is if I allow you to continue to live as you are. And that isn't going to happen." I lifted both hands in front of me.

"Wait. Don't," she pleaded. "If you kill me, you'll be no better than I am."

One of Abernathy's words - rehabilitation - struck a chord and found resonance in me. I hesitated and allowed a triumphant smile to spread across my face. "You're right, Sharra. I'm not going to kill you." I shifted my emotions. Instead of hate, I thought of forgiveness, pity, and mercy. This time the light that pulsed from my hands wasn't red as in the past. It was black. All seven of the magics combined.

Sharra howled in rage and pain as the power of the Seal pulsed through her.

Her body writhed on the floor. Black smoke surrounded her, consumed her until her body and the smoke became one. There was no way to tell where her body ended, and the smoke began until she became the smoke and wafted away.

Not a body.

Not a speck of dust.

Where her body had been, there was only emptiness.

The vampire queen was gone.

At her absence, a collective sigh of relief came from the worker vampires and the remaining marked.

The magical bonds which held the girls dissipated.

They scrambled from their prison, stepping over the dead bodies. Some hugged each other like they were friends, and I wondered how long Sharra held them captive.

Tentatively, a few of the girls came forward.

"Thank you," one of them said.

"You saved us."

"How can we ever repay you?"

They patted me on the shoulder, grabbed my hands, and pulled me into hugs.

I let them, unable to respond. Their words didn't register.

Was it over? I struggled to believe Sharra was gone. Like gone, gone.

I turned toward the worker vampires. Some were hugging, others weren't sure what to do. And others appeared angry.

OceanofPDF.com

SLAPPED HIM PLAYFULLY

I'D DEAL with them later. First, I needed to get to Dorian. He was still on the ground, his breathing labored, but his lips were no longer sewn shut. I placed my hands on his chest, near his heart, and began to heal him.

"Hi," he said gently.

Even after all I went through, all I'd done, I felt suddenly shy. "Hi yourself," I responded.

He turned toward me, but I held him steady. "Don't move. Let me finish healing you."

Dorian cleared his throat. "Alright. But go easy on me." He tried to smirk, but it looked more like a grimace. If he weren't so broken, I would've slapped him playfully. Instead, I sent the Seal's power into him, repairing the damage I hadn't managed to fix earlier.

After several long moments, he looked better. His eyes were bright and unblemished, his nose was no longer broken, and the scratches on his chest were gone. I also wondered about the wound on his back, where he was stabbed repeatedly while protecting me on the altar. "What about your back?" I asked, trying to raise him.

"It's fine," he said, his hands sliding up my arms. My body shivered. Tingled. His fingers wound their way through my hair, and he pulled me forward, so my face was above his. "You're awesome."

I smiled and was about to say something sassy in return when I really looked at his eyes. They were no longer hazel, but dark and flecked with all the colors of the seven magics. His eyes reminded me of the gem still in my pocket. As I thought of the gemstone, it warmed. "Your eyes. They've changed," I whispered, ignoring the gem and focusing on him. We were so close I could smell his blood, and I yearned to taste, suck, and drink him in.

"So have yours," he whispered, touching my cheek.

"What? No way. What color?" I asked, surprised.

"They're black and flecked - " He pulled me closer, so we were nose to nose. "Gold, green, red, vio - "

A shriek interrupted him.

I stood and stuck out my hand for Dorian to take. He did, bouncing onto his feet like a new man. And he was in some ways.

"What's wrong with that guy?" One of the girls cried.

I glanced from the group of girls to the spot where they were pointing. Christopher's body and head were trying to reattach themselves. As Professor Pops once said, it was a gruesome sight.

Dorian placed a hand on my arm. "Maybe you could help him?"

My first thought was to say no. If I helped him, he might just try to kill me again. But then I thought about what happened to Sharra. Perhaps I could heal him and use the Seal to give Christopher a change of heart. Maybe. If he disappeared the way Sharra had, then all the better, as long as he never returned. "You're a good man, Dorian." I touched his face, searching his eyes, wishing I could tell him all I learned and felt because of him. Instead, I went to Christopher and knelt beside him.

His body and head were squirming as he stitched himself back together. His eyes were filled with pain. When he noticed me, they turned to fear. "It's okay. I won't hurt you," I said and actually meant it. Though he betrayed me, it was easy to let it go. The reason was simple. Dorian. My love for him was so powerful, there was no room for hate. At least not at the moment.

Christopher blinked as though he didn't believe my words.

I touched his chest and took a deep breath, calling for the power of the Seal. My thoughts swirled with healing, mercy, and kindness. There was regret and a sliver of anger, too, but I pushed them down for now. As I watched, his head and neck reattached, and his body

stitched back together until I could once again hear the beating of his heart in his chest.

Christopher sighed and then looked at me. "Why?"

"I don't know," I said. How could I explain that because of the love I felt for Dorian, I wanted others to know such a gift. "But you are free to go, on one condition."

His eyes, which were the same color as Dorian's and I guessed mine as well, widened in worry. "What is it?" he asked.

Dorian was suddenly next to me, and I was beyond grateful. Perhaps I loved him so intensely because he was a friend first.

"I don't ever want to see your face again." I sat back on my heels, waiting for his response.

"Anything else?" He wasn't convinced.

"Do that, and you'll live," I added.

He scooted into a crouching position, his eyes still on mine. "Deal," he said and ran.

After he was gone, I turned my attention to the worker vampires, the females who surrounded and served the queen for eons. "You're free as well. Go. Do good. Don't kill. Don't hurt others. Be kind." I felt like I was speaking to children, but also felt like they needed to hear the words.

"I am Sasha," she said, placing her hand against her heart. "Thank you for what you've done." She looked away, but I sensed she had more to say. "Will you lead us?" She returned her gaze to me, her light brown eyes searching for answers.

"It is your right," another said before I could respond.

"I'm not sure," I said. I didn't want to. I still had high school to finish, and I wanted to start a real Seven Magics Academy, one where all supernaturals could go and feel accepted. Most of all, I wanted the school to be a place where they could be taught how to use their powers in a way that wouldn't harm others.

"Please," another said. "If you don't lead us, who will?"

"There will be chaos."

My hands squeezed into fists. They were right, but surely there was someone more qualified than an eighteen-year-old girl. As I searched their faces, it was clear that while they had been alive for a long time, they hadn't really lived.

"Whatever you decide, I'm not going anywhere," Dorian whispered, gently prying open one of my hands and lacing his fingers with mine.

I wanted to hug him, hold onto him, and never let him go, but there was still much to do. "Thank you," I said. Hand in hand, I went over to the marked. They were free but still looked confused and unsure about what to do next. "Hold still," I said to the first one I came to. With the power of the Seal, I reversed the mark placed on her as well as the rest. When I finished, I asked Sasha to round up a group of vampires and return the marked to their homes.

"Of course, my queen." She bowed.

I flinched at her words but only nodded. Then moved over to Pocahontas. She wasn't dead, and I used the Seal's power to heal her. She stood, touching her arms and body, surprised she was whole again.

"Why wouldn't you let me die?" she asked when I finished.

"That isn't who I am," I said softly, wishing we could be friends.

She gritted her teeth and crossed her arms. "What do you want in return?"

"My only request is that you live happily and use your newfound power for good, not t evil."

She gasped as I spoke. "You don't expect me to stay?"

"No, Pocahontas. You are free."

She dropped her arms to her sides and started to leave. "My hunter told me that if I agreed to let Sharra use my body, I wouldn't disappear, but would lead alongside her, our minds sharing the same

body."

My first instinct was to laugh at her naiveté, but hadn't Silindra and I shared her mind?

"It's certainly a possibility." I tried to smile and let her know I harbored no ill feelings toward her, but I was exhausted. "Go, but know you're welcome back to Sharra anytime."

"Thank you," she said. "But I drank the blood from my true love's heart." Tears filled her eyes. "In the human realm, I'm a murderer." Her anger became fear, and she clutched her hands together. "If you allow me to stay here, I will do whatever you ask. Just please don't make me go back."

She was a murderer, period, but she was also a part of something she hadn't fully understood or even asked for. "If you wish to stay, the castle is yours."

A brilliant smile lit up her face, and she ran to me, hugging me tightly. "Thank you."

I hugged her back, feeling she and I might be friends after all. "Will you look after things here for a while?" I asked, searching her eyes. "I will return, but there are things I still need to do in the human realm."

"You mean it?" Pocahontas was surprised.

"Yes, if that's alright with you."

"It'll be my pleasure, Snow. I won't let you down."

"Great."

"And Snow?" she said. "My friends call me Coco."

I understood what she meant, and a burst of warmth for her filled my heart. "Thank you for your help, Coco."

Before Dorian and I left, a great cheer rose within the room.

"Sharra is no longer a prison."

"You freed us."

"Hail, Queen Snow."

Without the walls, cheers could be heard as well. A quick peek out a window revealed thousands of creatures had gathered. The experience was overwhelming, and a new weight settled on my chest. That of responsibility. Because it was true. With the Seal's power, all the creatures - from the unicorn to the gremlin - were freed. They could come and go as they pleased without dying.

I took hold of Dorian, reveling in the love I felt from him and thought of home. Professor Pops and the mansion. The brothers, Cindy and my cat, Gatsby.

OceanofPDF.com

CLEAN SOAP

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the mansion, no one was there except Gatsby. He yowled like he hadn't been fed in days until Dorian got him food and water.

I was antsy and worried. "Where could they be?" I asked, pacing. I found my phone and dialed Cindy's number. She didn't respond. I texted but got no answer. "I'm worried."

"Hey," he said and pulled me against his chest. "I'm sure they're fine. Relax." He kissed my nose. "I'm going to take a shower." He pushed me back and wrinkled his nose. "You oughtta clean up too. You're a mess."

I laughed, and it felt good until I noticed my hands were covered in dried blood. "Agreed."

We climbed the stairs together. When we reached my door, he pulled me into another hug. "See you in a few."

I hugged him back, desperate to talk to him, but I definitely wanted a shower first. "'Kay," I said into his chest.

Inside my bedroom, I quickly undressed and showered. Threw on a pair of black and white checkered PJ pants and a black tank, tucking the black gem in the front pants pocket. Then I put my hair up out of the way before heading to the library, which was Dorian's new room.

He wasn't there, and my first thought was to head down to the kitchen. But I noticed the secret door - the one that led to the basement and the room we hung out in as kids. A little giddy, I pulled it open. The circular tube slide was still in place. Climbing in, I pushed off. The ride was longer and more winding than I remembered.

I slid out and onto my butt with an oomph.

I heard Dorian laugh and searched for him. He sat in a large yellow

beanbag chair. His sandy hair was wet and combed back, and he had on a pair of gray sweatpants and a Patriots tee shirt. "You're so graceful," he said, his voice filled with happiness. "The great and powerful Seal has the poise of a bumbling ox."

"Hey," I said, walking over to him.

He pulled me onto the beanbag next to him.

"I'm not an ox. Sheesh."

"Fine, a drunk rhino."

I smacked him on the arm. "Don't make me regret saving you," I joked.

His face grew serious. "Did I thank you for saving me yet?"

I huffed in mock disdain, crossing my arms. "No. Not a peep of gratitude."

He tucked an arm under me and snuggled close. I got a whiff of clean soap and the minty freshness on his breath.

I rested my head against his shoulder, trying to ignore the urgency parading through my body. I wanted to talk to him about what he said when we were with the Unknowns - that he loved me - and I wanted to tell him how much I loved him, too.

There was also the issue of the land of Sharra. Dorian said he'd go back with me. Did he mean it? Without a doubt, I knew he did, but we hadn't said the words to each other. At least when we weren't under duress. My feelings were fresh, exciting, and new, like the first ice cream cone on a warm summer day.

I snuggled against him, my worries waning and thought about what needed to happen next. First, I wanted to show everyone Dorian was alive. Then I wanted to go after my mom. Who knew what sort of plans Devoran would come up with once he heard Sharra was gone? I had no doubt he would fight to rule over the magical creatures and, truth be told, I was fine with that as long as he didn't try to enslave them.

Dorian kissed the top of my head lightly. The movement brought me out of my reverie.

I turned so I could see his face, gauge his expression. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you?" he asked, caressing my forehead with the tip of his fingers.

"How you felt about me," I finished, and my face colored bright red.

He nuzzled me close and kissed my eyebrow. "I did, while you were with Silindra. I did say I loved you."

"That's true, but you never said anything since." I searched his gorgeous eyes that looked just like mine now.

His lips curved in a slight smile. "When we were younger, you were this bright-eyed tomboy. As we grew, my feelings developed. But by then, the other brothers were talking about you in a romantic way." He raised his eyebrows and wriggled them comically.

My face got hotter. "What? I have no idea what you mean." Professor Pops had said as much, but it was still too weird to believe.

I playfully slapped Dorian on the chest. He caught my hand with his and entwined our fingers. His hand was much larger than mine, but with our fingers touching - palm to palm, finger to finger - our hands felt perfect together. A vibrant purple glowed between our fingers. We looked at each other, surprised. If this happened every time we touched, purple would be my favorite color again, I thought, my heart beating rapidly. "I don't think you're a normal boy anymore, Dorian Henry."

He chuckled, kissing my cheek. "Normal is overrated."

I raised my eyes, longing to kiss him. He lowered his head, so our lips were inches apart, and his breath caressed my skin like a kiss. It was warm and sent tingles through my body.

True love. It's comfortable and sexy. Reckless. Lustful. Fireworks

and kittens. I remembered telling Cindy how I felt for Christopher, and it was all of those things. But what I felt for him was also so much more.

The best part? Knowing with absolute surety that the other person felt the same way. Dorian and I were new together. Knowing his feelings for me made my heart beat fast. Sure, there was desire. A part of me wanted to climb on top of him and kiss him until we couldn't breathe, but it was more. It was - it felt like - Dorian was the final piece to my heart.

Gabe exposed the physicality of love.

Christopher revealed love could be heartbreaking.

Dorian showed me love, true love, was unconditional, far-reaching, and all-encompassing.

"Dorian," I breathed, touching his face and leaning forward.

Before our lips could meet, there was a loud clumping, like dozens of feet on the stairs.

We looked at each other and jumped up, prepared for whatever was coming for us. We faced the vampire queen together. We could face anything.

"Hey," Heathcliff said when he came around the corner. "I found her! And, holy crap, she's with Dorian!"

Excited hoots and shouts came from the stairs as they all piled into the room. Six sets of eyes. Seven counting Dorian. My family. Salvatore and Sebastian were wrestling with each other. From behind them all, another set of feet walked into the room. They were smaller. As I looked closer, she pushed through them.

"Mom!" I jumped up and ran to her. "How?" I asked, stunned.

"It's a long story." She hugged me.

Cindy appeared next, an excited smile curving her lips. After her came Professor Pops. He looked like he aged a lifetime since I last saw him, and I felt terrible. I promised we would defeat the queen

together, and then I disobeyed. His eyes softened, and he nodded in understanding.

"Pops," Dorian said.

Professor Pops' eyes shifted to his son, and the skin around them crinkled as he smiled.

"Dorian." He helped his son stand and hugged him tightly.

Cindy came to stand next to me. She smiled wearily, but she seemed more confident too. "Merde, Snow. You scared us. I'm mad at you just so you know."

"Sorry, Cin." I leaned my head on her shoulder. She batted at my face.

"You have a lot of explaining to do." She crossed her arms.

I lifted my head and nodded toward my mom, who followed our exchange with interest. "So do you."

"Touché, my friend." She took my hand, and we hugged and laughed.

My mom joined in. I watched with happy interest as the brothers surrounded Dorian, peppering him with questions. Laughing. Dorian did his best to answer. His eyes slid to mine, and he winked.

Warmth filled my body. This was what life was all about. Family. Love. There was one thing that could've made the moment better, and that was my dad. I hoped, wherever he was, he was okay. Safe. Getting the help he needed.

My mom squeezed me. "You're one lucky girl," she whispered, her eyes filled with a combination of happiness and incredulity.

I nodded, blinking back tears, but didn't say anything. My emotions were too close to the surface, and I didn't want to cry.

OceanofPDF.com

DEFEATING SHARRA

TWO MONTHS PASSED from when the vampire queen vanished in the black smoke. After speaking with Professor Pops, Kenmei, my mom, Cindy, and the brothers, it became clear I would have to become the next vampire queen. I was the Seal, after all. It was created to bring balance to all magics. There wasn't another way.

Since defeating Sharra, I felt Silindra within my consciousness more than once. She seemed happy. I didn't encourage her, though. I wasn't ready.

The only person who knew about Silindra was Dorian. He also knew about the gem, though we had no idea what to do with it. Until we figured something out, I always kept it on me, like Abernathy said.

I agreed to become the next queen under two conditions. The Seven Magics Academy had to be at the castle. With help, I would make it a real school. And I would finish the last few months of high school at Salem Academy. Dorian already agreed to be my date to Spring Fling.

Everyone loved the idea of us going and promised to help, which was why I was at the castle now, getting ready for my official coronation. Though I'd been handling the duties befitting my title as queen of the vampires for a while, tonight would make it all official. Plus, there would be food and dancing.

I would spend time in both places. Sharra and well as Salem. My mom had already taken up residence in our old house, and it was full of light and happiness and love once again.

As I watched Cindy put the finishing touches on my hair with magic, I thought about the vampire queen. Professor Pops, Kenmei, and I discussed at length what might have happened to Sharra when

she evaporated in the dark smoke. None of us knew for sure. We all had guesses and felt certain she wasn't gone for good. But we hoped she learned her lesson and would live out her days in her last human body before going quietly into the night. Part of me knew that thinking was wishful and even unwise, but we agreed to celebrate our win.

My mom came in. "You look beautiful," she said, squeezing my shoulder.

"So do you." She was dressed in a soft silver dress, her long hair pulled back in a bun. She told me about how she was rescued, and that Cindy was an incredible witch and a brilliant hero. Getting to know my mother again would take time, but I figured that was what a person did. Made an effort for those important to them. And my mom was a significant part of me.

Cindy and I talked at length about the Seven Magics Academy. I asked her to run it. She turned the offer down but agreed to teach spells and back up Heathcliff in teaching potions. Since his secretive job in a place called Demonland kept him busier and busier all the time.

After further reflection, I knew the person who should run the SMA was Coco. Because of all she went through, she could be strong when necessary as well as empathetic. As someone who was previously marked, she would be excellent in a position of leadership.

Dorian would teach weapons training. Professor Pops had agreed to assist Coco, but he wanted to continue teaching at Harvard and continue searching the world for those who would be a good fit for the Academy.

Several of the magical creatures, including Ryden, were on board to help too.

Gabe would stay at the mansion in Salem. He wasn't thrilled about the way magical creatures had free reign of the Earth once again. It turned out he and Sharra agreed on this one thing. He believed

humans would be safer, as would creatures of magic if they were kept separate.

Gabe and I would be working together often. As the leader of the chayot, his new purpose was to make sure humans were treated fairly. Sebastian and Bart opted to stay at the house with Gabe to help as necessary, not because they weren't behind my decision.

"We need to keep the chayot leader from getting uptight or taking himself too seriously," Bart said with a wink.

Most magical creatures didn't want to dwell in the human realm. They asked that I help them create a realm of their own, which I happily did. Still, Gabe worried.

I quickly realized ruling wasn't going to be easy. That was obvious within seconds of the vampire queen's disappearance. She forced her subjects to be loyal, and that kind of allegiance didn't last. But I possessed one thing she hadn't - the love of family and friends. Real love. Real friends.

Plus, I had Dorian. He decided to take classes from Harvard online so he could help me in the land of Sharra as well as teaching at the Seven Magics Academy.

Zenny appeared in the mirror. He wore a sparkly blue suit, his hair color changed to match. "Why don't you let me fetch Fina and Trina?" Zenny asked.

Cindy stuck out her tongue. "My magic is enough, Zenny."

I turned to the side to admire my hair. Soft curls cascaded down my back, and the sides were pulled up and pinned around the small diamond and onyx encrusted tiara. My makeup was subtle, except my lips. They were blood red. "It's appropriate, Snow. You're the vampire queen. Own it," Cindy said with a large smile.

"I will." I smiled. "You better get ready and check on Gabe. Make sure the chayot leader isn't getting into trouble."

"Agreed." She rushed from the room.

"I'm going to go find Mr. Henry," my mom said, leaving me alone.

In the closet, Fina and Trina helped me into my big, poofy, old-fashioned dress. I didn't want to wear it, but the fairies made it, and I needed to honor them. I studied my reflection in front of a large, oval mirror. The dress was beautiful but overwhelming, the material was velvet and deep purple. Black ribbing crisscrossed in the front, and tiny pearl buttons peeked from between the laced bodice.

"Be careful, child," Zenny shouted at Fina. "For crying out loud, that dress isn't made of bricks. It's delicate."

"Sorry," she responded as Trina assisted her.

"Maybe I can help," Dorian said from the door. Fina and Trina disappeared in a flustered wisp of magic.

I sighed with relief. "Yes, please."

OceanofPDF.com

TRUE LOVE

HE LOOKED SO INCREDIBLY handsome in black pants, a white shirt, and a jacket made from the same material as my dress. His sandy was cut short, allowing me full access to his gorgeously rugged face. Soon, he would be king. I had a crown made for him, but he refused to wear it. At least not until after he proposed, and we were married. "Or I could help you out of it?" His strange eyes that exactly resembled mine danced with mischief.

At his words, my heart melted, and my fangs pressed against my mouth. "Do you think?" I wanted him. His lips, his blood. He already gave me his heart.

He let out a joyous laugh. "My dad and your mom would never forgive us."

"I guess." I held up the front of the dress so it wouldn't fall off my shoulders.

"Allow me," he said, pretending to be hoity-toity and coming to stand behind me, pulling on the laces.

I stuck out my tongue but quickly drew it back in my mouth. Dorian's playfulness was gone, his eyes trained on my naked back. He caressed me tenderly, one of his fingers running the length of my spine and stopping at my waist. I shivered.

"You're so beautiful, Snow." His hand circled my waist, pulling me against him.

"So are you." My lower belly was on fire. Every inch of my body longed for his touch, his lips on mine. He kissed my shoulder before turning me so that I faced him.

My dress hung on my arms, sinking low in the front. His fingers stroked my cheeks, sending flickers of heat all over. Lowering his

head, his lips brushed mine. Soft. Loving.

I responded with force, opening my mouth, hungry for him. A deep growl escaped the back of his throat, and our gazes locked. He picked me up, moving me to the bed, laying me down before climbing on top. Our lips met again with profound strength, and I let out a mew, something I'd never done before. I wanted to wrap my legs around his hips, but my blasted dress was in the way.

Someone cleared his throat behind us.

"I'll come back later. Your hair is already a wreck, Snow. I don't even know why I try," Zenny said.

I smiled against Dorian's lips. "Help me get this damn thing off." I tugged at my dress.

Dorian lifted my skirt out of the way, and I clung to him with my legs.

"Bite me," he whispered a naughty glint in his eyes. "I know it's been a while since you've had any blood."

I gave him a thoughtful look. I hadn't drunk in a while because I only wanted his blood, and he hadn't offered. "Are you sure?" I extended my fangs.

"Damn sure. You are who you are. A queen. My love. And a vampire. It's one of the many things I love about you."

"Good," I said and kissed his neck, no longer able to hold back.

Dorian sighed sexily. "You're amazing," he said, kissing a trail along my shoulder.

My stomach quivered. The scent of his skin, and his blood, was incredible. Dorian tilted his neck, giving me better access to a vein, and I tugged him more tightly against me as my fangs sank deep. He groaned in pleasure as I ran my hands through his hair, along his shoulders, and down his back.

I counted internally.

One.

Two.

Three.

He tastes like Heaven, I thought, sucking harder. Dorian's fingers brushed my cheeks as he pressed his body into mine.

Four.

Five.

Six.

He tastes like magic.

Seven.

Eight.

A cracking noise sounded from the dresser near the bathroom. It was loud, like the sound of a boulder splitting, and I pulled away from Dorian's throat. My blood haze had me feeling euphoric. Dorian's face looked the way mine felt, I was sure, and I wanted to keep going. But I twisted my head so I could see the dresser.

I had placed the black gem there after Cindy left so I could put on my dress. A surprised gasp escaped my throat. The gem had doubled its original size.

Dorian looked up. "What is happening?" He stood, pulling me with him. My red lipstick was smeared on his gorgeous lips.

"I don't know." I touched the gem. "It is warm."

He touched it as well. "Strange. It almost feels like there's something alive in there."

The top half of the gem cracked, leaving a zigzagged line. Dorian and I pulled our fingers back at the same time, and we waited.

Nothing happened.

"It's probably nothing." I took his hand, hungry to spend more time in his arms.

Dorian looked at me. "I love you, Snow. But I'm not gonna lie; you're a wreck," he said, playfully running his thumb across my

bottom lip. "And there are thousands of creatures just beyond this wall, waiting for you." He kissed my nose.

I gave myself a once over in the mirror. He was right. My hair had fallen from the pins Cindy placed around the crown. The crown itself was tilted sideways, almost dangling. My lipstick was smeared along both sides of my cheeks. I let out an embarrassed laugh. "Cindy's going to kill me," I said, grabbing a tissue and wiping at the lipstick.

Dorian took the tissue from me and licked it.

"You're gross," I whispered, but I was mesmerized by him.

He rubbed the wet end of the tissue against my cheek softly. His eyes danced with such happiness. "Even a wreck, you're the most beautiful creature in the world."

I watched his face, knowing that he meant every word and loved him for it. "I never thought I could love someone the way I love you," I said tenderly.

Dorian's smile lit up his whole face. He set down the tissue and reached into his pocket, pulling out a black box. Then he got down on one knee.

Nervous excitement danced through my veins. "What are you doing?" I asked, even though I knew he was going to propose. My heart thundered in my chest, reminding me that while I was a creature of the supernatural world and always had been, I was still the same klutzy human girl who wanted it all - a career, a husband, children, and love. From Dorian, I felt so much love. It was the greatest gift I would ever receive.

He opened the box. Inside was a diamond solitaire, elegant and beautiful.

My hands went to my mouth.

"Snow Merriweather White, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Was I ready for this? It wasn't that long ago that I defeated the

vampire queen. I studied his eyes, so full of love, and knew there would never be a love greater than his and mine. "Yes, Dorian. Without a doubt, yes!" I dove into his arms, knocking him to the floor and smothering his face in kisses.

He chuckled happily until I kissed his lips, then all laughter was forgotten. In its place were hunger and desire. I wanted him. All of him.

"I love you so much, Dorian."

His eyes roamed my face and down my body. "I love you, too." He sat up, adjusting me in his lap, and took the ring out of the box before sliding it onto my finger.

I studied it for a moment, surprised by all that happened. Through all the trials and the heartache, we found each other, and I would never let him go. "I hope you're okay with being mine always and forever, Dorian Henry."

"More than okay with it." He took my face in his hands and kissed me.

I threw my arms around his neck, kissing him back with all the pent up love and adoration I had to give.

He dragged the dress down my arms, and I unbuttoned his shirt. We were going to seal our love with more than a kiss, and I was finally ready.

A loud pop sounded from the dresser.

Surprised, we both looked over.

A piece of the gem fell onto the floor. "It broke," I said, standing up. Dorian did too, and we went to it, bending to get a closer look.

"It looks like there's something inside," I said, and heard the wonder in my voice.

"It's a - "

"Vampire," I finished, as the most adorable pair of lavender eyes fluttered open. "I think." The face of an angel, I thought, moving

closer, remembering the depictions I saw in the Museum of the Supernatural.

More pieces of the flecked ebony gem broke away, making it easier to see all of her. There was no doubt it was a vampire, and she had wings.

"It's a girl," Dorian stated.

"I noticed," I said. She was tiny, the size of Dorian's fist. Black wings were tucked against the back of her human body with a shuck of silky black hair covered her head.

"Did you know about this?" he asked, scooping her into his hand. The baby vampire shivered, and he cupped his hand around her. I ran into the bathroom, trying to keep my dress up with one hand. With the other, I pulled a hand towel from the counter and rushed back.

"No," I finally answered, shaking my head in shocked amazement.

Dorian took the towel and carefully wrapped it around her. She sighed contentedly.

I reached the tip of my finger out, and she grabbed hold with one hand, sinking her teeth into my flesh. My heart melted.

"A baby," he whispered. He was astonished, and I completely understood.

"A baby vampire," I added. "With wings." Sated, she released my finger and snuggled down in the towel. I shook my head. Was she the next step in the evolution of the vampires? A human-looking original, but with wings. I thought of Silindra and knew she would approve. At that thought, something inside my head snapped, and like the unfurling of flower petals, I felt Silindra's consciousness come to attention.

She's perfect, Silindra said.

She is, I responded, wondering what it all meant.

I think the time will soon come for my mind and my body to become one again.

Your body is gone, Silindra. You'll -

"Snow? How are we going to explain her?" Dorian looked at me, a confused expression on his face.

I shook my head. We'll talk later. "I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe we don't tell anyone. Maybe we keep this between you, me, and - " I smacked my forehead. "Abernathy can tell us what to do. That sneaky dragon probably knew what the gem was all along."

Dorian stroked her hair with one of his fingers. She appeared to be sleeping.

"What should we name her?" he asked quietly.

A name immediately popped into my head. "Jasmine," I answered.

Dorian chuckled softly. "I like it."

"It's strange. She isn't covered in hair like the original vampires were. Like Silindra was. Her body is like ours. Human in nature."

"She's a new kind of original, then. Not exactly the same as the first, but similar," Dorian said.

"I think so."

His gaze caught mine. "Is this where I say, 'And they lived happily ever after'?" He grinned.

I snickered. "No, this is where we say: They lived triumphantly.'" I leaned in, careful of the baby vampire, seeing a little of Silindra in her wings. Silindra loved her wings. And she died believing she was the last of her kind. The vampire Dorian held in his hands would be Silindra's legacy. Though Jasmine was slightly different, she was also the same.

A vampire with wings, I thought excitedly.

Dorian nuzzled my cheek with his nose, and I smiled. "Were you going to kiss me, or did you change your mind?" I asked playfully.

Dorian inched his lips, so they barely brushed against mine. "You're the most powerful supernatural creature on Earth. What do you think?" His lips pressed against mine, and I felt it down to my

toes.

OceanofPDF.com

GORGEOUS HUSBAND

HAPPILY EVER AFTER WAS NEVER SOMETHING I believed would be possible - not for me. Yet I was given exactly that. As I lay in my bed, listening to Dorian's deep breathing, I admired our bedroom in the castle.

It was large and decorated in the most beautiful linens in shades of gold, white, and cream. Thick, soft drapes hung from the windows, keeping out the morning light surely blazing against them, and a sparkling chandelier hung in the middle of the ceiling. There was a fireplace to the left where a loveseat, chairs, and a coffee table were situated. To the right was the entrance to our walk-in closet and beside that, our bathroom.

It was beyond comfortable. Royal, in fact. But also homey. Jasmine's bedroom was next to ours. How I loved her. She was the most amazing child. A year ago, she grew out of her crib, and we moved her into a toddler bed.

But as I gazed on the man lying next to me - the man of my dreams - I was awed by my good luck. Dorian. My gorgeous husband and my best friend looked so peaceful. He was sleeping on his back, without a shirt, the white sheet pooled at his waist, giving me an amazing view.

"Snow, what are you doing?" His voice was hoarse with sleep, but his eyes stayed shut.

"Just watching my gorgeous husband. You aren't going to deny me, are you?" I smiled, then leaned in and kissed him on the mouth.

He growled softly as his arms came around me, rolling us, so he was on top. Then his lips were on mine. Soft and urgent. I would never get enough of him. Not in a thousand years.

"I would never deny you, my queen," he said, after a long while.

"You're such a sweet-talker. It's a wonder I've still got my figure." I smirked, enjoying our banter and the scent of him. He always smelled so good.

"Your figure is deliciously perfect." He pulled the sleeve of my nightgown off my shoulder before kissing a trail up to my neck.

"You're not so bad yourself," I said, running my hands along his muscled arms, up to his shoulders, and down his back. At the scar where the Unknowns' blade had driven into him over and over, I paused.

It was a month since we married. At that time, I discovered Dorian still suffered some pain in the area. I used the power of the Seal to heal it, but even then, I could sense that it wouldn't wholly mend. It was frustrating, but Dorian always played it off like it was nothing and made me promise not to tell Professor Pops or his brothers, so they didn't worry.

As my fingers tenderly caressed the scar, he flinched. "Dorian, I think we should talk to Abernathy about - "

"My lover, I'm fine. Let's not and say we did." He winked, and I laughed. "My first and most important priority this morning is to kiss every inch of you."

My hands were locked loosely around his neck. He kissed each collarbone before trailing kisses along my chest and down my stomach. I put my hands above my head, enjoying the touch of his lips against my skin.

Since becoming the new vampire queen, life was busy. Beyond busy, but Dorian made sure we took time for ourselves, too. And without a doubt, I loved our alone time together. Nothing in the world mattered as much as being his wife.

Dorian kissed around my navel, and I shuddered, pressing up against his mouth. In the last month, he showed me things -

"Mommy. Daddy. Are you awake?" Our door swung open.

Dorian quickly rolled off me and onto the edge of the bed, where

he swung Jasmine into his arms. "Hello, my little peanut."

I quickly adjusted my gown, watching the two of them. They were so sweet together. Dorian was a great father, and Jasmine loved every moment they spent together. In the last year, she went from baby to toddler, and when Dorian tossed her in the air, Jasmine spread her wings, hovering above him and giggling like she was the happiest creature in the world. Her black wings were large, too big for her body, and feathered, soft as silk. According to Abernathy, our daughter would grow into them, but for now, her wings almost swallowed her.

"Yes, we're up," I said, once I was decent.

Dorian set her on the bed, and she used her wings to come to me, jumping up into my arms. I hugged her tight. "Jasmine," I said, kissing her cheek.

She released me and ran back to Dorian. Once he was sitting against the padded headboard and she was snuggled into his arms, he took one of her hands in his. "How's my girl?"

"Good, but Daddy?" She patted his face with her tiny hands. "I want unicorn blood for breakfast. And then I want to play with Sabrina."

Sabrina was her best friend and a pixilette. The two of them spent most of every day together. Or, at least as much as they could.

Dorian smiled. "You've got your day planned out, then?"

She nodded. My heart squeezed. They had a special bond, one I found surprising and the slightest bit confusing.

Dorian adored Jasmine, and she reciprocated. Adoration radiated from them both. It was something I never had with my dad. Watching the two of them together filled my heart with such joy and sadness. I wondered where my father was, and if he was okay. I hoped so. It still brought tears to my eyes that he missed my wedding. Mom came, but she hadn't lingered. Not for long. She was busy helping Gabe and the other chayot or assisting the elves with their transition. It was never

easy to make such significant changes, but my mom was a champion and so committed to helping supernatural creatures of all kinds find a home for themselves.

"Have you decided to drink blood yet?" Jasmine asked Dorian, her face serious. She still didn't understand that he wasn't like her and figured that since she drank blood, so should her dad.

I waited for his answer. Since he saved my life, he changed. Magic flowed through him now. His body was infused with power. Yet the wound on his back still refused to heal completely.

We talked about changing him into a vampire. In some ways, it made sense, but whenever I thought about the decision, it didn't feel right.

Dorian shook his head. "Not yet." He gave me a tiny smile. "I'm still waiting."

I smiled, knowing what he wanted, but worried it wasn't an option. There was still so much about him we didn't know, and I wouldn't throw his life away for my own selfishness.

"You could drink some unicorn blood with me."

Dorian stroked Jasmine's wings. "Not today. I think I'll have some oatmeal with bananas, brown sugar, and cream with a side of bacon."

Jasmine scrunched her face up in disgust. "Gross, Daddy. How can you eat that stuff?"

A chuckle escaped my throat as Jasmine's eyes grew wide. I covered my mouth.

"What's funny, Mommy?" She came over to me, and the edge of one wing ruffled my hair. "You don't like that stuff either. You drink blood too." She said it matter-of-factly, as though what we did was normal and Dorian eating oatmeal wasn't.

"You're just so cute I can't help myself," I said, brushing some of her long, wild hair off her face.

"Thanks, Mommy." She wrapped her little arms around my neck.

"You cute, too."

"Awwww." I hugged her tight. "Let's get you dressed and then we'll eat."

Jasmine jumped off the bed, flying to the door. "Hungry. Come on."

OceanofPDF.com

SEVEN MAGICS

AFTER JASMINE, Dorian, and I had breakfast, I headed down to the conference area. There was a big meeting with all of the supernaturals, where we discussed whose realm would be created next. Once that was finished, Coco came by my office. As the headmistress of the Academy, she was in charge of everything, but she asked that I speak with one of my vampires, a young worker vampire who changed just before I defeated Sharra. The council, which included Professor Pops, Heathcliff, Cindy, Coco, and I, agreed to let Valencia attend the Seven Magics Academy.

I thought it was going well, but apparently, the girl enjoyed starting fights.

She was a beautiful young woman with dark hair, light brown skin, and brown eyes. Her navy jacket was unbuttoned, revealing her white shirt underneath. There was blood on the collar, and I sighed.

At the moment, she was seated in the chair opposite my desk, her head down, and her hands in her lap.

"Am I to understand you picked a fight with a witch and an elf during lunch?"

Valencia nodded, looking up. There were tears in her eyes.

"Then, you drank from them."

"Uh-huh," she said, her face a combination of sad and smug.

"You shouldn't be pleased with yourself, Valencia. I'm not like the old queen. That isn't acceptable behavior."

Valencia licked her blood-red lips.

"And I won't tolerate it." I clasped my hands together, resting them in front of me on the large oak desk.

Her face fell. Valencia looked away, gazing at her feet. She wore

black boots with her knee-high white socks, and she crossed her legs at the ankle. She didn't have any family. Many of the supernatural creatures we invited to the school didn't. They were either abandoned or disowned by their parents.

With magic, we created dormitories for them, with six students to a room. I hoped they would be able to bond with each other and create their own families. For the most part, it was working, but some struggled more than others.

Valencia swallowed. "My queen, the elf stole my favorite book, and she wouldn't give it back - not even when I asked her nicely." She blinked several times, and I waited for her to go on. "So I grabbed her around the neck and demanded she return it, but she laughed at me and called me a blood-sucking leech."

That was the cruelest and most derogatory comment a vampire could hear. "I see."

She went on. "The witch walked into the lunchroom while I had the elf around the neck and fought to protect the elf, which irritated the hell out of me, so yeah, I punched them both. But they deserved it."

I clenched my teeth together, forcing myself to remain in control. "I understand your frustration, Valencia, but the next time you have a problem like that, you bring it up with the headmistress or any of the teachers. When you take matters into your own hands, I have no choice but to punish you."

"But that isn't fair." She stuck out her bottom lip, pouting and irritated.

"Maybe not, but doing something negative in response to a negative action isn't right." I pursed my lips together, waiting to see what else she would say. "However, if you tell me the names of the other two girls, I will make sure they are punished as well."

"I'm not a snitch," she said, sitting on her hands.

"Very well, then you must stay after school and help Heathcliff in

the potions lab for the remainder of the week." I picked up some paper and clicked it against the desk before setting it in the basket to my right. "That will be all."

"Yes, your majesty." She went to the door. I didn't look up until she was gone, worried she would see my irritation at what had happened. Coco and I needed to talk about what we could do to alleviate some of the tension between the different creatures.

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON. I sat beside the fire, watching the flames dance merrily in the hearth.

"Mommy." Jasmine flew into the room and straight into my arms.

"Hi. How was your day?" I tucked her against me, holding her close. Jasmine wasn't in school yet, but what would the other creatures think when a vampire with wings began to attend? How would those at the academy treat her? Would they bully her like they did Valencia?

"It was so fun. Me and Abrea chased squirrels and helped baby birds learn to fly. Abrea tried to ride a fish. It was funny because the fish tried to eat her, but Daddy saved her."

"Thank goodness," I said.

"Yeah." Jasmine went on and on about her day as I listened, my eyes falling on Dorian, who stood by the entrance, leaning against the doorframe. His sandy hair was rumpled from the wind or possibly the play. Instantly, my fangs pressed against my lips. I wanted to taste him.

"Your daughter is a handful," he said, his voice filled with admiration, but he saw what I wanted, and his eyes became hooded.

"No, Daddy, you a handful." She jumped into the air and flew over and into his outstretched arms.

I walked over to them and wrapped my arms around them both. "Glad you had a fun day."

Dorian leaned around Jasmine's wings and kissed me. "I missed you," he whispered, his voice full of meaning.

Jasmine rested her head against Dorian's shoulder, and she closed her eyes. Within moments, Jasmine was asleep. Dorian's free hand wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me to him. I ran my fingers along the waistband of his pants, telling him with my eyes what I wanted.

He nodded knowingly.

"Let's put her to bed," he said.

My heart began to race. "And then you can take me to bed," I added, licking my lips.

"Agreed." He went up the stairs, and I followed him down the hall, up another set of stairs, down another corridor, and past mine and Dorian's bedroom. I opened Jasmine's door for him.

Her room was decorated in different shades of teal and black - Jasmine's two favorite colors. In the center of the room was a round bed covered in pillows. I pushed some aside, and Dorian laid her on her stomach. With her wings, it was the only way she could sleep. Then I covered her. "Night, Jasmine. Hope your dreams are sweet."

Ciana, the only vampire I would leave Jasmine with, appeared.

"Watch over her," I said softly.

"With pleasure, my queen." She bowed.

Dorian took my hand and pulled me toward the door. "Do you still want to go on our date?"

I watched his eyes happily. I really wanted him, but our dates were so much fun. "Definitely."

"Where to tonight?" Ciana asked.

Dorian put a finger to his lips. "It's a secret."

Ciana giggled, and I smiled at their exchange. Everyone in Sharra was smitten with Dorian. Where I was respected, Dorian was loved. Adored. He brought joy and kindness into the land. "Enjoy

yourselves," she said.

"Thanks, Ciana." She closed the door behind us, and I knew she would sit in Jasmine's room all night. Ciana was Jasmine's guard, protector, and nursemaid while Dorian and I were away.

"You going to give me a hint?" I asked, unable to hide my giddiness. We hadn't been married that long, and while I knew him my whole life, marriage was different. Exciting. And Dorian was so damn sexy I could hardly keep my hands to myself.

"You'll see." He leaned in and kissed my neck. I shivered in anticipation.

"Should I change?" I asked when we reached our bedroom.

He glanced down. I wore a sky-blue day dress made of fairy gossamer. It was soft, breathable, and airy like wearing a cloud.

His eyes skimmed across my body, caressing me slowly, and I shivered.

"You look perfect," he said, pulling me into the warmth of his strong arms. "Come on."

OceanofPDF.com

BODY AGAINST MINE

WE MADE our way out of the castle. Once we were outside the gates, we walked through the apple orchard. I plucked an apple off a tree and brought it to my nose. It still surprised me that its fragrance was blood. I knew it would taste like blood as well. I bit into it, enjoying the flavor.

Dorian also picked an apple. He took a few bites.

"What does yours taste like?" I asked, curious.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Like an apple, of course." He winked.

"It does?"

"Yes, my love, it tastes like a sweet and juicy apple."

"If you say so." But I knew that was the magic of Sharra. All foods tasted like what you desired most.

He leaned in and kissed me.

As we strolled through the grove, I admired the blossoms floating along with the breeze. Dorian caught one, clutched it between his thumb and first finger, spun it, and then turned and stuck it behind my ear.

"Beautiful." He stroked my cheek.

I loved that he could make me forget I was the vampire queen. With him, I was a woman in love with a totally gorgeous man, and that was more than enough. "So are you, you know." I touched his chest, felt the beating of his heart. Blood flowed through his veins and made my mouth water. Maybe that was why I didn't want to change him. I loved the way his blood tasted of humanity and magic. There wasn't any other blood anywhere in the world that tasted more divine.

Dorian smirked. "You want me, don't you?" He pressed his body

against mine.

"Yes, husband, I do." To prove my point, I ran my hands up his arms to his neck.

He rubbed his cheek against mine. "Can you wait until after our date, or should we go home, my queen?"

"Keep that up, and we'll skip our date and move straight to the afterparty."

Dorian chuckled. "Let's go, sexy. Our date is going to be a blast."

I snickered. "It better be."

We continued through the orchard until we arrived at a cobblestone path where we walked until we reached the Filigree River's sandy shore. At the water's edge, an elegant pearl barge bobbed next to a pier. Paper lanterns in pastel colors hung along the sides of the roof. They were lit and swayed gently in the breeze. The sun had almost set, its dying rays making the water flicker like flames.

"What's this?" I glanced from Dorian to the barge and back at his incredibly handsome face. Water wasn't my favorite thing. Growing up a klutz, I tended to stay away from areas where problems could occur - like water.

But I was the vampire queen now. No longer klutzy, no longer a bumbling snowflake.

"Officially, we've been married one month today. I wanted to do something special." I watched his excitement turn serious. "It feels like forever and yesterday since we were married."

I cupped his strong hand in both of mine. "I know exactly what you mean."

"But, you're still glad we married, right?" There was worry etched in his features.

Before the actual wedding day, we discussed at length whether to marry or not. We were still young - twenty and twenty-one, respectively. But we knew we'd found our soulmate in each other, so

there wasn't a point in waiting.

"Absolutely. What about you? Are you happy to be married to me?" His life had altered drastically because of me. He went from a Harvard student to the king of a magical land.

"Without a doubt." He leaned down and kissed me tenderly.

When he lifted his head, I smiled. "You are the perfect man for me."

The corner of his mouth rose into his trademark smirk that melted my heart and soul. "Remember that when I'm ninety and wrinkled and walking with a cane," he said.

I laughed. "Oh, I will." But I doubted he would ever need a cane or become wrinkled. He wasn't a vampire, but he had become part of the seven magics. If he aged, it would be at a much, much slower rate than humans. Though I might have to change him, so he didn't suffer.

"Good." He kissed the tip of my nose and pulled me toward the pier.

When I stepped onto the barge, a feeling of foreboding overwhelmed me. "Wait." I stopped and searched the water's edge on both sides of the wide river. My keen eyesight picked out a herd of deer, an otter building a home near one of the houses, and several dozen different birds chatting amongst themselves from tree branches. There was also a group of pixilettes fluttering near a meadow of pink wildflowers. An ogre was cutting down a tree. About a mile away, a vampire stalked a bear near the base of the mountain. Nothing abnormal - at least not for Sharra. Still, I sensed something.

"Dorian? Who knows we're here?"

An elf appeared wearing a deep blue tunic and brown pants. His long blue hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. His eyes were black, as were his eyebrows. They stuck out from his pale blue skin. He came from below the deck of the barge. In one hand he carried a tray. Two glasses of something deep and red sat on top.

"King Dorian. Queen Snow." He bowed. "Happy anniversary." He

offered the glasses to Dorian and me. "Please. Drink up."

Dorian picked up the glasses. "This is Rheme," he said, indicating the elf.

I nodded. "Nice to meet you."

"And you, my queen. Dorian has told me much about the two of you from when you were younger."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really?" I glanced between the two men. "What did he say?"

Dorian's eyes danced with mischief. "Go ahead, tell her."

Rheme seemed embarrassed. "He knew the two of you were meant for each other long before you did." He bowed again. "My queen."

I laughed, taking a glass from Dorian's hand. "Did he now?"

Rheme cleared his throat.

"Of course, I did." Dorian pressed the glass to his lips. My glass held blood. His looked like mine. Was he going to drink blood as well?

"What's in yours?"

He winked at me. "It looks like blood, but it's actually strawberry-rhubarb nectar, a special bland Rheme here makes. It's delicious."

"Oh?" He stuck his glass under my nose. I sniffed. "Mmmm, that smells good." It didn't really. Only blood smelled good anymore, but I knew it was supposed to smell appetizing, so I pretended.

Dorian shook his head and laughed. "You're a terrible liar."

I laughed too. "Yeah, I know."

OceanofPDF.com

NIGHT PIXIES

THERE WERE two other crewmembers on the twinkling flat-bottomed vessel. They went to work, pushing us away from the dock until a circular paddle smacked the water at the rear, pushing us forward.

It was nearly dark. Insects came out and played us their songs. Night pixies, their iridescent wings changing colors in the moonlight, fluttered along the water's edge. When they saw us, they flitted forward. I could hear their giggling and whispering. But before they reached us, they stopped and turned back. They no longer giggled. In fact, I sensed apprehension. Something spooked them.

I tried to remind myself I was the scariest thing in Sharra. None could hurt or defeat me. Plus, I had Dorian.

He seemed to sense my trepidation and pulled me against his chest, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Isn't it beautiful?"

I swallowed, forcing down the strange feeling in my gut. "Yes, it's exqui - "

The boat smacked against something hard. My body tried to lurch forward, but Dorian held me fast.

"Rheme, what was that?" He sounded calm, but I felt his pulse increase.

"I'm not sure, sir." Rheme walked toward the front of the boat. "Let me check," he said, leaning over the railing.

Something smacked against the boat again. The elf nearly went in the water.

Dorian released my waist and started forward, but I grabbed his arm. My senses were on overload. Something was wrong.

A figure, dark as the darkest night, appeared in front of Rheme and pulled the elf over the edge of the barge. Sub-consciously I expected to

hear a splash, but there wasn't one.

Dorian sprang forward, peering over the edge.

"Get behind me," I said, worried for him, as creatures who looked like shadows swarmed him. They were small, the size of children. "Dorian!" My body moved over to my husband before I even realized it. "Get off him!" My fangs descended with my fury. I couldn't see Dorian, there were so many creatures around him. I pulled at them, yanking and throwing them behind me, but I still couldn't see Dorian. The creatures were too dense.

After several seconds I realized what I was doing wasn't working, so I picked up the nearest dark figure and bit into it. The creatures looked like shadows, but they were solid, and solid meant they would have blood. I would be able to tell the type of creature by the flavor of its blood.

Except -

As soon as my fangs sank into the flesh, it disintegrated in my hands and evaporated. I screamed in frustration and grabbed another. And another. And another. Each one crumbled the same as the others.

Fear welled up; I didn't know what to do. I couldn't lose Dorian, and I wouldn't. So I kept fighting, even though it felt useless. One after another, I buried my fangs into them until a green light flashed from the center of the dogpile. At the place where I thought Dorian might be. It grew brighter, the color intensifying and getting bigger.

The shadow creatures no longer attacked, but froze, and began to float like black balloons.

I pushed them out of the way until I finally saw Dorian. The light was coming from him. "Magic," I whispered. "Are you? Dorian?" I called, reaching out to him in wonder.

He stood up straight, his eyes searching mine in wonder. His eyes glowed red. The magic of the Hunter. "Snow." His voice was soft, like a summer's breeze.

"What's happening? What are those things?" The remaining dark

creatures continued to float around him. I took a step closer.

"I don't know, but stay where you are. I'm not sure what's going on, and I don't want to hurt you." He raised a hand. His eyes changed to gold - the magic of the dragon.

"Your eyes."

He smiled. "I know, love. I can feel it. See a difference."

"Are you okay?" I reached out but didn't touch him and crossed my arms to keep from doing something stupid.

His eyes changed to a bright elven blue. "Yes. These are the underlings of the Unknowns. Remember them?"

My mind went back to the altar. The knife stabbing me. Dorian coming in to protect me, taking my place as the sacrifice. The Unknowns stopped their plan to destroy all magical creatures because of him. "They're whispering to me - the underlings. They have secrets; they're trying to protect me - protect us. From what, I'm not sure, but I think it's the Unknowns."

I shook my head. "Why? I thought that was over. They accepted the sacrifice. Your sacrifice."

His eyes changed to green, then brown, then indigo in quick succession.

"Apparently, they still want more." He tilted his head to the side as though listening. "They're bringing her back."

"Who?"

"Sharra."

The sound of cackling rang in the distance.

"No." My hands went to my mouth, and I covered it to keep in the scream forming on my lips.

Dorian's eyes turned silver. "The underlings don't know when, but they came to warn us. The Unknowns will do whatever it takes to give magic its rebirth."

His eyes changed back to ebony, flecked with the colors of the

seven magics.

"What?" A sick horror filled my body.

"They say if Jasmine dies, then so will all magic. We have to protect her at all costs." The shadows dissipated, and I went to Dorian.

"We will," I said, leaning against his chest. "We will keep her safe."

OceanofPDF.com

THREE YEARS LATER

THE RECTANGLE TABLE was filled with supernaturals from the seven magics, including Cindy. She was still my best friend and a damn fine witch. Professor Pops was there as well as Gabe and Dorian.

My eyes fell on my husband's face, and butterflies fluttered low in my belly. We'd been married a little more than three years, yet I couldn't get enough of him. If anything, my love and desire for the man had grown.

His eyes found mine, and he smiled.

I heard his heartbeat faster, and I bit my bottom lip.

Damn, I wanted to taste him.

"Did you hear me?" Gabe asked, his voice lifted with irritation.

Heat trickled up my neck. "Say again," I said, lifting my chin, daring him to be anything except respectful.

Sure, he and I had been in love once. It seemed forever ago. The chayot was still handsome but nothing compared to Dorian.

"I asked what you wanted us to do about the human girl. Now that her magic has manifested, she needs to be handled before she hurts someone else."

I didn't appreciate the way he spoke about the girl.

"Gabe!" Cindy shouted. She obviously didn't like what he said either.

"Hey, what? I get why she did what she did." He sighed. "But I'm a chayot. It is ingrained in my DNA to protect humans from supernaturals."

That was true, but the way he'd spoken still irked me. That was why we would've never worked. His nature was to protect humans while mine was to protect supernaturals—at all costs.

But Cindy and Gabe? They fit much better.

Slowly, I opened the magical dossier we'd put together on Sera. Unfortunately, the teen had a hard life, and things got worse when her magic violently revealed itself.

"Well?" one of the other board members asked.

I closed the folder. "Cindy and Professor Pops can locate Sera and bring her back to the Academy." The grandfather clock I kept in my living quarters chimed twelve times, telling me it was noon.

Jasmine and I had a mother-daughter date. She wanted to practice her flying with the pixilettes in the garden while I watched. It was one of my favorite times of the day. Jasmine was growing up so fast. Soon enough, she would be the same age as Sera. I had to take every opportunity to be with her while she still wanted me around.

I closed the folder and stood. "That'll be all. I have another appointment."

"I'll go with them," Gabe said, standing as well, his shoulders squared.

Cindy did her best to not roll her eyes while Professor Pops kept his face blank as an empty page.

"Very well," I said and left the room.

From beyond the door, I heard Cindy. "It isn't necessary for you to go with us, Gabe." She sounded only a little haughty.

I smiled.

The two of them were made for each other.

"Wait up," Dorian called.

I turned my skin dancing with anticipation at the sight of him. "Husband."

"Wife." He smiled mischievously. "I thought I'd join you in the garden and then afterward while Jasmine takes her nap - " He paused and wiggled his eyebrows playfully. "I thought I'd give you a massage."

I had a million things that needed to get done, but there was no way I could say no to that.

"Great idea." I tucked my arm through his and leaned my head against his bicep.

"I hoped you'd agree," he replied, kissing the top of my head.

Cindy and Gabe were arguing behind us, but I didn't pay them any mind. All I could think about was Dorian's hands on me and all we would do to each other while Jasmine took her nap.

"Snow," Cindy called.

She wanted me to intervene, but I didn't want to.

In response, I lifted my hand to let her know I heard her but kept walking away.

She huffed as she moved down another hallway in a different direction.

The sound of Gabe's booted feet trailed after her.

"You think they'll figure out they can't live without each other?" Dorian asked softly.

"Eventually," I said.

"It took you and me some time, too," Dorian added, wrapping an arm around me.

"Very true." I snuggled into his side, grateful I never had to be without him again.

OceanofPDF.com

DEADLY WITCH

OceanofPDF.com

A GRIM SMILE

"CINDY CROSWELL, will you - " Gabe, the angelic chayot leader and my boyfriend studied me, his glorious features a painting of perfection.

"What?" I asked, glancing at Pops nervously before focusing on Gabe.

My heart picked up speed. Was he going to ask me to marry him right here? Right now? In an alley full of smelly trash and debris.

His hands circled my arms, and he pulled me to the side. "Will you move out of the way? You're blocking my view of the street." He gave me a grim smile.

"Oh." My heart sank. How had my thoughts gone to marriage? I clucked my tongue and clenched my fists together. "Sure."

The town of Salem, Massachusetts, was quiet, which was unusual for a Saturday morning. Typically people were shopping in the market or children played in the park.

It could be that it was before seven in the morning, and none of the shops were open.

Plus, Pops, Gabe, and I were in the alleyway behind several stores.

The backs of the tall, brick buildings lined one side. Green trash bins rested against them. On the other side was a ten-foot chain-link fence separating the businesses from the enormous city building.

There were no windows, thankfully.

We could do our magic without worrying about humans catching us.

"Where is she, Cin?" Gabe asked. He was more on edge than usual as he searched the area.

"I don't know. I have magic, but I'm not a GPS. We're still going to

have to look." I crossed my arms, frustrated with my long-time love.

The air was damp and warm, causing my blue tank to stick to my back, not to mention the pool developing between my cleavage.

Thankfully I remembered to put my hair in a ponytail. But my green camo pants, while great for carrying weapons and whatnot, had me wishing I wore shorts.

Gabe wore jeans and a green tee shirt.

The blades he started carrying when he became the leader of the chayot crossed behind his back. Those angelic weapons were invisible to humans, so only the supernaturals had to worry.

"Well, you'd think your magic would be more accurate. You used a locater spell, right?"

I glared at him. "Look, Gabe - "

"Why don't you both go left, and I'll go right," Professor Pops interrupted, giving us a look that said we were annoying.

I agreed, but it wasn't me.

It was mostly Gabe.

My man needed to chill, which was difficult given the temperature.

Typically, Professor Pops wore sweaters and dress slacks, but today he had on pants similar to mine and a black tank.

The vampire was more than six hundred years old, but he was still damn fine - for an old guy. Short salt and pepper hair accented his square jaw and smile lines.

"You got it," Gabe said, heading off in that direction.

I followed, trying not to be bugged Gabe was here at all.

Pops and I could handle the girl fine, but my angelic boyfriend felt duty-bound to make sure we didn't use magic or compulsion to hurt any unsuspecting humans we came in contact with. As a chayot, that was his job, but it was still irritating.

I clenched my fists together, inhaling a deep breath to calm my nerves.

The witch we were after needed our help, whether she realized it or not. Like me, she was born with magic. And like me, she didn't find out until after her sixteenth birthday.

It was a tough situation.

The girl was in the foster care system.

One of her foster brothers forced himself on her.

In her fear and self-protective rage, she hurt him using magic.

Not that the little asshole didn't deserve it.

He did.

The problem was, he kept blabbing to anyone who would listen that Sera was a witch.

We needed to find her before the police caught her and incarcerated her, or worse, just killed her.

New laws were passed a year ago.

It wasn't right.

Governments tried to detain any supernaturals they caught.

Thankfully, Pops, his sons, Gabe, Snow, and I freed most of them, but a few were still in detainee camps.

Those supernaturals who weren't prisoners were used in treacherous ways.

Snow defeated Sharra a little over three years ago, and the human realm was just getting back to normal.

Sort of.

While I loved my best friend and appreciated her need to free all supernaturals, she made things rather difficult for humans.

They were entirely blind-sided by the sudden appearance of magical creatures wandering their streets, performing magic in the open, and sucking blood.

Gabe spoke with the leaders of the human realm as well as Snow and the leaders of the other supernaturals, and they all came to an

accord.

The supernaturals agreed to leave the human realm, and Snow helped them create their own.

Once most supernaturals were gone, the human leaders passed laws banning magic and supernaturals from their realm altogether.

Still, in many cases, there was no way to tell who the supernaturals were.

That left the human realm in a combustible position, but things were better.

Okay, not really.

The biggest worry was the kids, especially those born in the human realm with magic and didn't know it.

In some cases, the parents kicked them out as soon as their magic manifested.

Others turned their own children over to their government.

The Seven Magics Academy wasn't having that.

Which was why we'd gone to the hospital where the guy was staying.

He had a broken arm and some fractured ribs.

I used magic to sneak us into the room, and Professor Pops compelled the jerk to forget the magic he saw Sera use.

Pops also compelled the guy to be kind.

Gabe didn't like that Pops used compulsion on a human, but I thought it was amazing.

Have I mentioned I really like Pops? He's incredible in more ways than one.

"Over here," Pops called.

Gabe and I ran back.

Sera was huddled against a trash bin, her back against the wall. She was dirty, and her red hair was matted.

"Don't be afraid," I said, standing in front of Pops and Gabe. Men weren't what she needed to see at the moment.

"Leave me alone!" Sera put out her hand, and Gabe went sailing back into the chain-link fence.

Without a word, Pops helped him stand.

I was impressed the girl could do magic without the help of a spell or incantation. Her magic probably came from trolls and was mostly brute strength.

I still didn't know where my magic came from.

"Hey," I said, trying again, my hands out in supplication. "It's okay. We aren't going to hurt you. We're here to help."

She pushed herself against the wall and stood, her hand coming out again, and I knew things were about to get ugly.

Sure enough, this time, she sent her magic into Pops.

The vampire took a step back but repelled her with his own magic - that of a hunter. His eyes glowed red, and he growled, flashing his fangs.

Sera's eyes grew wide, and she cried out in pain.

"Incomples slumberia." I spoke the words gently, and Sera's eyes closed as her body slumped to the ground. "Let's get her back to the Academy before anyone else gets hurt."

"Agreed." Pops picked Sera up like she weighed nothing.

"I'll see you later," Gabe said, kissing my cheek. His features were tight, and I bit back the need to ask him what was wrong. Now wasn't the time.

"Tonight, after my shift at Bertilini's?" I asked, meeting his gaze.

"I'll be there." He smiled, but his body remained stiff. Maybe he was still upset over what Pops had done to the jerk who hurt Sera.

I tilted my head and scrunched my eyebrows together, hoping the effort would help me read him. It didn't. "Good." I watched him walk to the end of the alley and turn the corner.

Once Gabe was out of sight, I whispered the spell that opened a portal back into Sharra. Specifically, the basement of the Seven Magics Academy.

OceanofPDF.com

MAGICAL SHIELD

IF THE WORLD was created with a bang, then magic began in a whisper. The utterance of one word: Bloomous, that single declaration, articulated softly, started it all.

Bloomous.

I thought about that as I considered the lesson I was preparing for next week's classes.

The ideas brought back memories, some recent, others happened years ago.

While many weren't good, I was grateful for them anyway because they made me step up and become the witch I was today.

And in my opinion, I was pretty damn awesome.

The lights flickered, and I searched the room.

It was large with reformatory cells along the far wall.

Desks covered in various magical items were placed in the middle of the room.

The door resided on the other side. Wide and arched at the top, it was made of wood with a black wrought iron handle.

Shelves lined either side of the entrance and were filled with dusty old books interspersed with old boxes and ancient-looking artifacts.

On the two short walls stood an enchanted sentry. Gilded armor that looked like it belonged in Arthurian times.

Basically, the room was a catch-all for things we weren't sure what to do with but were too valuable to throw away.

Again the lights sputtered.

"Luminous nervosa," I said, hoping that would fix the flickering.

It was hard to believe I was a teacher at the Seven Magics

Academy.

In high school, I always thought teachers were so old.

I was barely older than the oldest students.

In a lot of ways, I considered myself a kid. Just like the ones I taught.

There were three things I believed were important in this world.

Fashion, friendship, and magic. Not necessarily in that order.

Sure, it was always important to look your best, and magic was the coolest thing on the planet, but if I had to choose between a gorgeous new top from Bloomingdale's or my best friend Snow, I would choose Snow.

Without even batting a false eyelash.

Yes, she was a little awkward and couldn't put an outfit together to save her life. But, she had a heart bigger than the Grand Canyon and cared for me and all supernaturals like we were her family.

As Vampire Queen of Sharra, Snow carried a lot of responsibility.

I did what I could to help, including teaching the spells and charms classes at the Seven Magics Academy.

It was strange how much I enjoyed teaching exasperating teenagers how to put together a charm or master a spell.

Actually, it was more than like.

I loved teaching.

Helping them figure out their magic shifted my worldview.

Where before I was unsure of my place, now I knew right where I fit.

Seeing students' eyes light up, and over time, watching their confidence develop, it was a joy to be a part of - even if they were little pricks sometimes.

Gabe kept telling me to pace myself.

All my passion could get used up like a dried sponge sooner rather

than later.

He spoke from experience. Leading the chayot and helping the humans took its toll on my boyfriend.

Keeping the peace between vampires and other magical creatures as well as non-magical humans was a full-time job-and-a-half.

I didn't envy him one bit.

But as I sat at a desk in the basement, waiting for Sera to wake up, I thought a lot of it had to do with the job itself.

I was shaping and molding young minds while Gabe was wrangling rogue vampires and cleaning up magical messes.

I sighed, happy I could spend time in Sharra at the academy though I also enjoyed hunting for new students whenever necessary and working weekends at Bertilini's. The Italian restaurant was in the human realm and they would be lost without me.

It was also good to spend time with Gabe.

We'd been together a while, longer than Dorian and Snow, but Gabe hadn't hinted at a proposal.

Not that I cared.

At least, not that much.

I loved him, and he loved me. It was enough for now.

I checked my watch. Sera was still asleep, and I needed to be here when she woke. I ended up calling Bertilini's and getting someone to cover my shift.

I also canceled on Gabe. He was acting weird anyway.

At the moment, Sera was lying on a single bed in a cell, the bars and walls shielded by magic so she couldn't bust out when she did wake.

The bars and cells were a regrettable necessity. I didn't want her to be afraid. She wasn't a prisoner, per se. She was going to be a new student at the academy - if I could convince her.

Sera moaned, rubbing her head.

With the wave of my hand, I paused the pen I was using to do my lesson and stood, taking a deep breath.

Over the years since Snow officially took over the Seven Magics Academy, I found myself in this position many times.

She sat up, rubbing her head. "Where am I?" Her voice was soft but dangerous.

I would bet my right hand she was descended from trolls. Don't ask about the logistics of that. I didn't want to know. Nor did I want to think about it. Weirdly, it was more common than one might believe. Some humans were willing to try anything, including a smelly troll.

"You're in the basement of the Seven Magics Academy, a school for supernatural kids like you," I said, resting my hands on my hips.

She noticed the bars, and her eyes widened. "Why am I locked up?"

"It's okay. They are there to protect you." I stepped closer, getting a whiff of her. The girl needed a shower.

She stood, her hands flailing magic from her body.

Her golden brown magic smacked into the magical shield that surrounded her compartment. The safeguard was useful for a couple of reasons.

The first, it kept me safe. And the second. It gave me an idea of what kind of magic the person possessed.

Sera was descended from trolls, although the golden hue was a surprise.

As her magic melded harmlessly into the enchantment around the cell, she let out a scream of frustration. "Let me out of here!"

"I will. As soon as you have a seat and listen to what I have to say." I kept my voice calm in the hope she would compose herself.

It didn't work.

"I will kill you if you don't let me go." She went to the bars and tried to grab hold, but the magic there shocked her, and she flinched.

"Ouch! Damn, that hurt!" She shook out her hands in frustration, stepping back.

I wanted to stoop to her level and tell her she was acting like a whiny bitch.

Instead, I took a deep breath before heading back to the desk and sat in my chair.

"I swear, I'll rip your eyes from their sockets and douse them in oil before setting them on fire!"

She paused a moment and then growled.

"I'll tear your limbs from your body and beat you with them until you're dead," she continued, stomping around, throwing things with her magic and her hands. Making a mess out of the room.

OceanofPDF.com

ALTERED WITH MAGIC

I IGNORED Sera and went back to my lessons.

Monday would be the first day of the new year at the academy.

Even with Sera yelling like a crazy person, I couldn't stifle my excitement.

I always looked forward to the opening ceremony.

Abernathy presented me with an orb, which allowed me to see which house the new students belonged in.

Sometimes I wondered whether I should use the orb on myself to discover which house I belonged to, but I was too chicken.

In A Study on Charms, I would teach the class how to select an object suitable for a magical charm.

It was a serious process choosing and preparing a charm before it was altered with magic. Charms worked best when paired with the person's magic, and that's why we had the opening ceremony.

A student with fairy ancestry would have better luck creating emotional charms, like love, while a witch with troll magic would excel at offensive or defensive charms.

Witches with elven magic could produce amazing luck charms.

Of course, my students could try to make charms from magics that weren't from their heritage.

Some might even turn out well.

Supernaturals could draw from other magics once they learned how, but they were always most powerful using their own.

Still, it wouldn't be a beginner class if at least half the students didn't create a charm hoping it would bring them love. The charm rarely worked.

The other class I taught on Mondays was An Introduction to Spells.

I would teach them a simple binding spell.

The newbie witches would hopefully leave class knowing how to tie their shoes without using their hands.

On Tuesday, I would instruct the intermediate -

"Hey," Sera shouted.

I steeled myself and glanced up. "Are you ready to listen, or do you still intend to continue your tantrum?"

She slumped onto the edge of the bed, her arms crossed, and she was breathing heavily. "What?" she sneered.

I pulled my chair over so I could sit in front of her. "My name is Cindy Croswell, but you may call me Miss Croswell." I paused, waiting to see if she would respond.

She nodded.

Good enough.

"I'm a teacher at the Seven Magics Academy, which is where we are." I looked around the room. "Well, right now we are below it, but close enough."

"Why am I here?" she asked quietly.

"You possess magic." I debated whether to tell her about her heritage but thought better of it.

That could wait until the opening ceremony.

"Didn't you wonder how you were able to injure that boy when he tried to hurt you, or fling my friend across the alley?"

She glanced down at her hands. "I have magic?" she asked in wonder.

"Yes. By the looks of it, very powerful magic."

"But that would make me one of those supernaturals I've seen on the news. They're against the law. I'm against the law." She began to breathe heavily, and her face crumpled like she would cry.

"You are a supernatural, and while you might be against the law in the human realm, you are no longer there." I smiled. "You are in Sharra, and you are safe. Here at the Seven Magics Academy, we will teach you how to use your magic."

"I'm not on Earth? Are you an alien? Are you going to probe me?" She stood and came closer, studying me as though looking for something otherworldly.

I closed my eyes so I wouldn't roll them. Just about every magical hybrid who came here asked the same type of question. "You are still on Earth," I said, opening my eyes. "Just in a different realm. And no, I am not going to probe you. That's gross." I gave her a wry smile, hoping to dispel some of the tension.

Sera smiled too. "Good."

She went back and sat on the bed. Her face fell. "I didn't mean to hurt Bucky so bad. I just wanted him to get off me." Her voice was soft, and she was once again looking at her hands.

"Hey," I said tenderly. "I get it. No judgment here. That guy was an asshole for doing what he did. You protected yourself. A little too strongly, but still, it's what I would've done."

I clasped my hands together and rested my elbows on my thighs. "You did good, and now you're here, I can show you how to control your magic so you can do better."

"Okay." There was still fight in her, but she was ready to talk and listen. I could work with that.

I went over and picked up my paper and pen. I needed to get as much information about her as possible.

"Let's start at the beginning," I said.

IN THE MIDDLE of questioning Sera, the heavy door creaked open.

I glanced over my shoulder, wondering who it could be at this hour.

Snow and Coco, whose real name was Pocahontas, entered.

Both women were vampires, and both of them were exquisitely beautiful.

Snow wore a black dress covered in blood-red lace.

It was tight in the bodice, causing the long skirt to flare out. Since becoming the vampire queen, she went from a total tomboy to always dressed to the nines.

A small crown covered in diamonds and rubies adorned her head.

Coco wore a dress similar to Snow's in style, but it was midnight blue, the color of her eyes. Her black hair was short against her head, accentuating her strong jawline and red lips.

"Snow. Coco." I closed my notebook and sent it back over to my desk with magic while I made my way over.

"Has our new friend spoken yet?" Coco asked, looking over my shoulder at Sera.

"She has, and I believe, after a few more questions and tests, she'll be ready to join the rest of the students for Monday's classes."

As I spoke, I hugged Snow.

Queen or not, she was still my best friend.

Coco and I weren't necessarily friends, but only because we hardly knew each other.

"Good." Coco crossed her arms, lifting her chin.

"Want to introduce us?" Snow asked.

I walked over to the cell, Snow, and Coco following.

Sera looked frightened, and I could understand why.

Vampires were intimidating by nature.

Something about them oozed terror.

"It's okay," I said, holding out my hands. "This is Snow White, Queen of the Vampires and ruler of all supernaturals." I stepped aside, pointing at Snow.

Snow smiled and went toward the cell. "It's lovely to meet you, Sera."

Sera swallowed and tried to smile, but I sensed her fear.

"And this is Coco Redding. She's the headmistress of SMA." I pointed to Coco.

She flashed a bright smile, showing off all of her sharp, white teeth. "Welcome to the Seven Magics Academy, Sera. Please call me Ms. Redding."

"Hello," Sera said quietly. "It's nice to meet you both." She kept looking at me and then back at them.

If I didn't know them, I would find them intimidating as well.

"We're glad you're here. Tomorrow, Ms. Redding will introduce you to your roommates and get you set up with uniforms and books for your classes." Snow's smile got bigger. "The school is a wonderful place to hone your craft and make life-long friends."

Snow glanced at Coco and me before continuing, "We're more like a family than a typical student body, and we hope you'll feel comfortable enough to seek one of us out if you have a question or need anything."

"I'll be by tomorrow afternoon to collect you," Coco said, her lips forming a tight line. It was apparent she wasn't as ready for Sera to be released as Snow and me.

"Okay," Sera said, wringing her hands. "Thank you," she added belatedly when Snow and Coco moved back over to the exit.

Before Snow left, she glanced at me and whispered, "Are we still on for dinner tomorrow evening? There's something I need to discuss with you."

"Wouldn't miss it," I said, hugging her again.

Our Sunday dinners were the best. It was the only time we got the chance to talk extensively.

When they were gone, I went back over to Sera. "Let me go over

the details for tomorrow and Monday, and then we can get you cleaned up and presentable before I do a few more tests."

OceanofPDF.com

LUMIA

BY THE TIME Coco came by to get Sera on Sunday, the girl was more than ready to get out of the basement, and I couldn't blame her.

More than once, I had to leave her down there alone.

Each time I returned, she looked frazzled, though she was no longer dirty.

She donned some of my clothes, including a faded pair of jeans and a blue sweatshirt with Merde across the front as well as some shoes and socks.

I'd used magic to clean her up.

Beneath the multiple layers of grime, she had long, red naturally curly hair, azure blue eyes, and light, freckled skin.

"Let me know if you need anything," I said as she followed after Coco.

Sera nodded, still slightly nervous. "I will. Thanks."

When she was gone, I stayed and tidied up the cell, then finished my lessons for the week. By the time I was done, I had to rush to meet Snow for dinner.

Snow wrinkled her nose when she opened the door. "I didn't think you were going to make it." She hugged me, and I hugged her back.

"Wouldn't miss dinner with the queen." A quick glance around the finely decorated dining hall revealed Dorian was there, as well as a little girl. She had black wings on her back and was so cherubic, it hurt a little to look at her. "Hello, Dorian," I said, going over.

"Welcome," he said, taking my hand.

"Who's this?" I asked, curious about the girl. She must be another supernatural, but what kind?

Over the years, I'd met gargoyles, fairies, and a dragon hybrid, but

none of them had wings in human form the way this girl did.

"I'm Jasmine," she said, standing on the chair, so we were the same height. "What's your name?" Her eyes were the loveliest shade of lavender, and as she looked at me, I thought she might be able to see all the way into my soul.

"Cindy," I replied, taking her small, outstretched hand.

At her touch, a jolt of magic zinged through me like nothing before.

The girl seemed to possess more power than any other person, including Snow, who had been the Seal.

"It's lovely to meet you," Jasmine said.

"And you," I replied, awed. She appeared to be no more than three or four, but she spoke and acted much older.

"Have a seat." Snow indicated the chair across from Jasmine, and to the right of her chair at the head of the table.

I sat as did Snow. For the next several minutes, a flurry of worker vampires brought in our food. Once everything was placed on the table and the glasses filled, the workers left, and we were able to eat and talk in peace.

I was hungrier than I thought and dove in. The roasted chicken with fingerling potatoes, onions, and carrots covered in gravy were delicious.

Jasmine gave me a quizzical look. She hadn't touched her food.

"Mommy, is this your best friend?"

That sent my chewing to a halt, and I swallowed. "Mommy?" I looked from the girl to Snow. "Did you adopt her?"

"Well, not exactly. It's an interesting stor - " The door to the dining hall flung open.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Coco said. "But, I could use Cindy's assistance." Her brows furrowed. "You seem to have a connection with Sera, and there's a problem."

"Oh?"

"It's after curfew, and she and some other students are out in the forest behind the stables." Her lips pinched together. "Perhaps I wasn't clear on the rules, but I think it would be best if you spoke with them instead of me."

"Sure." I set down my fork.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Snow asked.

I shook my head. "Stay with your family. I'll handle it." I rose, glancing at Jasmine and Dorian, who smiled kindly. The man put up with me because of my friendship with Snow, but we weren't ever really close.

"You positive?" Snow asked, even though it was apparent she wanted to stay.

"If I can't handle it, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Cin." Snow smiled gratefully.

I placed my napkin on the table beside my plate and went over to Coco. "Lead the way."

I followed Coco down the hall, passing a plethora of rooms, and then down a winding set of stairs inside one of the towers.

At the bottom, we went through the kitchens and out the back door.

Darkness overtook me, and I paused.

Unlike Coco, I couldn't see in the dark without help.

"Lumia," I whispered, and a ball of light appeared, lighting the way.

Coco was already farther down the path than I expected, and I quickened my pace until I was beside her.

"Where are they?" I asked, doing my best to contain my unease.

"Back this way. I saw magic lighting the night on my way back from my ride." She sped up, and I jogged beside her to keep up with her long legs.

I touched Coco's arm. "Don't worry. I know where I'm going now. Go ahead and get the things done you need to. Tomorrow is your busiest day of the year."

She stopped. "Excellent. Thank you, Miss Croswell. Cindy." A wisp of a smile formed on her lips.

"Course."

"Will you let me know what was going on when you finish up?" Coco asked.

"Yes, I'll meet you in your office when I'm finished."

"I would appreciate that." She turned and went back the way we came.

I made my way to the barn before skirting around it and coming to the back. I searched for a moment to find them.

They were beyond the barn and inside the forest.

Candles were lit in a seven-pointed star, and seven students sat inside, around a fire.

"Merde." I extinguished my light and headed toward them.

They were chanting something.

Even without hearing what they said, I knew this magic was more substantial and more complex than any taught at the school.

The very air crackled with power.

As I came closer, I saw Sera was in charge of the group.

That surprised me.

It had only been a few hours since she was introduced to her roommates.

Apparently, she knew more about her magic than she first let on.

My worry turned to panic.

What was she doing?

As soon as I entered the forest, Sera looked up.

Flames from the fire danced in her eyes, and her cruel expression

changed to surprise. "She's here," Sera said. "Just like I promised."

The others, all of them looking terrified, turned.

When they saw me, they looked like they wanted to run but couldn't.

"It's going to be okay," I said delicately.

Then to Sera, "What are you doing?"

A look of panic crossed Sera's face before her eyes rolled back inside her head, and they were replaced with twin pools of red, like blood.

"Sera isn't here right now," she said, and my light was extinguished. "I am Mizrabel, a sorceress from the land of Polonias. With her longing for friends and for power, this child was easy to coerce into wakening me. Now everyone in the land will pay, especially you. If you dare, come for me, and we will see who is meant to rule the land." The voice, which sounded nothing like Sera's, cackled and was gone.

The fire went out, and we were immediately bathed in darkness.

"Lumia," I said again.

Around me, the students were crying or whispering nervously.

Sera moaned, her knees buckling as she began to fall forward.

"Deleria soproth," I said fiercely to stop Sera from tumbling into the hot embers of the snuffed out fire.

"We're so sorry," Kaylan said from my right.

"We didn't know this would happen, Miss Croswell. We thought this was just going to be a fun seance," Kimberly added.

I gave them a stern look. "It's after curfew. Get back to your rooms. We will talk about this later." I worked to keep my voice steady, though concern built a well in my stomach, making me sick.

The kids scattered, hurrying back in the direction of the dormitories.

Sera tried to move, but I continued to hold her with my magic.

"I didn't know this would happen," she said. "I swear."

I gritted my teeth. "Let's go. We'll discuss it in Ms. Redding's office." I released her before taking her by the arm.

We walked back to the castle, which Snow turned into the Seven Magics Academy, and straight to Coco's office.

When we entered, a look of relief crossed Ms. Redding's face, but it lasted only moments.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Sit," I ordered Sera.

When the girl was situated, I sat as well, but stayed on the edge of my chair, in case she or this Mizrabel tried anything again.

"It seems Sera here was coerced by a sorceress called Mizrabel to perform a seance and waken her." I turned to Sera.

"Start from the beginning and tell us what happened," I said.

The girl nodded, her teeth chattering. "Ms. Redding introduced me to my roommates, Kaylan, Kimberly, and the others. Kaylan and Kimberly are really nice. We got to talking about spells and being a witch. They were bragging about what they could do, and I felt stupid."

Her hands clenched together in fists. "The last week or so, I've heard Mizrabel's voice in my head, telling me to do things, and so I told Kaylan and Kimberly about it. They said we should do a seance and that I would have to lead since she was in my head. They got some of their friends together, and we went into the forest."

She swallowed. "You saw the rest."

I shook my head. "Why didn't you tell me about the voice when you first arrived yesterday?"

Tears filled her eyes. It was apparent she was really sorry. "I was embarrassed and thought it was nothing."

"It's obviously something," Coco said stiffly.

Sera nodded. "I know that now, and I apologize."

I took a tissue from Coco's desk and handed it to the sniffling girl. "Is there anything else you've neglected to share with us?"

"No." She blew her nose. "I promise you know everything I do."

"Very well, but there must be a consequence for your actions tonight," Coco said.

Sera hung her head. "I understand."

"You will write a two-page paper on the reasons why what you did was a bad idea."

"Okay." Relief filled Sera's eyes.

"Have it finished and bring it to me by tomorrow night. Understood?" Coco looked down her nose at the girl. She was really good at looking the part of the headmistress.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, now get back to your room. Do not stop for any reason whatsoever, or I'll add to your consequences." Coco gave the girl a tight smile. "Goodnight, Sera Coggs."

Sera left, and I looked at Coco. "Do you think she's telling the truth?" I asked.

Coco raised her eyebrows. "Let us hope," she replied.

OceanofPDF.com

SAVED ME DESSERT

CURFEW WAS eight o'clock during the school year.

Students didn't have to be in bed, but they did have to be on their floor.

With vampires and other predatory supernaturals roaming the land of Sharra and the castle, it was a precaution most students adhered to.

As I made my way back up to Snow's floor, I thought about what Mizrabel said.

She dared me to go after her.

Why? Who was I to her?

The words shook me, though. No doubt about it. I needed to discuss what happened with Snow.

The worker vampire known as Dina opened the door leading to Snow's floor. "Thank you," I said, my thoughts still on Sera and Mizrabel, and I shook my head.

Something about Sera wasn't quite right, but I didn't know why I felt that way. I would keep an eye on her.

Snow closed one of the doors, standing in the hall.

"Hey," I called, waving.

She put a finger to her lips. "Hey," she said in a whisper.

That's when I remembered Jasmine.

Snow and I had a lot to talk about.

"I was just on my way to find you. What happened? Anything I need to be concerned about?" She took my hand.

"Yes. Can we go somewhere to talk?" I studied Snow's strange eyes.

They were changed from blue to grayish lavender since she'd

become the Seal.

We talked at length about whether she was still the Seal or not.

The amulet did what it was meant to do, so it stood to reason the Seal's power was gone. There was no way to know for sure without talking to the Unknowns, but we had no way to find them.

Snow led me into their living room. "Have a seat. Are you hungry?"

Dessert sounded wonderful, but I didn't need it. "No, I'm fine."

Snow poured herself some blood into a golden goblet and came to sit beside me. "What happened?"

I told her about Polonias and Mizrabel and all that transpired with Sera. "I believe the girl didn't mean to wake the sorceress or the peoples of the land, but that doesn't change the fact the deed is done, and I'm not sure what to do about it."

Snow watched me, sipping from her glass, her features twisted in an unreadable expression.

"How about I help you research Polonias and Mizrabel? We can check the books now if you want," she said, lifting a hopeful brow.

I shook my head. "I do want your help, but not tonight. I'm tired, and we have a big day tomorrow."

"Alright." Snow squeezed my hand. "Yes, the house ritual is always interesting, isn't it?" She gave me a wry smile.

"That it is." I glanced over to the dining table. "You saved me dessert, didn't you?"

"Of course I did." Snow rose and went over, lifting the cover and grabbing me a napkin, fork, and the little china plate with a delectable cake atop it. "Here you go." She handed it to me.

"You know me too well," I said, taking it from her.

"I should hope so. We've been friends a very long time."

"Since I saved you from the apple," I said, and smiled, before shoving a piece of cake in my mouth.

Snow returned to her spot and picked up her glass. "It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

"Amen," I said, swallowing. "Now, tell me all about Jasmine." I cut another forkful but didn't eat it yet. "Where did she come from? What is she? Who is she? Tell me everything."

AFTER A LONG DAY, I went to my room, changed into my periwinkle PJs, and climbed under the covers.

My room at the academy was on the floor below Snow's.

As I lay in bed, I pondered all Snow told me. I couldn't believe she had a daughter, and the girl was an original vampire. We also discussed the Unknowns and what they had to do with us, but we really knew very little about them.

My bedside table lamp still glimmered, casting shadows.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my mind.

Opening ceremonies were in the morning, and I needed to be up early.

"Diminius." The light went out.

I tucked my sheet and comforter under my chin, the way I liked and was about to close my eyes when a tiny red light flicked on above my head.

"What the hell?" Startled, I sat up and scooted toward my headboard. The light grew bigger and bigger. As it grew, it moved toward the foot of my bed.

An irritated female voice spoke. "Cinderella, it's time. Magic has awakened us from our slumber, and Polonias is in danger. The land needs you. All of our realm's inhabitants need you."

She sneezed. And the rosy light became the outline of a woman who appeared to be around my age with brown hair and very eclectic taste in clothing.

Without thinking, I pulled the comforter up past my nose.

"Revealith," I whispered, hoping the magic would show me what she really was.

My first thought was Mizrabel, but she didn't sound like the sorceress.

"Tut-tut," she quipped, then sneezed again.

"Knock it off with the magic. I'm allergic."

That made me laugh. "You're allergic to magic?" She reeked of it. How could she be allergic to something she so obviously possessed.

"Well, yes. No need to be rude, Cinderella." With her wand, she tapped on the light blue lampshade next to my bed, and it illuminated.

I choked back more laughter, no longer the least bit frightened. "Sorry. By the way, my name is Cindy, not Cinderella." I only sounded a little put out by her using my full name.

"It isn't?" A book appeared in her hands, and she flipped through the pages, sending sparkles of magic into the air. "Yes. It's right here. Cinderella. Plain as day."

I blinked back my irritation. "I don't care what your book says, my name is Cindy."

"Fine." The light around her dimmed, and the book vanished as her feet dropped lightly to my carpet.

I let the comforter fall slightly.

She was obviously some kind of witch, like me, and there didn't seem to be anything malevolent about her.

She smoothed out her outlandish bright green dress.

The sleeveless bodice sparkled with different colored gems, and the tulle skirt pooled out around her like an overabundant tutu.

Her legs were covered in black and lime green striped stockings and surprisingly conservative black heels.

The woman was around my height, and atop her curly brown hair sat a green and black hat, not pointed, but fluffy, like an old-fashioned

artist's beret.

At the front rested a lovely gold and lime-colored butterfly. It looked real, and I wanted to reach out and touch it.

Her eyelashes were lined in green jewels that matched her eyes.

"What are you doing in my room?" I asked as I watched her reorganize herself.

She sniffed but said nothing, then stuck her hands out to the side like she intended to walk on a tight rope before jumping into the air.

I worked to keep a straight face.

When she came back down, her feet landed on the carpet with a thud.

"Twixit," she said, jumping up into the air twice more.

Each time, her feet returned to the ground with an increasingly loud thud.

She glanced at me from under her long, bejeweled lashes and jumped a third time.

"Oh, for the love of butterflies!" She stomped around in a circle and pulled at her thickly fluffed skirt. The funky black and green hat on her head danced around precariously.

I thought it would fall off, but it didn't.

"Is there something I can help you with?" I asked, trying to contain my giggles. Maybe I was dreaming.

OceanofPDF.com

FAIRY GODMOTHER

SHE HUFFED AND SAID SOMETHING, but I couldn't understand with her back to me.

I watched her shoulders rise and fall.

Then she turned.

"I'm Quilla Templeton. Your fairy godmother. Maybe you remember me?" She stuck out a hand wrapped in a fingerless glove.

I got on my knees and moved toward the edge of the bed. "Um, Quilla, is it?"

She nodded, blowing her bangs off her forehead. "Yes."

I took her hand. "I'm much too old to need a fairy godmother, and you seem too young to be one."

She rolled her eyes. "It's a title, Cinderella." Her cheeks reddened. "And I'm older than I look. We fairies age at a much slower rate than humans." She stepped back.

"If you're a fairy, where are your wings?" I didn't mean to sound presumptuous, but fairies were supposed to have them.

That much I knew.

Her cheeks got even redder. "Well, aren't you just a tactless bundle of appallingly bad manners?" She crossed her arms.

I didn't see a need to respond to that.

"A mean and awful fairy by the name of Tinkerbell used magic to steal my wings." Tears filled Quilla's eyes. "I haven't been able to get them back."

"Is that why you can't fly?" I asked, sitting on the edge of my bed. I figured that was the reason she was jumping around a few moments ago.

Quilla let out a squeal, stomped around in another circle, and then stopped when she faced me. "I can fly just fine. Maybe not with my beautiful wings, but I have the capability nonetheless."

I leaned back, realizing we weren't getting anywhere by arguing like this. "Why are you here?" I asked, trying for the blunt approach.

She glanced at the ceiling. "A roof," she said quickly.

Confusion rolled over me, and I decided to try again. "Yeah?"

"Right. Yes." Still preoccupied, she snapped her fingers and sneezed. "Our land has been asleep for a thousand years, but someone used a spell to wake us, and that's why I'm here." Her face became serious. "It's your magic that will save the land of Polonias and all of its people."

The words sounded rehearsed. I wasn't buying it. "Right. And you've got some great mountaintop property to sell me in Florida, too. Am I right?" I winked, crossing my arms, working to stay calm. Quilla wasn't wicked that I could tell, but she was annoying as hell and must have exceedingly strong magic to get past the protective barriers placed around the castle.

Her hands dropped to her sides. "Florida? No. I don't even know what that means." She shook her head. "Stop talking and listen."

I shrugged. "Bossing me isn't helping any."

She glared. "May I speak? Or are you going to interrupt me again?"

"Continue," I said, sarcastic, crossing my legs and resting my elbows on them.

She put her hands on her hips. "Polonias is a land created by magic. It's connected to this realm but resides on a different plane. It's elsewhere if you catch my meaning." She looked at me, hopefully.

"I have no idea what you're saying." After Snow freed all supernaturals, it was her magic, along with the magics of others, that created the other realms, but Polonias wasn't one of them.

For some reason this witch or whoever was lying to me - about a

lot of things.

"Ugh, this is ridiculous. The Croswells should be ashamed of themselves. They were supposed to tell you the truth when you received The Eye of Abernathy." Quilla gave me a pointed look. "You've never heard of Polonias?"

Occasionally, since receiving the spellbook, I saw things. They came mostly at night and didn't make sense, so I ignored them. "Maybe a dream or two of another place, though I didn't know its name," I said.

"That's Polonias, I'm sure of it. King Loyalor sent me to find you and bring you back." She walked over to my bookshelves, retrieved a book, and turned it over. She blew on it, and dust sailed into the air. I braced myself, but this time she didn't sneeze.

"Why me? I've never heard of Polonias, been to Polonias, or known a single thing about Polonias. Why would I be the person to save it? Sounds like a bunch of bull."

She gasped. "It. Is. Not. Bull," she enunciated. "It may sound odd, but it's true. You and you alone possess the keys necessary to save our land."

I snorted, feigning disgust. But Mizrabel had mentioned the land to me as well.

She said it belonged to her.

People with power were idiots except for Snow.

"Don't snort at me. It's very unladylike." She shoved the book back in its place and stomped over. Leaned down, so our faces were aligned. "Are you going to help us or not, Cinderella?"

I leaned in until her nose touched mine. "No."

She sucked in a breath. Pulled back and rubbed her nose with her hand. "Well, that's just unacceptable!" she sputtered and threw her hands in the air.

Glitter shot from her fingertips, filling the room, and she sneezed.

"People will die, Cinderella! Lots of people. And fairies, water sprites, and gnomes. They'll die too." She was out of control, flitting everywhere at once. "Do you want that on your conscience?"

I didn't want anyone's death on my conscience, but I didn't believe she was serious for one second.

And the way the butterfly danced atop her head made me take her even less seriously.

She stopped suddenly and looked at me. "You're a disappointment!" Then, with a quick lightning crackle and a sneeze, she vanished.

My light flickered off, and I was alone.

Timidly, in case she came back, I made my way back under my covers, tucked them to my chin, and thought and thought and thought about what the hell had just happened.

Mostly I believed Quilla Templeton was a nuisance fairy sent to me as a prank by one of the advanced students.

Still, a tiny speck in my brain wondered if she was telling the truth.

Time passed, and the speck got bigger until I decided to talk to Professor Pops about it.

Maybe he would know something about Polonias.

Eventually, I fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed.

I stood in the middle of a misty meadow.

It was dark except for a pink moon hanging against the gray-violet sky.

Gigantic black trees surrounded me.

But it was silent. Still.

The tall grasses didn't swish and tickle my bare legs.

Not a single leaf rustled.

There wasn't a breeze or even the tiniest sound of insects.

Only my breathing.

But I sensed someone was out there, just beyond the tree line.

Watching me.

Waiting for something.

Or maybe he was stalking me, and I was his prey.

I didn't know.

A figure stepped forward.

Dark.

Solitary.

My breath hitched as my pulse picked up speed.

I knew I should run, but my feet were planted to their spot.

Like the tall grasses, I was stuck still, unable to uproot myself.

Five feet away, the figure stopped.

I strained to catch a glimpse.

Arms reached out, grasping as though to touch me, but couldn't.

A male voice whispered, "Come, Cinderella. I need you."

OceanofPDF.com

INTRODUCTIONS

AFTER BREAKFAST, opening ceremonies for the academy took place in the grand ballroom.

Since the academy only officially existed for a few years, there were fifty-five students in varying classes.

All of them came from the human realm, and they all possessed at least one of the seven magics.

Two students could change into werewolves, and one was a werecat.

There were three vampires and a plethora of witches. There were also several varieties of other magical creatures, including a half-troll, and a few half-elves.

A rag-tag group, to be sure, but still, it was a start.

Coco, Professor Pops, and Snow went out of their way to find great teachers. There was a teacher from each of the seven magics as well as others, like me, for a total of fifteen instructors.

Some were only part-time, including Professor Pops, Snow, and Heathcliff, while the rest of us taught permanently.

The other adults were already on stage, and I hurried to make my way up.

The grand ballroom was decorated to go with this year's school theme. Signs glowing in varying shades of blue - the elf house color - read BELIEVE IN YOURSELF.

Little pixilettes buzzed around in the air, writing the word believe in sparkles, so from up on the stand, it looked like the room rained blue glitter. The kids oohed and aahed, enjoying the theatrics.

The curtains were a midnight shade while the chandeliers gave off a bluish hue. The chairs were wrapped in navy blue, and the walls

sparkled with sky-blue paint.

It was a little over the top - okay a lot.

Jaxon, the school's president and head of the activities committee, really outdid himself. His magic came from the elves, and they were known for their extravagant natures.

The ballroom was a testament to that.

As I took my seat on the end, I smiled at the electric excitement in the air.

"You ready for this?" Eldrick asked. He taught elven magic, which included the ability to see into the future and the past.

In the human realm, a select few people had used a portion of the seven magics for years. Those who called themselves psychics or fortune-tellers (at least the real ones) possessed elven magic.

"Definitely. You?" I returned, getting comfortable in my seat.

"Why not?" He clasped his hands together, and I smiled.

Eldrick was tall and on the willowy side, but he was handsome with silver hair and bright green eyes that gave him a timeless look.

It was hard to know whether he was twenty or twenty-five hundred.

Next to him sat Jordan. He taught the supernatural creatures classes.

The man was short and thick with a beard that nearly touched the floor.

Beside him was Heathcliff.

When he could, he taught potions, but I had a feeling he would have to be replaced soon. His secretive job in Demonland kept him overly busy.

Next came Kenmei.

He was an interesting fellow of Asian descent who taught about dragons and their magic.

Then sat Professor Pops, who taught about a vampire hunter's magic.

When Snow defeated Sharra, she released all magical creatures, and so, since there were still vampire hunters in the world, including Christopher, we felt it necessary to educate the children about what they could do.

Sitting next to Pops was Dorian.

He taught weapons training and was, by far, everyone's favorite teacher.

The girls loved him because he was dreamy.

The guys liked that he showed them how to kick ass.

Snow was beside him.

When she had time, she gave lectures on vampires, sharing about the difference between human-made vampires and originals.

After last night, I understood why.

At some point, Jasmine would attend this school, and she was an original, though she didn't look like Sharra or Silindra.

She wasn't covered in fur like they were at one time.

On the other side of Snow was Coco.

As the headmistress, she made sure everything ran smoothly, and school life was kept in order. She did a great job, and I didn't envy her one bit.

The school kept her busy twenty-four-seven.

Beside Coco sat Tori.

As a full-blooded troll, she could be a little scary. Standing more than seven feet tall, she towered over everyone and had to duck when entering a room.

She was also extremely kind and kept herself looking as lovely as could be expected for a troll. I would go so far as to say she was pretty, especially on the inside.

Fenn was seated beside her. She was a fairy. Her straw-colored hair and pink skin made her stand out almost as much as Tori.

The two of them couldn't look more different, but they were best friends.

Sierra taught about unicorns. Supposedly her ancestors were gifted their healing magic. She had the journals to prove it, so no one doubted her.

She looked a little like a wild mustang. Her brown hair was long and thick and went everywhere, not to mention her oversized teeth. Her smile took up her whole face.

Beside her was Bastille. He taught ancient languages. With gray hair and dark skin, he reminded me of what an old wise man might look like. He was friendly and easy-going.

Lance and Amelia were floaters and taught whenever Snow, Professor Pops, or Heathcliff couldn't. They were both vampires and mostly kept to themselves.

I personally thought they were having a passionate affair, but I wasn't around them enough to know for certain.

Along the edges of the room sat dozens of worker vampires. They barely moved, looking like beautiful female statues.

Though Snow had released them after defeating Sharra and the vampires were free to go and do as they pleased, most chose to stay.

So many centuries of serving Sharra robbed them of much of their free will.

They didn't do much unless Snow or Coco asked them to.

After several minutes, Coco stood and held up her hands, asking the students to quiet down. Once the room settled, Coco introduced all of the teachers.

"Now, as many of you know," she continued. "At the beginning of each school year, we have the opening ceremony to welcome everyone."

Everyone clapped and cheered.

One of the male students, a boy name Casper, shouted, "Go Rams!" Apparently, they were his favorite football team.

Casper was a vampire.

Unusually, he was born of a human woman, but his father was a vampire, so he was sired, not turned.

He drank blood but could eat food as well.

He also possessed all other traits of vampires as well as the ability to walk through walls.

Some people laughed at his words. Others booed.

"Quiet down, please," Coco said, clapping her hands together, making a loud crack.

A vibrating hush settled over the room.

"We have some new students this year. As is the custom, we are going to bring each student forward. Cindy will use magic and the obsidian stone to draw some blood. As it rises into the air, it will turn different colors. Whatever color it becomes will tell us from which magic your power comes, and that will determine where your focus of study will be."

The crowd applauded.

OceanofPDF.com

EXTREMELY RARE

BUT THE FOUR new students looked worried, including Sera. As humans, they were taught early when you bled, it was usually associated with pain.

I hopped down from the stage and came to stand in the center of the room. "Delilah, please step forward." She was small in stature, probably under five feet.

Snow and I had found her a few weeks ago, hiding under a bridge in Rock Springs, Wyoming.

Her knees quaked as she came forward.

She was a vampire, which automatically meant she belonged in the vampire house, but when it came to studies, it was good to verify. Since the originals were created with all seven magics, their own included, they usually had one magic that was more prominent than the others. "It's going to be fine. I promise."

She nodded, but I could tell she didn't believe me.

Not that I blamed her.

Trust was earned, and we didn't know each other very well.

"Hold out your hand, palm facing up."

She swallowed, so loud I heard it, but she did as I said.

I reached into the pocket of my cobalt maxi dress and took out the obsidian orb.

It was a curious object pulsating with magical properties.

For all I knew, Abernathy had created it. When I'd pressed him for answers, he wouldn't give them.

Typical dragon. He didn't like sharing.

"See this?"

"Uh-huh," Delilah said, and her voice trembled.

"All that will happen is the orb will leave my hand and move to hover above yours. Please don't move, and the magic within can get a handle on yours."

She looked at me and blinked. "I will hold still, Miss Croswell," she finally said.

I spoke the words to the spell quietly to the orb before releasing it.

The orb floated from me and stopped when it drifted over to Delilah.

She flinched at its nearness but didn't move.

After several seconds, a small trail of blood came out of Delilah's palm, passing through the orb, where it lingered a few moments as though tasting her blood.

When it finished, the black orb changed to silver.

"Delilah's strongest power comes from the vampires," I said, smiling happily.

As I spoke, it changed to green. "And your secondary power comes from fairies." Fairy magic had to do with emotions, and those who were influenced by fairy magic were exceptionally kind and good.

Those with similar magics hooted and clapped.

"Did it hurt?" I asked quietly, studying her liquid brown eyes.

"Not at all," she replied, her features no longer scared, but relieved. "Thank you."

"Very good. You may go sit down with the other vampires." I took the orb and waited until she sat. "Robbie, please come up," I said.

Robbie was less nervous since the process obviously didn't hurt Delilah.

Once the orb tasted his blood, it was discovered his power came from elves - another great magic.

Sook-Yin followed the boy.

She was a small Asian-American girl with bright caramel eyes and straight black hair that rested at her chin.

The orb revealed her power came from the elves as well.

It didn't surprise me.

For all their talk of keeping their bloodlines pure, there sure were a lot of humans with elven magic.

Finally, it was Sera's turn. "Don't you already know where my magic comes from?" she asked, more nervous than the others.

"I believe so, but we will see." I whispered the spell and watched the orb do its thing.

Her blood changed the orb to brown, which meant her most potent magic came from trolls, just as I suspected.

"Sera's magic comes from the trolls," I said knowingly but stopped because the orb turned to gold. Her secondary magic came from dragons. "And apparently, there is dragon magic in your blood as well."

The orb returned to black. I glanced back at Snow. Dragon magic was very rare.

The students cheered, excited she had dragon magic.

As they did, the orb changed color again. This time to Indigo.

One of the teacher's gasped.

Unicorn magic. A first. No other student had unicorn blood.

Snow was shocked as were the other teachers, I could tell, but they worked to keep their faces serene.

I looked at Sera. "Very good. You may be seated."

"What did the final color represent?" she asked, her eyes filled with intensity.

"Unicorn," I said, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from saying more.

"Oooh. Thanks." Sera gave me a puzzled expression before heading

back to her chair.

I returned to my seat, still in amazement.

She was the first supernatural I knew who possessed three magics.

Coco stood. "The original seven may be gone, but their magic lives on in us! At the Seven Magics Academy, we will teach you what it means to eat, sleep, and breathe your magic. Whether you have the heart of a fairy or the soul of a dragon. The speed of a vampire or the strength of a troll. The sight of an elf or the ability to transform as the locanis, you belong here, and we are honored to have you with us."

The room exploded with cheering and clapping.

I understood why.

The academy was a place where most of these kids would finally feel accepted.

Ms. Redding said a few more words to the student body, telling them about the rules and how the year would go.

While she talked, I mulled over what just happened with Sera.

Could Abernathy's orb be on the fritz?

It was highly unlikely.

Coco finished, excusing the students from the ballroom, telling them to meet in their homeroom classes in an hour.

From there, the kids would be given a schedule suited to their particular magic, and that would be their tract for the time they remained at the school.

When the kids were all out, Snow excused the worker vampires as well, leaving just the fifteen of us.

"Did I see that right?" Snow asked, her gaze meeting mine. "She has dragon and unicorn magic as well as troll?"

Kenmei spoke. "It isn't as unusual as one might think." He clasped his hands together lightly. "It just means she's able to conduct all three magics more thoroughly than most. Many humans haven't or aren't willing to open their chakras. As you know, there are seven on the

body, and each correlates to a degree with the seven magics. Sera is probably more self-aware than most, which allows her more access to the magics within.

"But unicorn magic?" I asked, flabbergasted.

Kenmei and Snow shared a look before Snow spoke. "At the moment, that isn't important." She turned to Sierra. "It looks like you have a student who might be gifted in the ability of healing. That's exciting," she said.

Sierra wasn't as thrilled as I thought she should be. "Excellent, my queen. I look forward to instructing her."

OceanofPDF.com

NORMAL IS OVERRATED

FOR THE NEXT FORTY-FIVE MINUTES, we prepared the new students' schedules and adjusted some of the upper-level kids' classes.

It would be a great year, I decided, making my way over to my homeroom class.

As I went, memories of my dream of the man and my visit with Quilla kept me distracted. My so-called fairy godmother seemed almost too crazy to be real.

At the door to my class, I put all of that aside.

Taking a deep breath, I plastered a smile on my face, went in, walked past the desks, and to the front of the class.

Students talked excitedly, and I soaked in their enthusiasm.

We were on the second floor. In our first year using the castle as the academy, I spruced each room according to my mood.

In this room, I turned the walls into magical movie screens.

On them, moments in supernatural history played out.

The one now was Titan's Battle - a war between the elves and the trolls over a mountain used to study, experiment on, and explore supernatural creatures.

On the back wall played the scene where a black unicorn known as Envy had died in a cause of freedom.

The original, Silindra, kneeled beside her.

I knew the story because Snow told me.

I wanted the students to feel like they were a part of history, allowing them to see first-hand that magic wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

It was also dangerous and deadly.

"Ovangery," I whispered, and the moments froze, becoming like murals instead of movies.

A few students whined but faced me. "Good morning," I said, giving them my brightest smile.

Some moved to their seats.

"Welcome to a new year at the Seven Magics Academy," I said by way of introduction. "If you haven't already, please find a place to sit."

I went over to the large wooden desk at the front of the class and picked up a piece of chalk with the flick of my wrist.

It floated next to the board, waiting for me to tell it what to do.

The trailing students quickly obeyed.

Their focus trained on me, except for Sera.

She and one of the other students, Heather, were in a heated conversation.

I cleared my throat, and Sera stopped talking, an almost cruel smile on her lips.

Heather's hands trembled.

Whatever went on between them, I would figure it out after class.

Heather was a bright student who looked out for the underdog, which made me wonder what happened to upset her so much.

"Throughout the year, you will learn how to use your magic. The other teachers and I will do more than just teach. We will guide you, so by the time you leave the academy, you will know how to better handle the supernatural parts of yourself. You'll be able to do magic and be a thriving member of wherever you decide to live. By raise of hands, who knows how to use their magic?"

Several students sent their hands into the air, including Sera.

Interesting.

She only found out magic existed by accident.

"Sera, you know how to use your magic?" I arched one brow. Her

last try had ended with the awakening of a sorceress and an unknown land.

"You know I do." She crossed her arms, leaning back in her chair.

I shook my head. "I know you have magic, but I haven't seen you use it."

Sera looked confused. "But that's how you found me, right? I did magic on the jerk who tried to hurt me and on your friend." She was pleased with herself. "Plus, the other night - "

"You chucked your magic without knowledge, like throwing a rock. You didn't use it. There was zero control." I paused, allowing her to let that information sink in. "The academy will teach you to understand the power in your possession, and you will learn to harness it instead of letting the magic use you."

Her hands balled into fists, but she nodded.

"Good."

The rest of homeroom went off without incident, and in the end, I sent the students off to their first class.

Heather was still in her seat when the others left.

When it was just the two of us, she came over to my desk, her eyes down.

I busied myself with paperwork, allowing her time to collect her thoughts.

"Miss Croswell?" she finally asked.

"What is it, Heather?" I glanced up into her worried eyes.

She glanced over at the door.

With a thought, I closed it. "We can talk in private. Does this have to do with whatever you and Sera were talking about earlier?"

She nodded.

I used my magic to bring a chair over. "Tell me about it."

"It's just - " She sat, dropping her bag on the floor.

Pushing aside my paperwork, I focused on her and waited.

"I'm - it's just - uh, this is hard." She glanced down at her hands.

"It's okay, Heather. You know you can trust me." Uneasiness crept in. What could she possibly need to tell me that had her so flustered?

"I'm transgender," she finally blurted, her features contorted with pain.

"Oh?" That was the last thing I expected her to say. Nothing to do with magic or the supernatural but a difficult challenge just the same.

Now that she started, she couldn't seem to stop. "Yeah, so I was born Robert, but when I was around ten or eleven, I started having these feelings that I was a girl. I even had dreams - night and day - of myself as female. I think it was my magic working within me back then because they were so real." She paused and looked at me.

"Go on," I said, determined to be supportive. This girl was braver than most to be willing to talk about this.

"Being in the foster care system, I was forced to wear boy clothes and keep my hair short, but when I turned fifteen, I ran away, and then you and Professor Pops found me." She smiled. "It was my chance to be who I wanted to be, which is a girl, so I told you I was a girl and that my name is Heather. Since the academy doesn't have records and do things like the human realm, it was easy."

A cloud descended over her features. "Except Sera somehow knows, and she's threatened to tell our other roommates."

Tears filled her eyes. "I know I wasn't honest, and that was wrong, but I love it here. For the first time in my life, I feel right and like I belong."

She glanced at the chalkboard, tears causing her eyes to glisten. "I understand there needs to be consequences and I'll accept whatever punishment you give me, just please don't send me away."

My pulse raced as I considered her words.

First and foremost, I couldn't imagine what her life must be like.

Feeling she was one way while those around her called her something else.

But I also needed to consider the other students.

While I knew Heather wouldn't do anything awful to her roommates (nothing happened in the last two years), her body was still that of a boy, and if anyone else found out we were allowing coed dorm rooms, things might get a bit sketchy fast.

It was also obvious what Heather was sharing with me was hard and that her feelings were tender.

Treading carefully, I tucked my hands in my lap.

"Heather, thank you for telling me. You did the right thing and I commend you for your courage." I considered my next words. "I appreciate that you feel like a girl, and I would never take that away from you. At the same time, you have boy parts, correct?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"For that reason, I will need to speak with Ms. Redding and the queen to decide the best way to handle this situation. You are an honor student, and your past actions speak highly of the kind of person you are, so whatever comes of this, know I think you're amazing and want what's best for you and all of the students."

A single tear streaked down her cheek. "I don't know why I'm so wrong." She buried her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

My heart broke.

I got out of my seat and went to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. After a while, I spoke. "Look at me."

She wiped at her eyes, mascara smearing down her face.

"You are not wrong," I said fiercely. "You're different, but definitely not wrong. Got it?" I went back to my seat, writing a note for her next teacher.

OceanofPDF.com

NOT ORDINARY

HEATHER WAS GOING to be late.

"Okay," she whispered, meeting my eyes.

"Let me talk to the instructors, and when I have an answer, I'll let you know quickly." An ache filled me at the pain and anguish she must be going through.

"Can't you use magic to change my body into a girl?" She sounded desperate, placing her hand over mine.

"There is a magic that can make you look different. They are called glamours. But the spell is only temporary. They can't help you long term." In my own studies, I came across a story or two of supernaturals changing their form. I would look into the possibility, but I didn't want to get her hopes up. "Get to class, and when I have information, I'll let you know," I said, handing her the note.

She picked up her backpack and wiped her face as she stood. It was a mess. "Thank you, Miss Croswell."

"Sure," I said, standing too. "And one more thing?"

Heather looked at me, hopeful.

"Your makeup. Want me to fix it?"

She sighed. "Yes, please." She swallowed. "Maybe you could fix me too. If I didn't feel like a girl, then everything would be fine. I would be normal." Unshed tears pressed against her lids.

"Normal is overrated," I said, my voice hoarse with emotion. "I'll do all I can to work this out, and swiftly. Try not to worry." I spoke the words to the spell I used on Snow all the time. Within moments, Heather's makeup was fresh. "There. Now off you go."

"Yes, Miss Croswell."

AFTER CLASSES, I sought out Snow, telling her about Heather.

She agreed it was a tough situation and promised to speak with Professor Pops, Coco, and Kenmei. She had an idea.

I understood some of what Heather was going through. I was feeling a little like I didn't belong as well.

The words my fairy godmother said about my Croswell heritage had me worried I wasn't who I always thought I was, either.

I needed to hear from my mom that everything was fine.

Using magic, I popped into the human realm and into the house I shared with my parents.

My dad was out of town, and my mom wasn't home.

I waited for her until midnight before leaving a note in the kitchen and falling asleep in my old room.

I dreamed again of the man.

When I woke, I was still hazy from the dream, but I showered, dressed, and applied makeup.

Presentable, my mother would say.

I walked downstairs to the smell of coffee, cinnamon, and bacon - my three favorite foods.

I wore a casual mauve dress covered in flowers and my favorite ankle boots. Appropriate school attire. I needed to hurry so I wouldn't be late for classes.

Mom was seated at the breakfast bar, looking perfect, as usual.

Her dyed blonde hair was done up in a twist. Makeup was fresh. She wore a buttery satin, short-sleeved blouse, tan skirt, and nude heels.

"Hi, Mom." I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

She put a piece of grapefruit in her mouth, smiled, and then gave me a once over with her hazel eyes.

"What time did you finally get in last night?" I asked, sitting beside

her.

"I'm not sure," she said evasively.

I thought I detected a hint of guilt. "Your note said you needed to talk. What's up?"

"I wanted to ask you about our history."

"Oh?" She scooped up another piece of grapefruit before making a point of rolling her eyes.

She went over to the oven and took out a pan filled with enough bacon for seven.

With tongs, she took two pieces from the pan and put them on a plate, then set a muffin next to them and brought it over to me.

She slid the plate in front of me.

"Everything with our family tree is ordinary?" I asked, knowing that wasn't the right word, but unsure how to bring up what I needed to discuss.

"Why would you want to be ordinary? You aren't. Witch or not, you're a Croswell. We don't do ordinary." Her face lit up with a false smile as she nodded, asking me with her eyes to agree.

Quilla's words pummeled inside my head.

I was a Croswell, wasn't I?

My aunt possessed magic.

She gave me The Eye of Abernathy.

We had to be related, right?

The thoughts tumbled around in my mind.

Sure, all families had secrets.

But if I was adopted, well, that was a pretty big secret.

"Cindy," my mom snapped, irritated my focus wasn't entirely on her.

I met her gaze, shoving my questions away before taking a bite of bacon. "Thanks for breakfast, Mom." She hadn't prepared it.

I didn't think my mom knew how to cook toast, let alone bacon, muffins, and coffee. She left everything domestic to Nancy, our housekeeper.

My mom shook her head and laughed. "Of course." She took a sip of her coffee.

I chewed and swallowed. "I better go. I don't want to be late for class."

She made a face. "Always so busy."

"But that's good, right?" I stood, ignoring the muffin, but taking the other piece of bacon and wrapping it in a napkin.

"I suppose. I just miss you." Mom looked sad. It was hard to see her that way.

"Miss you too, Mom," I said, coming over to her for a hug.

Mom nodded but didn't lean in. "Alright. See you later," she said, missing the cue and going to the kitchen door.

"Hey, Mom?" I walked over and hugged her. Secrets or not, she still meant the world to me.

My mom patted me lightly on the back. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said, squeezing her. "I - I just love you."

She sniffed. "Love you, Cindy." My mom pulled away and patted my arm before leaving the kitchen.

I took a deep breath. If she was keeping secrets from me, they wouldn't last long. I had a spell for that.

ANOTHER DAY of classes was over, and I still didn't have answers for Heather. Nor had I decided what to do about Quilla, Mizrabel, my weird dreams, and Sera.

Worries were piling up like stacked marbles.

One false move and everything would come tumbling down.

Snow left word that until we figured out the situation, Heather would have her own room. I didn't want the girl to feel ostracized,

though, and hoped we could speedily come to a resolution. Snow also reminded me to talk to Pops about my Polonias problem, which was why I was here.

I sent a message to Sera using magic, asking her to meet me in my office in an hour. I hoped that would be enough time to talk to Pops about the situation.

Professor Pops led me into the small room he used as an office at the academy. He closed the door, his face serious.

I sat in one of his lush leather chairs.

"How can I help you, Cindy?" He sat as well, resting his forearms on the edge of his large desk.

At once, I was nervous. "Well," I began. Why would Pops know about Polonias?

OceanofPDF.com

WHAT AM I

SURE, he'd been alive a long time and seemed to know everything about the supernatural, but perhaps I should've talked to Abernathy, the dragon, instead.

Professor Pops took his reading glasses from his sweater pocket and put them on the end of his nose.

He began going over some papers on his desk.

The longer I sat, the worse I felt.

And I wasn't sure I had a reason.

I never once saw Pops be anything but kind and beyond helpful.

Sure he was a human turned Hunter, turned kind of human again -

No, that was wrong. He was and always would be a vampire.

Nothing could change that fact.

Plus, I didn't think he wanted to change. I shifted in my seat.

Pops looked at me over the top of his glasses. "Cindy? You said you needed to talk to me. Was that true, or are you hiding from someone?"

I snorted and cleared my throat. "Have you heard of a land called Polonias?" I blurted.

He pulled off his glasses and set them on the desk, then clasped his hands together. "Perhaps. Where is this Polonias?" His bright eyes studied me, and I got the distinct impression he was testing me somehow.

I tucked my legs beneath me. "It's a land. My - " Should I say fairy godmother? He might laugh, and I wasn't in the mood to be laughed at. I decided on a different way to put her. "A woman by the name of Quilla Templeton told me about it. She said I needed to save it."

Professor Pops leaned back, resting his hands against his stomach.

"I see. And who is Quilla Templeton to you?"

Ah crap, he was going to make me say it. Out loud. "She says - " I paused, pushing some loose hair behind my ears. "She says she's my fairy godmother." I felt the color rise in my cheeks.

It was as embarrassing to say it out loud as I thought it'd be.

Pops sat up. "Okay, now we're getting somewhere."

"We are?" I asked, blinking several times.

"Yes, because now you're being honest." He picked up his glasses and put them back in his pocket. "Don't want to lose these," he said, once they were in place. "So, when did Quilla first appear to you?"

"You know wha - who she is?" I was stunned.

Did, like, all supernaturals belong to a club?

Were there secret handshakes?

Special codes?

Did Snow know about Polonias?

And why was it I always seemed to be the last person to know everything?

Pops nodded slowly. "I met Quilla before a long time ago. Yes."

"I swear." I stood and began to pace, trying to control my temper. I don't know where it came from, but like lava, it rolled out of me.

"It's okay, Cindy. I wanted to gauge how you know about Polonias, whether you dreamed it or if Quilla actually spoke to you. Now that I know, we can get down to business." His expression was amused, and it made me angrier.

"Seriously. Why didn't you tell me about this place before?" I sat back down in a huff.

"Well, my dear, because it wasn't my place to tell you. I'm surprised Quilla didn't give you more details herself."

I coughed. "Well, she's sort of upset with me. Said I'm a disappointment." I slumped back into my chair.

"Oh, I see." He studied me for several long moments until I wanted to squirm like a disobedient child under his gaze.

"What?" I finally asked.

He leaned forward. "Polonias has some similarities to Sharra, but it's different as well. It's similar in that it's connected to Earth. As you probably know, Sharra was created by the magic of a Vampire. It exists within Earth, only on a different plane." He stacked one hand on top of the other to illustrate. "Like the layers of your skin. You can only see the top layer, but we know two more layers exist. It's the same with Sharra."

"And Polonias. How is it different?"

He picked up a pencil and tapped it on his desk. "Polonias was created by magic, same as the others, but it wasn't created with Earth's magic."

Sick foreboding filled my stomach. "What are you saying?" I asked the question but was terrified of the answer. I didn't even want to comprehend what he meant.

"It gets a little complicated, but Polonias is a land you can get to from Earth, but it isn't part of Earth."

I felt my mouth fall open. Professor Pops hurried on.

"Polonias is kind of like its own world."

I tried to speak but sounded like a gasping fish. "Like aliens?" I finally asked.

"Aliens." Pops snorted. Actually snorted. I closed my mouth, frustrated.

"Those who exist on Polonias are human just as we are. Or," he shrugged. "In my case, once was. The magical creatures that dwell in Polonias are the same as the magical creatures you've seen here and in Sharra. They are part of the seven magics. But here's the cool part."

"Cool?" That wasn't the word I'd use. Freaky. Weird. Effing terrifying. Those words were a better fit.

"The seven magics are part of Earth, but they also exist everywhere. And Polonias used the magics from - "

"Stop. Holy hell. Just stop. Please." I rubbed the sides of my head. This was too much. I didn't want to hear anymore.

But I had one more question. "Quilla said something that leads me to believe my mom and dad aren't really my mom and dad. Am - " I trailed off.

It seemed too impossible.

Saying the words felt like I would make them come true.

Pops shook his head. "That's not a question I can answer. You should ask Quilla. Or better yet, your mom and dad. They have the answers you seek."

I nodded. He was right. Of course, if there were an easy answer, he would've told me.

That meant my parents did have secrets.

I sighed internally.

There was no damn way I wanted to ask my mom now.

I thought about what kind of spell I could use to get to the truth.

"Alright," I said, feeling more confused than before I came into his office.

"How are things between you and Gabe?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Fine, I guess." Nothing like Dorian and Snow. They were so in love it was sickening, but mine and Gabe's relationship was good enough.

Professor Pops came around and patted my shoulder. "One thing I'm certain of is that everything will work out. It always does."

"Thanks." Sure, things worked out, but that didn't mean they worked out the way I wanted them to. Or the way that I thought was best.

I left Professor Pops' office in a daze.

In the hallway, Heathcliff waved and said hello.

I think I raised a hand in answer, but I wasn't sure.

My life suddenly didn't feel like my own.

For a moment, I thought I understood what Snow felt when she became the Seal.

But no.

I wasn't like that.

I didn't need to worry.

Sharra. The academy. This was where I belonged.

OceanofPDF.com

LEOLAS

I WENT into my office and closed the door.

During class, I asked my students to write a paragraph on what they hoped to learn this year, and now I needed to get through them to gauge not only their ability to write but also whether or not I needed to change my next lesson.

The words were a blur.

I kept reading the same sentence over and over again and still didn't know what it said. I couldn't help it.

Random thoughts popped up.

My magic.

It came from The Eye of Abernathy, which came from Earth.

And Abernathy was a dragon of the Earth.

If my sinking suspicions about where I was born were correct -

"No," I shook those thoughts away.

It just didn't make sense.

After staring into space for I didn't know how long, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," I said, glancing at the clock.

It was time for my appointment with Sera. Actually, the girl was a little late but better late than never.

The door opened, but instead of Sera, there stood a man.

His eyes were blue like summer sky right before the sun sets.

"Hello," he said and smiled. The man had dimples. Damn dimples. "Mind if I come in?" He inclined his head at the chair on the opposite side of my desk.

"Oh, sure." I let out an embarrassed laugh as my skin reddened.

His handsomeness was palpable, like the heat from the sun.

"Have a seat."

"Thanks." He sat, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Can I get you something to drink? Wine. Chocolate milk?" Why the hell did I ask the beautiful man if he wanted chocolate milk? Lame. Not to mention, I didn't have any.

He chuckled at that, and I felt more heat rise to my cheeks.

"I'm good, thank you," he said.

"Excellent. Great." My insides spun dizzily.

He studied me as though exploring the facets of my face.

Then his eyes wandered down my shoulders and arms to my hands.

It felt as though he sculpted me with his eyes, as though I were coming alive under his intense scrutiny.

"You don't recognize me?" he asked, a slight grin on his face.

The man was yummy. I would've remembered seeing him before, but there was something about him. "Should I?"

I rested my hands on my thighs, clawing my nails into them, trying to get a handle on myself. I was with Gabe.

My amazing chayot warrior.

Righter of wrongs.

Champion for the humans.

Too bad he'd been in a bad mood for the last year. I dug my nails deeper into my skin.

"Perhaps not." His eyes sparkled, and my breath hitched. "How about I tell you my name?"

"Right. Yes. What's your name, and how can I help you?" I felt like an idiot, like a silly pink poodle with her tongue dangling from her mouth.

He chuckled. "My name is Leolas, but my friends call me Leo."

I stretched out my arm across my desk. "Nice to meet you, Leolas. I'm Cindy."

He stood, taking my hand in his and kissing the knuckles.

I very nearly swooned (yep, I can now say with complete honesty, I understand what the word means) as a jolt of electricity shot through me.

My heart picked up speed, racing like a herd of wild horses.

There had to be a spell to deal with my overactive organ.

Lightheaded, I fell back into my seat.

"You all right?" Leolas asked, sitting back down.

"Sure. Of course. Now, why don't you tell me why you're here." I tried to regain control.

"Cinderella," he said, and the word floated to me like a crisp breeze.

"Don't call me that," I said, scrutinizing him carefully.

Come to me.

Those words filtered into my brain. Had they come from him?

The room felt stifling.

I needed some air.

Standing, I strode past him to the door.

"I should go." I left the room and rushed down the steps and out the front doors of the castle.

The sun was setting, the font of the castle in shadow, and I bent over, heaving air into my lungs.

"Cinderella," Leo called. He was right behind me.

"Leave me alone." I didn't understand what was happening. If necessary, I would use force to keep him from me.

Come to me. The words entered my mind again, but I fought against them. "No," I shouted and took off down the steps.

Then I was running, heading around the castle toward the barn

and the forest beyond.

I wanted to hide.

Anything to get away from him.

Not just because he scared me, but because I didn't want to be a part of whatever was happening.

"Cinderella," he called again, and I saw he was right there, as though we were attached.

"Holy merde," I said, crossing my arms. "Leave me alone, creepy stalker."

A stunning spell ran through my mind, and I said the words almost as soon as I thought them.

Leo sensed my magic and sidestepped it as though he could see it.

"Your magic is impressive." As he spoke, he moved closer. "Though it's still new. I can tell that much," he added, his eyes glittering mischievously.

"I - I - " Magic wasn't something I threw around.

Just about everyone, but Snow was uncomfortable with it, including my parents.

My aunt didn't mind, but I didn't see her much.

"Thanks," I finally got out, holding a hand against my head.

Leo was so close the tips of our shoes touched.

Behind me, I heard the rustle of woodland creatures, out of sight, but nearby.

My heart raced erratically.

I was torn between running, lighting his hair on fire with a spell, and seeing just what the hell he would do next. I could see his magic, almost like a light shining around him.

"Who are you?" I finally asked.

Then thought it was a stupid question. He already said he was Leo.

He lifted his hand, and a circle of buttery colored magic flickered at his fingers. My breath sucked in.

"You shouldn't - " I began.

"Shhhhh," he breathed, and the orb grew until I could see within.

There was a castle, flags flying from each point.

Beautiful landscape surrounded it, and it was encircled by water.

As the sphere grew, I stepped back so I wouldn't touch it.

Leo brought it between us.

Six moons shone in various colors, gently lighting the land, including cottages, cities, farmland, mountains, valleys, and a large body of water.

When it finally stopped growing, the orb was the size of a beach ball.

Around the edges were gray mists, some darker than others.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at the darkness.

"The Sickness," Leo said, his voice quiet, almost reverent.

"What kind of sickness?" Without him telling me, I knew the realm was Polonias.

"She's dying." He looked at me, his beautiful eyes sad. "Polonias needs your help, Cinderella."

"No." I stepped back, bumping against a tree. "Did Quilla send you?"

He shook his head. "I shouldn't be here, but I've come on behalf of the land of Polonias to ask you, respectfully, for your help."

Even though I knew the land was Polonias, hearing him say it aloud racked my body with shockwaves.

"I can't." Uncontrollable terror caused my knees to quake.

I carefully stepped around the tree, trying to get farther away from him.

"Please leave me alone."

Leo's face fell, and the magical sphere vanished. "I'll never stop trying." His words were intense, and I knew without a doubt, I'd see him again.

At the conviction that radiated from him, I almost wavered. Almost. But I shook my head.

"Go away," I said, pushing past him, heading back to the castle.

Leo touched my arm, and I glanced back at him. His posture was proud, his chin lifted.

"I will. For now." He vanished as though he were an apparition, and I clutched at my throat.

He wasn't gone for good. The thought rocked me with terrified excitement.

"Merde," I swore.

I needed Gabe.

Using magic, I created a portal right into my bedroom in the human realm and quickly texted Gabe.

It was a Tuesday night.

My mom had her charity meetings, and my dad was still away on business, so I had the house to myself.

Gabe wouldn't come into Sharra, but I had no problem entering the human realm.

There were talks by the governments of the world about creating a way to alert certain agencies when magic was used.

Gabe and the chayot were part of the team since it was the chayots' job to keep humans safe.

It was the whole reason they existed.

I knew Gabe felt the need to help them on a cellular level, which was why I knew part of him resisted giving himself entirely to me. I was a witch.

Therefore, I was the enemy, to an extent.

OceanofPDF.com

LOSE MY NUMBER

GABE TEXTED BACK that he would be over soon, saying we needed to talk, but I wasn't in the mood for talking.

He showed up at my window ten minutes after I was in my pajamas.

I wore silk shorts and a matching spaghetti strap tank.

With giddy anticipation, I let him in.

"Hey," he said softly.

He smelled of the fresh night air, moonbeams, pure magic, and something I couldn't quite gauge.

What could be the matter?

"Hi." I closed the window and turned, studying him as he wandered the room, picking up the photo of us right after high school graduation, before setting it back down.

Gabe was hot. His dark hair short and his emerald green eyes seemed even brighter than usual.

He always had a tan, and his body was sculpted and sleek.

I craved him. And I wanted him to make me forget all my worries for a little while, especially Leolas.

Going to him, I pressed my lips to his.

He responded hungrily, wrapping his arms around me.

I sighed, knowing I would never love another the way I loved him. I met his tongue as he deepened our kiss, pulling me tight against him.

It was too long since the last time we were together, and I moved my hands under his shirt, stroking the skin beneath the band of his jeans.

He lifted me into his arms, and I was surprised, though I wasn't

complaining, and wrapped my legs around his hips.

He was kissing me like when we first got together.

As though I was shelter and he was the storm.

In his arms, I didn't think about Sera and her lack of compassion, Quilla and her apparent allergy to magic, a land called Polonias, a man with effing dimples, or Heather and her broken heart.

I just wanted to feel, lose myself in Gabe, and he was right there with me.

He walked us over to the bed and climbed on.

I scooted back, unbuckling his belt.

He released my lips and pushed my hands away. "Wait," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"I don't want to. I need you." I tugged him on top of me.

He groaned, kissing me again, his hands going under me, pressing my body against his, but I sensed a hesitation in him.

"What's wrong?" I asked, cupping his face in my hands.

By the look of him, I knew we weren't going to lose ourselves in each other.

His gaze locked in on mine. Something weighed on his mind.

"I can't stay long," he said after clearing his throat. He looked away.

"You just got here," I said, using my legs to hold him to me.

"I know, but I have a meeting." He still wouldn't meet my eyes.

"You always have meetings," I replied, pouting.

Gabe pulled away and stood, tucking in his tee-shirt. "I wish I didn't. I wish this whole damn thing with the supernaturals would go away. I wish - " He stopped, crossing his arms.

"But it isn't, and I can't stop. It's my job." He began pacing, and I quickly put on a robe. "Just tonight, right before I got here, I was called to a crime scene where five teens were drained dry. All of them

dead." He shook his head. "And you expect me to drop everything because you're having a bad day?" He shook his head, and I understood. He found me disgusting.

A fracture cracked at the edges of my heart. "I guess not," I said, wishing he would stop talking. I knew where this conversation was heading, and I didn't like it.

But if he was going to end things between us, I wanted a clean break.

"Damn right." He huffed and fell into a chair, rubbing a hand over his face. "I can't do this anymore," he said and stood right back up, walking over to the window.

I went to him, putting my arms around his waist and leaning my face against his back. "You know I'm not to blame," I said tenderly. "I'm trying to help."

He didn't turn, but I heard him grind his teeth together. "Sure. You and that stupid school." He snorted.

"It isn't stupid, and we are helping." I released him, wishing my hands would stop shaking. "When we discover someone with magic, we take them out of the human realm." I clenched my hands into fists. "At least we don't kill them like you do."

He faced me then. "The chayot must save humans, and sometimes that means bringing justice to supernaturals," he growled. "And you know we only kill those who've murdered humans using their powers. That's it."

"And the others? Where are they?"

"Incarcerated, as they should be." He glared, but I could tell he wanted to say more.

Why wouldn't he talk to me?

I knew the chayot worked in conjunction with certain powerful humans to create a supernatural prison, but Gabe wouldn't tell me where it was located.

If I wanted to, I could use magic to find them, but I didn't want to. Not really.

"Goodbye, Cindy," he said, opening the window.

A blast of cold air caused my skin to prickle.

Without meaning to, tears filled my eyes.

I loved him. So much it hurt. And he was casting me aside like an old shoe.

"Wait." I went to him, knowing his goodbye wasn't temporary, but permanent, and desperation had me clinging to his shirt.

Tears trickled down my cheeks.

I couldn't stop them but angrily wiped them away.

When we first started dating, I promised I wouldn't use magic on him, and I intended to keep my promise.

But at that moment, I changed my mind.

I had to hear him say the words. "Abreva reveala," I whispered.

His body jerked at the words, and a pained look crossed his face. "Don't, Cindy. Whatever spell you think you've placed on me, no good will come of it."

I wasn't having it. I needed to know.

"Tell the truth," I said. "If you're going to dump me, I want you to tell me why."

His shoulders slumped, and he went over to a chair, sitting.

The window was still open, sending wisps of frigid air into the room. "Deneth," I said, and the window slammed shut.

Gabe glared, but I saw the pain in his eyes. "Fine. Since you aren't giving me a choice."

I momentarily thought of removing the spell, but didn't. I was weak and needed him to speak the words.

"Please, Gabe." I knelt in front of him. "I'm your girlfriend, and I love you. Whatever is wrong, we can work it out together." I placed

my hands on his knees.

He gritted his teeth as though he didn't want to say the words, but they came out. "I don't love you anymore. Happy now?" He closed his eyes, and he slumped down in the chair.

I fell back like he slapped me. "You're lying," I whispered, unable able to believe him. "Just a moment ago, you were showing me how much you love me."

He took hold of my chin and brought his face so close I smelled his aftershave. "I can't lie. Your spell won't let me. Right?"

For the first time, I saw a hint of his birth father - Oberon - in him.

I pulled from his grasp and stood, covering my mouth with the back of my hand.

Fresh tears rolled down my face. "Right," I whispered.

Gabe went over to the window, opening it again, and throwing one leg over the sill.

"You promised you would never do that." He ground his teeth together. "Supernaturals are all the same. They take what they want without regard for anyone but themselves."

"You're a self-righteous prick, you know that?" I stomped over and slapped his face. "You talk about supernaturals like we're all evil, but you forget one crucial thing."

His hand went to his cheek, where I left an impression of my hand. "What's that, witch?"

"You're supernatural too, you son-of-a-bitch." I moved to slap him again, but he was ready and grabbed my wrist, holding it tight.

"You broke your promise," he said quietly. "You lied, and I don't ever want to see you again." Gabe's face was contorted in a combination of rage and devastation.

"Lose my number. Got it?" He threw his other leg over the edge and jumped.

"Your loss!" I shouted, slamming my window shut.

OceanofPDF.com

MIRROR MIRROR

HEAVING A DEEP BREATH, the fracture in my heart splintered, and I threw myself on my bed.

Sobs racked my body as pain filled every crevice.

I don't know how long I lay in bed and allowed myself to cry.

It was after eleven when I made a decision. I needed to talk to my best friend.

Taking a deep breath, I went to my bathroom and took in my reflection.

My eyes were red and swollen. Haunted. Shocked. Horrified.

At the memory of what happened, more tears fell.

"Mirror, mirror, made of glass, show me Snow, do as I ask."

All of Sharra's mirrors were enchanted, making it easy for me to find Snow or anyone, if necessary, though I wouldn't break a student's trust.

It had to be life or death.

But with Snow, we had a bond.

As the spell began to work, my reflection wavered back and forth until it vanished.

In its place was a darkened room. I could hear kissing noises.

Were Snow and Dorian - ?

I forced myself not to be embarrassed.

What just happened between Gabe and me demanded I speak with Snow immediately.

The polite thing would be to say the words that would stop the magic, but I was desperate.

"Snow." I cleared my throat. "Sorry for the interruption, but I really

need to talk to you," I said, sniffling.

Dorian cursed.

Snow whispered something to him.

My ears started to burn. "I said I was sorry," I mumbled.

"It's okay." Snow got out of bed. I looked away, allowing her to get decent.

Then she flipped on a light, and I glanced back in time to see her scoot a chair in front of the mirror. "What's up?" She sounded tired but happy.

"Still in love, I see," I said, trying not to sound distraught.

Obviously, Dorian and Snow were going strong, but my love life was in shambles.

"Forever," Dorian said, wrapping a blanket around his naked hips before heading into the bathroom.

"Tell me what's wrong," Snow said. She looked beautiful, her hair hanging loose around her shoulders.

"It's Gabe," I wailed, grabbing a tissue and blowing my nose. "He came over tonight and - " I dabbed at my eyes. "I cast a truth spell on him, and he told me he doesn't love me anymore."

I didn't recognize my own voice.

It sounded hollow and filled with pain. "It just can't be. I heard the words with my own ears, and I still can't believe them." I pressed my hand against the mirror.

"He's been acting weird for a while now, but I thought we could get through it." I swallowed down a sob. "Tell me what to do."

Snow exhaled heavily, flicked her bangs from her eyes. "I don't think spells work on the chayot. At least, not unless it's a really, really powerful one. He was probably lying."

I sniffled. "What? How do you know?"

"I was doing some reading and found an obscure comment about how most spells didn't work on their kind. I could be wrong." She

shrugged, obviously trying not to get my hopes up.

"But, I can't imagine Gabe just fell out of love with you." She glanced over toward the bathroom and lowered her voice. "Dorian said Gabe has been way on edge lately. He can't even stand to be around him."

"Does Dorian know why?" I told her about the vamps killing the teens.

She shook her head. "No, but actually, I might."

"What is it?" Regardless, Gabe still said the hurtful words, but if I understood what was going on in his life, then maybe it would ease the pain.

Highly doubtful, but I had to try something.

I couldn't just live with this hurt forever.

"Look, I know I made the right call when I freed all supernaturals, but Gabe is right that I didn't consider how it would affect humans." She closed her eyes.

"I know what I did is making things difficult for them, and the chayot, and I'm trying to come up with a plan to deal with it." Her vivid eyes bore into me.

"I'm sorry my choices have affected your relationship, Cin."

"It isn't your fault," I said sympathetically.

"You know, chayot are like angels." Snow folded her feet under herself. Readjusted her robe. It was apparent what she had to say was huge.

I ground my teeth. Nodded.

Could she just spit it out already?

"There's a hierarchy in the angelic realm. And it seems the highest of all the angels changed the rules. Now, angels, including chayot, are no longer allowed to date, marry, or have relations with anyone who isn't one of their kind." She rubbed a hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry he didn't tell you himself. I don't think he told anyone, except me, and

last I heard, he was going to defy the rules and continue to be with you, but - "

"Merde! Why didn't you tell me?" That explained why Gabe broke up with me, but not why he didn't just tell me.

"Gabe asked me not to. Said he wanted to do it himself. But I figure since he was a total asshole to you tonight, he can suck it.0"

"I'm so glad you told me. Not that it helps my broken heart, but at least I know why he broke it." I was suddenly exhausted.

"Yeah, it's stupid, and I don't know how long it'll last. But it's my fault, and I'm sorry."

I picked up my brush, and absently ran it through my hair. "You did what you thought was right. Don't be sorry. That fool Gabe is who should be sorry. He just gave up the best thing to ever happen to him." I pressed my lips together, wishing my heart could be as tough as my words.

"Thanks for saying so, but I may have to go back on my promise and force the magical creatures out of the human realm altogether." She took a deep breath and grimaced. "Being in charge is hard."

"Whatever decision you make, you know I'll support it, but you know as well as I do that magic is interspersed with humans. It's watered down in most cases, sure, but it's still out there and has been for a long, long time. Nearly every human has magic in their blood."

"It's true." She sighed again.

"So, there's this man from Polonias who talked to me today, too," I said, wanting to get it all out.

"Oh?" She seemed to relax though she sounded curious.

"His name is Leolas."

Her features darkened. "I've heard of him. He's the crown prince of the land. He'll rule Polonias one day." Snow pushed her hair off her face, resting in over one shoulder.

"He's a prince?" I was shocked, but it really wasn't surprising.

The way he carried himself, his confidence.

It all screamed he was a leader.

"Quilla made it seem like my parents aren't really my parents. That I'm from there. And Pops said Polonias isn't part of Earth - at least not really." I blinked back more tears.

"I might be an alien," I said.

Snow stood, grabbing both sides of the mirror. "I'm a vampire, the vampire queen. I have fangs for crying out loud. We're friends with a dragon, and Dorian has become," she looked away for a moment before continuing, "something. We aren't sure what yet. A little original vampire girl is running about my home, growing faster than should be physically possible, and I've released magical creatures upon the humans like some twisted maniac. The fact that Polonias isn't part of Earth is probably a good thing and should be the least of your worries." She stepped back.

"You aren't an alien," she said, her lips twitching like she tried not to smile. "Not really."

Laughter bubbled from my chest, and we both started to giggle.

"It's not funny," I said but laughed harder, so the tears in my eyes streamed down my cheeks.

"I know," she said, laughing with me. "It shouldn't be, but just when we think it can't get weirder, it does."

"What's going on?" Dorian asked, appearing behind Snow.

"I'm an alien," I said, my voice thick with laughter.

Dorian chuckled. "I had a feeling."

Snow punched him in the stomach playfully.

I took a deep breath. "Thanks, Snow. I feel better."

"Good."

Dorian took Snow's hand. "Does that mean my vampire queen can come back to bed?" His words were sultry, filled with innuendo.

"Oh," Snow said, giving me a sideways look.

Dorian traced his thumb along Snow's jaw, and a pang of sadness filled my heart.

It was evident to anyone that Snow and Dorian would do anything for each other and fight through Heaven and Hell to be together.

Not so with Gabe. Tonight proved that.

"Of course. Night, guys." I smiled. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Snow."

"Good thing you'll never have to find out." She didn't look at me when she spoke.

Dorian waved before pulling Snow away from the mirror.

I quickly spoke the words to the spell that would remove me from their room: "Mirror, mirror, made of glass, bring back my face, do as I ask." My haphazard reflection returned. I stuck out my tongue before turning off the light and getting back into bed.

That night I dreamed of fire. Of burning wood and smoke so thick I couldn't see much of anything.

I tried several different spells to dispel the smoke and put out the flames, but my magic didn't work.

Brilliantly glowing reds and oranges flashed around me, burning trees to ash, until all that remained was a gray world, with soot filling my lungs so I couldn't breathe.

Come to me, Cinderella. His voice cut through the dreariness and despair, filling my veins and sinews with something akin to a purpose.

OceanofPDF.com

LEO IS SKETCHY

IN THE MORNING, I put on a light yellow dress and did my hair up in a bun.

Downstairs I grabbed a piece of toast and peanut butter after turning on the coffee for my mom.

She came into the kitchen, surprised.

"Two days in a row?" She smiled, taking a mug from the cupboard.

"Have you heard of Polonias?" I asked, skipping past the silly pleasantries and getting right to the point.

I could do a spell on her, but after what happened with Gabe the night before, I wasn't in the mood to force someone to tell me the truth.

Her eyes grew large. "Where did you hear that word?"

I decided to be honest. "From Quilla, my fairy godmother."

I went to the refrigerator for some juice.

My mom dropped the coffee mug.

"Thenorus," I whispered. The mug halted its descent just inches from the tile floor.

She took it out of the air and set it on the counter. "I wish you wouldn't do that," she said, seemingly embarrassed by my magic.

I wasn't going to get into it with her, about the fact that I was a witch whether she liked it or not.

"Sorry," I said, though I wasn't.

"You've seen Quilla?" She crossed her arms, looking at me like I was an alien and might sprout two antennae.

"Yes, I saw her. She came to my room the other night." I blinked, trying to keep my words light, but I was experiencing another level of

heartbreak.

My mom knew who Quilla was, yet she kept it from me.

"I need to go. I - I must speak with your father." She dashed from the kitchen so fast I didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

I glanced at the clock on the microwave. There was still an hour before my first class. Shoving the last bite of toast in my mouth, I decided to talk to Abernathy, hoping the dragon would have the answers I needed.

In my room, I placed bright blue candles on the floor in the shape of a seven-pointed star. Then I sat in the center, crossed my legs, closed my eyes, and spoke the words that would take me to his cave.

It didn't take long before the smell of sulfur and rotting flesh struck my nose. It was dark.

"Lumia," I whispered, and a small light appeared.

As I walked toward the sound of Abernathy's snoring, my skin started to crawl.

It felt like I was being watched.

I quickly glanced around, searching for the culprit, but no one was there. I stopped.

The dragon wasn't there. In the center of the cave stood Leo.

"Hi, Cinderella. I hope you don't mind, but Abernathy went out for a snack. He agreed it would be better if I answered your questions instead."

I backed away, allowing the light in my hand to extinguish. I didn't want to see Leo. Not now.

"Go away," I shouted, turning and stomping on old bones as I walked back the way I came.

"I can't do that, Cinderella." His voice was right in my ear, and I screamed.

A light like the one I held appeared in his hand. "We're the same, you and I - at least where it matters. And it's about time you

understood what that means."

He grabbed for my hand, but I pulled away and ran and ran and ran until I was at the entrance of Abernathy's cave.

I wasn't in the greatest shape, and I bent over, grabbing my knees, gulping in deep breaths, and grateful the air smelled better so close to the opening.

I heard him in front of me and glanced up.

"Just stay away from me," I retorted, trying to think of a spell that would make him go away. Nothing came to mind.

"It doesn't matter what sort of spell you throw my way. I'll just counter it with one of my own. It's easy since I've been doing magic longer than you've been alive." He grinned, flashing his white teeth and dimples.

"Stop smiling, dammit." I tripped over some bones.

Leo caught me before I went down.

His face grew serious. "There is something I need to show you. Someone I want you to meet. Would that be okay?"

I straightened. "Do I have idiot stamped across my forehead? Why would I go anywhere with you?"

Leo examined my forehead earnestly. "There's a dirt smudge and part of a cobweb, but I don't see a word." He brushed at it. "Yeah, there isn't a word on your forehead."

Against my will, a gurgle of laughter erupted from my throat. Leo gave me a confused look. "Why are you laughing?"

I shook my head. "Merde, you really aren't from around here, are you?"

His eyebrows scrunched together. "No, Cinderella. You've seen my land."

A very unladylike noise came from my nose. I covered it and my mouth.

Leo smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I said through my hand. "Sure, I'm fine." After last night, I should be depressed beyond belief, but Leo had a way about him.

He reached out and grasped the hand covering my mouth. A shiver of exhilaration ran through my body at his touch. "Will you come with me? Please."

Leo seemed harmless, but the idea of going to another land with no knowledge of how to get back didn't fill me with warm fuzzies.

It wouldn't be the smart thing to do. Not even a little bit.

"You're scared?" He released my hand and stuck his own in his pants pocket.

"No." I lifted my chin. If he tried anything, I could kick his ass.

From his pocket, he pulled out a thin chain. It was long and looked like it was made of silver. On the end was an hourglass.

"Here," he said, holding it out for me.

I shrunk away, my hands behind my back. "I don't want it."

He took a deep breath.

Obviously, I was frustrating him.

"This is a travel charm." He placed the small hourglass on the end of the chain between his thumb and first finger and held it up for me to see.

The dust inside sparkled like diamonds.

"If you hold this in your hand and think of where you want to be, the charm will take you there."

I stepped forward. "So if I wanted to go home, for example, I would just need to think of it, and I'll be there?"

Leo grinned, showing off his dimples. "Almost. You must have the charm in your possession. Also, it can be a little tricky. If you think of two places at once, you might end up in some random location instead."

My eyebrows raised in worry. That wouldn't be good, but I was a witch. I could open portals. No doubt, I could handle a travel charm.

"Be specific." He held the necklace in the palm of his hand. "Try it."

I took the charm, careful not to brush his skin.

"Let's try somewhere easy. How about the middle of Abernathy's cave? I'm going to come with you, so I need to be touching you, okay?"

"Sure." I licked my lips in preparation.

His warm fingers surrounded my forearm.

My heart sped up, and I shivered.

To cover it up, I cleared my throat. "So, I just think about Abernathy's cave?"

"Close your eyes." Leo moved closer to me, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. "Now think about the rock walls covered with moss, the dirt floor. The white bones scattered throughout and the bright sky above." He paused. "Got it?"

I didn't have to answer. The stench that abruptly filled my nose made it obvious we had arrived. I opened my eyes.

Leo's eyes were on me. "You're brilliant." He leaned in, and I thought he might kiss me. Instead, he took the necklace from my palm and placed the chain around my neck.

"Will you come with me to Polonias, Cinderella?"

OceanofPDF.com

THEY ARE HUGGERS

I STUDIED HIS BLUE EYES, searching for a sign of deceit, but there wasn't any. "I will as long as we can make it quick. I have classes to teach soon."

"You needn't worry. Time in Polonias passes at a different rate than time here. We can be gone a year according to time in Polonias, and you will only miss a day here. Okay?"

I bit my bottom lip, thinking I didn't understand how time could scroll at different speeds. Time was time.

But I decided to go with it.

If anything about the land or Leo became sketchy, I could use the travel charm to return.

"Let's get this over with, then."

Leo grabbed me around the waist. "Hold still," he whispered, his voice intense. He pressed my body against him, and I held my breath.

I didn't know what to do with my arms, so I wrapped them around his neck. It was strange, the way my body so quickly responded to him.

Momentarily, I felt like I was cheating on Gabe, even though the ass told me that he never wanted to see me again.

I pushed away my guilt. I wasn't cheating.

He and I were over, but even the thought broke my heart.

Leo took the hourglass between his thumb and first finger. "Ready?" he asked.

I looked away. "Sure."

He pulled me closer.

We seemed to fit like his body was made for mine. At the thought,

I put my hands on his chest, trying to put a little space between us. Leo winked.

We began to move. As we went, the dust inside the hourglass slowly rose and swirled from the bottom to the top.

If that wasn't strange enough, we entered a misty fog.

The air changed, and I knew we were no longer in Abernathy's cave, but somewhere else.

It churned through the air like it wished to claim us.

Whispers could be heard all around, tiny voices speaking in a language my mind tried to understand but couldn't.

Almost like the wind was speaking.

Dozens of feathery touches brushed against my arms, my neck, and even pulled at my hair.

I glanced up at Leo, curious what was happening.

His features were focused. He concentrated on something beyond what I could see.

I turned, so my back was against his chest, nervous, but I didn't speak, feeling that doing so might cause a disturbance.

Leo's hand held me tightly, and his clean-shaven jaw pressed against the side of my head.

"Almost there." He spoke through clenched teeth.

As we moved, the air changed several times.

From the clingy stench of Abernathy's cave to wet mists to a dry heat so hot it was hard to breathe.

The landscape changed, as well.

Darkness turned to grayish-black mists to fiery lava. When we finally stopped, it changed again.

I held my breath and searched the land.

Electric pink and purple flowers grew from vibrant green branches.

Poppy orange and lemon yellow blossoms danced in fields, and

overhead was a bright violet-blue sky.

From Leo's arms, I could see two moons with pink bubblegum rings. Birds sang in the branches, and insects buzzed in the lush foliage.

"What is this place?" I asked, stepping away from Leo.

"This is Polonias," he said, coming to stand beside me. I heard the smile in his voice. It was obviously a land he loved.

"It's beautiful." A delicious breeze licked the back of my neck and my arms. It was the perfect temperature. "How many moons does Polonias have?" I pointed to the two I could see.

"There are six moons in total." Leo's arm brushed against mine, sending prickles of pleasure along my skin.

"What about those mists we passed through?" I bent and picked one of the orange flowers. Then brought it to my nose.

The petals were shaped like pansies and smelled like tangerines.

"These flowers are called tigerspaw." He plucked the flower from my hand and spun it between his fingers.

The color was that of a tiger's fur. "Why, tigerspaw?"

Leo turned the flower over and gently touched it against my wrist. "Its petals leave a paw print. See?" He moved the flower, and sure enough, it looked like a paw print.

"Cool," I breathed.

Leo smiled, his eyes studying my features. "May I put it in your hair?"

My lips parted slightly, and my heart lurched.

I needed to be careful.

It was apparent Leo knew how to say what a girl wanted to hear.

"Sure," I finally said.

He stepped close and slid the flower through my hair, so it rested behind my ear. "Beautiful," he said.

"Thanks." I placed a hand on his chest. "Now about the mists. What were they?"

Leo's features darkened. "Those are the Witch Mists. Traveling from where we were to our land requires we go through them. It can be very dangerous if you don't concentrate."

"I heard whispering and felt something like feathers touching me as we passed through them." Remembering made me shudder.

He gave me a sharp look. "You heard them? Felt them?"

"I - Yes, I think so." I stepped closer to him, suddenly afraid. I knew nothing about where I was.

Leo placed his hands on my bare arms. "Those are the Cursed. They are creatures who turned their backs on Polonias and the goodness of the magic in the land. They are like the demons of your world. Some are desperate for a way out of the darkness, while others seek to pull unsuspecting travelers in. They are the cause of the Sickness." He shook his head. "Did you understand them?"

"No," I answered firmly. No sense telling him it felt like I should've understood their language, that it felt like I was close.

"Good." He nodded like that was the end of it.

The air was fragrant with flowers, and I stepped to one of the blooms on a low hanging branch. Near the middle, it had burgundy freckles.

"These are beautiful," I said, reaching out to touch one.

Leo stepped beside me and put a hand on my finger. "Careful, they're huggers."

"Huggers?" I giggled at the funny name.

"Watch." He placed his first finger on one of the petals, and it curled around his finger. The other petals lengthened and reached for his finger as well, wrapping around it until it was no longer visible.

I was momentarily scared. "Does it want to eat you?"

Leo chuckled. "No, the petals are drawn to warmth. But they won't

let go until you scratch or tickle it near the stem, like this." With his other hand, he rubbed the bottom of the flower-like one would scratch behind a dog's ears.

The flower immediately released Leo's finger and sighed.

"I just thought you might want to know before you thought it was attacking you." He smiled, flashing one dimple.

"Yeah, good call."

"Want to try it? The petals are soft." He watched me curiously.

I shook my head. "Maybe later."

He caressed a few more blooms the way he had the first. Each exhaled with delight.

"They like you." I laughed, thinking everything swooned at his touch, not just me.

"Nah, they just liked to be caressed." He shrugged and started walking through the orange and yellow flowers.

A glittering ebony path appeared below our feet.

"How did you - ?" I began, then stopped. Of course, he used magic.

Leo turned back and smiled. "Come on. There's someone I want you to meet."

OceanofPDF.com

SOUL OF POLONIAS

WE FOLLOWED the path through the forest for a long time.

Everything around us buzzed with life.

The more we walked, the deeper into the woods we went until the path barely allowed us room to get through.

Tall, skinny trees with furry silver trunks grew tightly on either side of the trail. Or maybe they hadn't grown there but moved to make room after Leo's spell.

With him, such magic felt possible.

"Where is this person?" I finally asked after more than thirty minutes of non-stop walking. I wore my wedge sandals, the most comfortable heels around.

Still, enough was enough.

"At the Center," he answered, but didn't elaborate.

I huffed. He said the words, but they told me nothing.

Still, I strived for patience and kept walking, admiring the vegetation, the colorful flowers, and the random animals and birds we startled.

Probably an hour later, I was tired, hungry, and my feet hurt. Leo finally stopped.

"We're here," he said.

"Here" was truly magical.

A mountain wall shot straight up so high I couldn't even see the sky, from which tumbled five different waterfalls.

The sound should've been deafening, but it wasn't. Instead of a roar, it was like the sound of heavy rain. The water slapped against flat rocks and meandered down until the waterfalls all came together

and emptied into a pool of turquoise water.

Colorful dragonflies flitted around the edges, landing on flowers in lavender, pink, bright yellow, and red. The air was clean and fresh, making me feel relaxed and happy.

To the right of the pool bloomed a rose the size of a manhole cover. Without a stem or leaves, it grew from the ground, not on a bush. Its petals were mauve around edges, then buttery yellow and cream.

"That. Is. Incredible," I said, moving toward it.

"That is Polly," Leo said, respectfully.

"The flower has a name?" The closer I got, the more glorious the flower became.

"She goes by many names. She is the heart and soul of Polonias."

I stopped directly in front of the flower. "Well, she's lovely," I said, confused about why he would bring me all this way to see a flower, even if it was the biggest, most beautiful flower I ever saw.

Leo stepped next to me. "She is beautiful. And she needs you."

He sounded sad, and I glanced over. He looked as miserable as he sounded.

"She needs me?" I pressed a hand against my chest. "Why?" I watched him, mesmerized by his emotion.

It was sweet; he cared so much about the end of a flower.

But that was how flowers worked.

They began as a seed. Grew into a bud. Bloomed. Flourished a while. Then died.

Hell, it was how life worked.

I patted his arm.

"Does she need more water? A spell? I'm confused," I said, shaking my head.

"Speak her name and let her tell you herself."

My head snapped toward the flower. "The flower can talk?" There were many things I became aware of after I discovered I was a witch, but talking flowers was a total shock.

"Yes, Cinderella. Because she's more than a flower. Say her name."

"Okay." I wiped my hands on my dress. I was instantly nervous. "Uh, Polly?" I glanced at Leo, and he nodded encouragingly. "Polly, would you mind speaking to me?"

The petals shuddered and opened, revealing a young woman, my height, with hair, the color of cream, and blush pink eyes stood before us. In her hair was a small rose, and she wore a dress made of rose petals.

"Hello, Cinderella. Thank you for coming to see me." She bowed slightly.

I tried to speak a few different times, but nothing came out. "Hi," I raised my hand in a lame wave.

She smiled, walked over to the edge of the pool, cupped her hand, and lifted water to her lips. "Nothing better than drinking water," she said in a voice that sounded like the soft chiming from a music box.

The tips of her fingers looked bruised - deep purples and navy.

Polly followed my gaze and held her hands out in front of her. "Oh, dear. It's getting worse." She turned her hands back and forth, studying them intently.

"Why are they bruised? Did you hurt yourself?" I asked, abruptly filled with concern.

"The Sickness. It's getting stronger. I can't hold it off much longer." Polly looked at me, and a zing of emotion shot through me.

Her eyes were filled with terror, sadness.

The hopeless look of a person who knows they are going to die and can't do anything about it.

I saw that look once before in my grandfather as stomach cancer took him. Day by day, hour by hour, second by second.

It was the most challenging thing I ever had to watch.

"What can I do?" I asked, taking her hand in mine without thinking.

As soon as I touched her, the bruises left her fingers.

I gasped and pulled away. "What happened?"

Polly smiled, glancing over my shoulder to Leo before focusing on me.

"It is you, isn't it." She took my hands in hers and pressed them to her cheek. "Will you help me, Cinderella? Please?"

My eyes met Leo's, but he just stood there, his features unreadable.

Both he and Quilla asked me to come, and I turned them down.

But Polly? I sensed her magic, her natural goodness.

Without a doubt, she needed my help.

"I'll help in any way I can," I answered, and knew in that instant everything in my life was about to change.

DEAR DIARY,

Today I entered a new world and met a girl by the name of Polly. She's a beautiful flower girl.

I know that sounds kind of funny.

No one is getting married.

She's just a girl who is sometimes a flower.

She's also the heart of the world of Polonias - the world I entered today. If she gets sick, Polonias gets sick. If she dies, Polonias dies.

She asked me to help her, and I agreed.

I've no idea how I'm going to do it, but I feel utterly drawn to her. So I'm staying here.

Leo put me up in a room in the castle. His family's castle. It's beautiful.

Filled with thick tapestries and a large four-poster bed.

Tomorrow, Leo will give me a tour of the land, and I'm nervous about what I'll see.

I'm also worried about home and the Seven Magics Academy, and about Heather.

But I know Snow and Coco will take care of her. I'm also concerned about Sera and her powerful magic.

And Gabe, too, though I hate to admit it.

Yes, I'm still sad about our breakup.

But there's nothing I can do to change his mind. If he wanted me, he would've fought for me. I'm not saying it doesn't hurt. It does!!!

And there's no way in hell I'll be dating another guy anytime soon.

But I can look. Admire the view that is Leo. Right? Right!

I'm sending notes via magic to my parents and Snow and Gabe, telling them where I am.

Quilla, my fairy godmother, agreed to deliver them.

I have to keep telling myself time is different here than in Sharra or on Earth.

They will be fine. I'll be fine, and according to Leo, I can stay here a year, and it will only be a day in Sharra.

I'm counting on that!

OceanofPDF.com

A DIARY AND LETTERS

DEAR MOM AND DAD,

This is to let you know I'll be in Polonias a while.

Not sure how long.

It could only be minutes your time, but I didn't want you to worry.

Polonias is somehow connected to Earth, but not a part of Earth - Yeah, it's all very confusing.

The thing is, I mentioned Polonias to Mom at breakfast this morning, and I'm sure from her comments she already knows about it, which means you probably do too, Dad.

If I'm wrong, talk to Adam Henry.

He can explain everything to you.

Please know I'm safe. And thank you so much for all the love and support you've given me over the years.

All my love,

Cindy

HEY SNOW,

Just wanted you to know I'm in Polonias.

If I can't make it back in time, please have someone cover my classes for the day.

You know how much I love teaching.

I wouldn't abandon my classes unless it was serious.

But I've met someone. And before you freak, it isn't Leo.

I can't move on from Gabe so easily.

It's a girl by the name of Polly.

She's adorable. Weirder than you.

She's a flower and a girl.

Like an actual effing flower.

She grows from the ground.

She's also the heart of Polonias, and I have to help her.

Please help Heather and keep an eye on Sera for me.

Both girls need extra attention, and I'm sorry I'm not there to give it, but this is really important. I feel it deep in my heart and soul.

Take care. I may be back in a few hours but wanted you to know what's going on, just in case.

Hugs,

Cindy

GABE,

I've written several letters today.

Yours is the hardest.

Mostly because I know why you broke up with me, thanks to Snow.

It hurts that you didn't feel like you could tell me the reason.

I get it, though.

There's a new law in place for the chayot: no interspecies dating. Fine.

I would've understood.

Maybe you didn't love me the way I believed.

That knowledge hurts, but whatever.

It's done.

I'll be supportive and stay out of your way.

Hell, I'm not even on Earth anymore, so you're safe from my wicked witchy ways.

If you're curious about where I am, talk to Professor Pops about Polonias. He has the answers.

Take care of yourself.

Cindy

DEAR DIARY,

I've been in Polonias a week already.

The land is beautiful, if not a little old-fashioned.

Imagine living a hundred and fifty years ago.

There's no modern technology in the land.

No cell phones, microwaves, or cars.

It isn't because those things can't be created.

They can. Instead, those things don't exist because they aren't necessary.

Everything happens with magic - because of magic.

It's as much a part of this world as the grass, the many moons, or the violet-blue sky.

This past week has been quite the lesson for me, and when I return to Sharra, I'm going to add my newfound knowledge to the curriculum.

My students need to understand what a gift it is to be a part of magic.

But also, as beautiful as magic can be, that it can also be deadly.

It's a little weird watching the people here in Polonias use magic for everything.

The first time Cook prepared a meal, I nearly fell over.

Eggs, milk, butter, flour, and salt flew through the air and into a large bowl, all on their own.

Then a whisk mixed the ingredients.

When it was finished, the bowl rose into the air and poured the

batter into a pan.

The pan went over to the oven where the oven opened, and the pan slid inside.

The whole time, the cook used magical words to make the items do as she commanded instead of manipulating them with her hands.

It made me wonder why there couldn't be fast food created by magic.

I told Leo what I was thinking, and he laughed.

"Magical fast food. You might be onto something, Cinderella," he said.

I still hate it when he uses my full name, but I let it slide that time.

There is more to Polonias than I first realized.

Each day I see something new, something different. I have to tell you, I feel at home here.

I don't know if that makes sense.

It's like I've finally found the place where I belong.

The people are kind and seem interested in getting to know me except the king.

He is genuinely perturbed by my presence, even though I believe he sent Leo after me.

My only guess as to why he would do such a thing is he hoped I would say no.

Either way, I caught him giving me foul looks more than once, although I'm not sure what I did to offend him.

Since my arrival, I spend a lot of time with Leo. We hang out every day. He's very kind and good-hearted, not to mention beyond gorgeous.

More than once, I tried to magic a mirror so I could talk to Snow in Sharra, but it didn't work.

When I told Leo, he explained it's because while Polonias is

tethered to Earth, it isn't part of the planes or realms within the planet.

My magic doesn't work the same here, either.

Like using different languages in different countries, magic requires different words depending on where I am.

I tried to use Luminous to produce tiny stars in my room like I would on Earth.

Instead, I lit up the whole castle, bright as a Christmas tree. Whoops!

Then there's the people and the creatures.

They dress the way you might expect in a fairytale.

The men wear trousers, and the women wear skirts and gowns.

All of the animals can talk, including the tiniest insect - at least, that's what Leo told me. He also said most of them choose not to speak since it requires a great deal of magic to understand different languages, and they don't want to be bothered.

I might actually believe that last part.

So far, the ones who have spoken are grumpy.

Earlier today, I encountered a spotted leopard.

When I saw her, I screamed in terror at seeing the large cat wandering freely around the city. I ran away.

Leo later shared that the leopard is the records keeper for the land, and she lives in the castle. Her name is Violet, and she can speak as well as him or me.

Now I think about it, she looked adorable.

She walked on her hind legs and wore a brightly colored gown.

The funniest part is she keeps a pair of spectacles balanced on the tip of her nose. I'm guessing they don't fall off only because of a spell.

I haven't officially been introduced to anyone but the king.

Leo says it's because the people want to have a formal welcome

party for me.

The party is tonight. I'm hoping the guests will like me.

I haven't seen Quilla since the first day I arrived.

Perhaps it's because she's mad I treated her like a magical mail carrier. I don't know.

Polly is back in the forest, next to her waterfall.

She came to the castle with us and stayed for a few days.

I noticed she was getting antsy, though. Finally, she came to me and said she needed to get back to her dirt beside the waterfall.

I was sad to see her go, but I understood.

She's a part flower, so it seems like she should need the ground.

She also said something weird to me right before she left.

She said, "We're sisters, you and me. There's a gift I must bestow upon you. Be ready. It's a gift with a curse, I'm sorry to say." She looked a little unhappy at saying those words, and I wanted to reassure her.

"Sure, Polly," was how I responded, keeping my voice light even though inside I felt really weird about her saying we are sisters.

Also, the "gift" sounds like it isn't a gift at all, but a total pain in the ass. When I see Polly again, I'll tell her I don't want it.

That's everything.

Oh, except for one random note.

I've seen two brown rabbits wandering the castle.

One seems genuinely interested in me while the other plays tricks.

Last night it dumped a satchel of dirt in my bed and the day before it put worms in my shoes.

I've tried to talk to them, but they hop away before I get the chance.

When I get to the bottom of it, I'll let you know.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAT WITH QUILLA

FROM THE DEPTHS OF A DREAM, I heard someone pounding on the door.

"Come in," I mumbled out of habit before remembering where I was.

Quicker than I usually move, I went over to my robe and threw it on, opening the door. A swift glance at the old-fashioned grandfather clock revealed it was late morning.

In the doorway stood Quilla.

Hands on her hips, she tapped her foot impatiently.

She wore a dress the color of an eggplant, a bright red painter's hat, spotted blue tights, and pointy black boots.

Before I could say anything sarcastic, she walked past me into my room.

"Why didn't you use magic to open the door? Not that I'm complaining. Stupid allergies. But Polonias is a world full of it. No one cares whether you use it or not. In fact, they expect you to." She whirled around the room like a bird who drank too much coffee.

"You were just being polite, weren't you?" She sighed before plopping down on my bed, bouncing several times. "Cozy." Then she gave me a once-over.

My head spun.

Quilla always seemed to move in fast forward.

I shook off the lingering effects of sleep, working to keep up.

She clucked her tongue at my attire, as though I should already be dressed and ready.

My robe was split open, showing my blue polka dot boxer shorts and light blue tank.

Quilla wrinkled her nose. "Is that what you're wearing to your party tonight? It's," she paused and sniffed before continuing, "enchanting."

I tightened the robe around myself and took a steadying breath. "Hi, Quilla. No, this is not what I'm wearing. Sheesh. But my party doesn't start for several hours. Still, it's nice of you to finally come by and see me. Where've you been?" I went to the closet as I spoke.

Apparently, it was time to get dressed.

The closet was more substantial than my room back home and filled with hundreds of shoes, underclothes, and dresses.

They began arriving almost immediately after I did.

Most of the dresses were in various shades of blue, I'm guessing because Leo told the dressmakers blue was my favorite color. I wondered how he knew.

The gowns weren't as short or as stylish as I was used to, but they were still beautiful.

I ran my fingers over the different fabrics, some soft, others stiff.

They were all lovely, almost sensuous.

I chose one in sky blue, the material was soft and functional.

The shoes I selected were black flats.

My reflection in the mirror revealed I looked pretty but too sweet. It wasn't my style, even if I did love the color.

I stepped from the closet and smiled at Quilla. "What about this for the party?"

She snorted. "No. No. No." She twirled her index finger. In the air between us, moving at the same speed as her finger, a tornado of materials spun in a flurry of silvers, blues, and blacks.

Before my eyes, a stunning dress took shape. The bodice was fitted and a combination of glittery silver and sky blue. The jagged tulle skirt pooled out from the waist like a cloud.

"That's gorgeous," I said, reaching out to touch it.

"Th-th - " Quilla sneezed. "You can wear this tonight. I'm sure the dressmakers have plenty of choices in that gigantic closet of yours, but this will be perfect."

"Thank you." I took the dress Quilla created from the air and used magic to hang it up in my closet. Another glance in the mirror and I decided to wear the dress I had on for the day. When I returned, Quilla was staring at me.

"What? This will do until my party, right?"

She waved my question away like batting at an irritating gnat. "It's fine." She shook her bouncy curls. "What is it about you and handsome men anyway? First, that attractive chayot - Gabe, right? And now, Leo. "

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I went to the bathroom, thankful the facilities weren't old-fashioned, and ran a brush through my hair.

"I asked you to come to Polonias way before Leo did, even telling you how important it was to all of the people here, and you refused. A handsome prince with perfect hair and gorgeous eyes asks and, hocus pocus, you're here." She paused, and I waited, tying my hair in a braid. "I thought you were stronger than that."

"It wasn't Leo who convinced me. It was Polly," I said, pulling the hourglass charm necklace over my head and tucking it under my camisole.

It had been sitting on the counter beside the sink.

Then I studied my reflection, steeling myself for Quilla's continual barrage of my character.

She sniffed loudly. "Yeah, right."

I washed my face before patting it dry and moisturizing. Usually, I enjoyed taking the time to do my makeup without magic. Not today. "Compli makus," I said, and my makeup was handled.

A little mascara, some gloss, and some glow.

Quilla still sat on my bed.

"Compli makus amara," I said.

The magic moved Quilla into the air as my bed was made.

I smirked at her shocked expression. She was the one who told me to use magic. I was just following orders.

"It was Polly and not the crown prince who brought you here?" she asked, floating to the ground and adjusting her skirts.

"That's right." I didn't need to explain my reasons to her.

Still, I thought about what she said and wondered if she was right. "Did you want something?" I finally asked.

"Nope. Just wanted to see for myself you were up and about and make sure you had the proper dress for your party." She crinkled her nose. "See you later."

With a poof, she was gone.

"Thank you," I whispered, wondering if I should go find Leo. My thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

If it was Quilla again, I would give her a piece of my mind.

It wasn't.

It was Leo, and he looked like a fairytale prince.

He wore a burgundy and black jacket, gray pants that hugged his muscled thighs, a matching black belt and boots.

"Hi," I finally said after perusing his body more than once.

Leo did the same to me, and I blushed.

"Did you tell the dressmakers I like the color blue?" I asked, trying to cover up my embarrassment by fluffing a pillow.

He shook his head. "No. Is it your favorite color?"

"Yes, it is." I shut the door, and we walked side by side down the hall.

Leo smiled, and his eyes sparkled with mischief. "What else do you like?"

"All sorts of stuff." I shrugged. "I hope you're here to take me to the kitchen because I'm starved."

He winked, reached out, and took my hand.

Everywhere our fingers touched was like ice and fire, burning cold. I gasped but didn't pull away.

The tingling filled my veins.

I wanted to ask if he felt it, but I was afraid if the feeling were one-sided, he would think I was putting the moves on him.

My heart still clung to Gabe.

My emotions for him weren't so easily erased, even if that wasn't true of my ex-boyfriend. The chayot leader was an idiot, but I still loved him.

"Breakfast is our first stop. I've got a special place in mind for after," Leo said.

I gently pulled my hand away and quirked an eyebrow. "Are you flirting with me, Leo Loyalor?"

He chuckled. "What if I am?" He started down the steps, and I followed, my mouth hanging open. He was blunt. I liked that.

"I - I'm sort of - " What did I tell him? Gabe had broken off our relationship, shattered it to pieces, but - "I'm not ready."

Leo smiled. "Let's eat."

He gave me a quick tour of the castle the day I arrived, but his castle was expansive.

Halls intersected with each other like a spider's web.

I knew there had to be a spell to help me find my way, but it was too much fun having Leo show me around.

I was happier when he was around.

Probably because I liked him, but I didn't allow myself to settle into such foolishness.

I glanced sideways at him.

It was true. I did like him, but I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

He caught me staring when we reached the bottom of the stairs. "What?"

"Uh, nothing. It's just I'm glad you're here to help me find my way around. This place is gigantic. It's like a labyrinth."

Leo stuck out his elbow. I took it. "You're most welcome," he said.

We walked in silence down the hall.

After several turns, I knew we were getting closer to the kitchen because of the delicious aroma.

Blueberry muffins. My favorite, I thought, swallowing.

"I hope you're hungry," he said as we entered the kitchen, and he directed me to sit on a wooden chair.

"I am," I said when he sat beside me.

Cook, whose name was Mrs. Flamico, brought over a platter of muffins, some creamy butter, and bacon.

"Thank you," I said, taking one of the muffins and placing it on my plate.

With my knife, I spread the butter until the muffin was covered.

I broke off a piece and popped it into my mouth.

The edge was crisp and the inside tender. "Mmmmm," I said, closing my eyes. "It's perfect."

Leo chuckled. "Mrs. Flamico makes the best food."

I glanced at the cook and caught her face burning with embarrassed pride. "Stop it. Your compliments won't get you thirds," she said, bringing over a big plate of scrambled eggs and potatoes.

She set them in front of him, and Leo dug in.

I had a feeling she would give him fourths if he asked.

"So, what are you making for the banquet tonight?" Leo asked her between bites.

She waved a hand at him. "It's a surprise. You'll find out."

Leo smiled and stuffed another forkful of food in his mouth.

We ate in silence.

When we finished, we thanked Mrs. Flamico.

Leo magicked the dishes clean and then magicked them back into their position on top of a bunch of others.

When we were out in the hallway, he asked, "You ready?" He grabbed my hand, and again I felt the cold heat of fire and ice.

"Sure," I replied, trying to ignore how my skin tingled as he gripped my hand tighter.

OceanofPDF.com

POSIES

"AVANDEY." Leo spoke the word quietly.

There was a gentle rush, and our bodies traveled like apparitions down hallways, through rock walls, and out onto the grounds.

I watched in awe as we floated past groundkeepers through bushes, trees, and a large lake. Until we reached a garden surrounded by thick bushes and covered in what looked like roses.

"Stolenvey." At the word, our bodies stopped, and my feet touched the ground.

I took a deep breath. "I always wondered what it would feel like to be a ghost," I said, feeling the slightest bit woozy.

"Is that the normal way people of Polonias travel, or were you showing off?" I turned in a circle, taking in my surroundings. We were in a garden filled with flowers.

"A little of both," he said, sheepishly. "It's quick and easy. Think you can remember the words?"

"Sure," I said, repeating them in my mind.

"Good." He walked to the edge of the garden and picked a flower that sort of looked like a blue rose.

Then he turned and brought it to me.

I took it from his hand.

The petals were buttery soft and smelled like roses too.

I pressed the center to my nose and inhaled. Something pinched me.

"Ouch," I said, pulling it away. At the center of the flower was a little - girl.

I could just make out her head, shoulders, and arms.

She had her arms crossed and was glaring at me, or at least trying to.

"What in the world?" I asked, handing the flower girl back to Leo.

She reminded me of a mini Polly.

"These aren't really flowers, but posies." He held his hand flat, and the petals turned downward, becoming a lovely dress, the same as Polly's.

The little posie walked to the edge of Leo's fingers and shook a fist at me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, covering my smile in my hand. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

She crossed her arms and turned away in a huff.

Leo chuckled and put his face close to the posie's.

"It's my fault. I told her your garden was special. I wanted to show you to her. She thought you smelled lovely. Am I right, Cindy?"

I stepped closer. "Yes, he's right. You do smell really good." I gave her an encouraging smile.

She faced me and stepped closer. Then four of what I thought were petals turned to wings at the center of her back.

I never saw Polly do that, but I wondered whether she could.

The posie lifted off Leo's hand, flew closer to me, and patted my nose.

A strange noise came from her mouth.

I had the feeling she was speaking to me, but I couldn't understand.

I looked at Leo for help.

He smiled. "The posie language is a little strange, but you'll get the hang of it. You just need a little magic." He cleared his throat. "Say this: deotha spranza."

The little posie and Leo waited.

I took a deep breath. "Deotha spranza."

As soon as I spoke the words, a strange wave of air struck my eardrums.

The feeling touched my throat, as well.

The posie flipped her long red hair. "Greetings, Cinderella. It's lovely to meet you. My name is Cyan. Welcome to my garden."

I blinked several times, surprised her mouth moved, and I understood. "Nice to meet you," I finally said.

Cyan flew higher and out toward the middle of the garden.

Leo sidled up next to me and took my hand.

As Cyan waved her hands, thousands of posie creatures flew off the shrubs, bushes, and stems and into the air.

I thought of the pixilettes from Sharra.

They were around the same size, but a pixilettes' wings were more like a dragonfly than a flower.

As we watched, the posies performed a sort of dance.

Each moved in sync with others. They were beautiful.

"What do you think?" Leo asked.

"I love them," I breathed. The posies twirled and swayed to music I couldn't hear.

"Are they flowers or something else?" I finally asked.

Leo chuckled. "Flower isn't acceptable to you?"

"Most flowers don't talk and dance, but after all I've seen here, I'll accept pretty much any explanation." I smirked.

"Remember, everything here is created of magic. Most can talk. You just have to be able to understand them."

I nodded, thinking of the words I used to understand Cyan. "Will I always be able to understand the posies now that I've spoken the magic words?"

"You will. Yes." He led me over to a bench where we sat.

I couldn't take my eyes from the flowers. They were incredible.

"The posies are a type of fairy," Leo went on. "Here in Polonias, they are in charge of reseeding in the spring and fall. Since it's summer, they're in full out party mode."

"Cool. In Sharra, there are creatures called pixilettes. Posies remind me of them a little," I said, smiling.

"I've met a pixilette before. She was known as Ryden."

I glanced over at the prince. "I know her," I said, surprised and thinking even though we weren't on Earth, it was a small world.

We sat comfortably together for a long while, enjoying the posies, and each other's company. Leo was really easy to talk to. It was nice to speak with him about nothing at all. A sense of calm overtook me, and I smiled. I really did like it here.

"I should probably get you back. The celebration will begin in a few hours, and I know you'll want to get ready."

"Alright," I said, allowing him to help me up.

He tucked my hand into the crook of his arm, and we walked together to the edge of the gardens.

Several of the posies held petals in their tiny hands.

Cyan flew forward, presenting me with one. "We wanted you to have these in honor of the celebration tonight."

"Thank you," I replied, as she placed it in my hand.

After her, dozens of posies came forward, dropped petals into my cupped hands, and then flew away.

When they were finished, my hands were filled.

I looked at Cyan, unsure about what to do with all of them. I didn't want to be disrespectful, but they were petals, though the aroma coming off them was incredible.

Cyan hovered just above my hand.

From within her dress, she pulled a wand and waved it.

The petals spun together and transformed into a small bottle.

The top was shaped like a flower.

Inside the iridescent glass bottle was a light blue liquid.

"Wear it, and all who catch a whiff will be unable to do anything but agree with all you say," Cyan said.

"Thank you," I said, studying the bottle more closely.

It was more a potion than a perfume.

I knew and knew the contents could be exploited. I needed to keep it safe.

"I am so grateful to you, Cyan, and all posies for your welcoming Cinderella and for your lovely gift. Good day," Leo said and bowed.

In response, the posies flew around him, speaking their returned gratitude.

Leo grasped my hand and uttered the word, "Avandey."

As I waved goodbye, we drifted out of the garden, over the river, and onto a path near the castle.

OceanofPDF.com

A RABBIT TRUTH

"STOLENVEY." Leo used the word to stop our supernatural travel. "Be careful with that potion. The gift is as she said. If someone discovers you've used the concoction on them, they won't be happy."

"I kinda figured. So why would they give it to me?" I tucked the bottle into the pocket of my dress so it wouldn't be seen.

"Posies have lived a long time. Some believe they can see the future. Others believe their power is even stronger than that. They believe posies can travel to the future and the past as well as predict it."

"Merde," I swore softly.

It seemed the little creatures had some elven blood in them as well.

Leo shook his head. "I don't know the truth. No one really does, but it's nice to have them on your side, especially if they know something we don't."

I agreed, and we continued back to the castle. When we reached my room, Leo stopped.

"I'll see you tonight, Cinderella." He gently stroked my cheek with the back of his hand.

My body tingled.

I swallowed back the feelings coursing through me. "See ya," I said, and quickly shut the door, leaning against it.

I removed the bottle from my pocket and studied the liquid inside. I couldn't catch a whiff of the scent, but I knew it would smell amazing, and I debated dabbing a bit on for the party, but quickly decided not to.

The dress Quilla made for me, the one I put in the closet before

leaving earlier, fluttered through the air and stopped near my bed.

"What the hell?" I went to the closet and tucked the potion in my underthings drawer, way in the back.

As I walked away, I changed my mind, deciding the hiding place wasn't secure enough.

I retrieved the bottle and searched for a dress with pockets, finding a periwinkle gown similar to the one I had on.

After a quick glance toward the closet door, I slid the potion inside the pocket closest to the wall.

Satisfied, I left the closet, shutting the doors.

The dress moved so it was beside me and I screamed in fear.

"Stop it," I said, grabbing at my racing heart. "You're worse than an apparition." It seemed to sulk, the sleeves drooping slightly.

"Sorry," I said quietly, running a hand over the skirt.

Movement from my bed turned my attention there.

Curled atop my covers were two furry brown rabbits.

"Why?" I gasped in surprise.

The bunnies woke in unison, their ears twitching.

They weren't small bunnies; each looked to be at least a foot in length.

I guessed these were the rabbits I saw around the castle, one of which continuously played tricks on me.

"What do you two want?" I asked, figuring they would run off the way they had in the past.

Instead, they carefully hopped to the end of the bed and stopped.

I took a tentative step toward them. "You aren't going to run?" I crossed my arms, not expecting a response.

At the sound of my voice, one of the rabbits scooted backward while the other sniffed me.

"I won't bite," I said, holding out my hand.

Twinkling lights appeared suddenly around them.

Just a few at first, but quickly more and more surrounded them until the light was so bright, I looked away.

When I turned back, the twin bunnies were gone and, in their place, sat a girlish creature.

Pointed ears poked through hair the color of chestnuts.

Her eyes were amber.

She wore a forest green dress and matching shoes that reminded me of leaves.

Between her shoulder blades grew two beautiful, gossamer wings.

They fluttered rapidly, like a fan turned on high. I blinked and brushed some fluttering hair out of my face.

"Oh, sorry," she said, her voice high and soft.

As she spoke, her wings slowed until they came to a stop.

"What happened to the bunnies?" I asked, trying not to stare, but I couldn't help it.

Between the posie, Quilla, Polly, and now this girl, I was beginning to feel that possessing magic in this land was nothing unless it was accompanied by a set of wings - or at least a flower dress.

Neither of which I owned.

The girl's body changed to a bright shade of yellow.

"Uh, I - I'm the bunnies. They are m - me. W - we are each other," she stammered nervously, clutching her hands together.

"You are the bunnies?" I asked, watching her.

She looked more confused than I felt. "A - a spell." Her eyes darkened. Her thin brows scrunched together. "A cu - curse is more like it."

She hopped off the bed.

She was taller than expected.

Her head came to my shoulders.

"You were cursed? By whom? Why?" What a terrible thing to do to someone.

She sighed. "Mizrabel did it."

I was about to ask for more information on Mizrabel but the girl continued.

"Mizrabel is a dark sorceress. She lives on Thorn's Peak, to the east of the castle, past the Golden Forest." She turned her face in the direction of my window.

Her wings fluttered slightly.

"My name is Anna - Anna Belle Sun." She turned her amber eyes on me. "I'm a woodland fairy. My family lives in the Golden Forest."

"Mizrabel sounds miserable," I said, smiling at my joke, trying to lighten the mood, but Anna Belle didn't join in.

I cleared my throat. "Nice to meet you." I stuck out my hand to shake hers.

I didn't know why, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

Anna Belle fell to her knees and took my hand in both of hers, kissing my knuckles. "It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Cinderella."

I was more than a little shocked. "What are you doing?" I asked, pulling her up by her elbow. "There's no need for that."

She turned a bright yellow. "I'm showing you my respect. As you are the one true ruler of Polonias, it's my duty and honor to bow before you." She bobbed a curtsy.

I took a step back as a sudden and strange panic curled through my stomach. "You have me mistaken for someone else. Leo and his family are the rulers of this land. I'm just a guest."

She walked forward and placed a hand over my heart.

I let her, too stunned to move away.

The palm of her hand seemed to radiate warmth.

I looked down and would swear I saw an orangey glow coming

from her.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, locking eyes with her.

"Checking." After a few moments, she nodded. "You are the one, Cinderella. And contrary to what you may think, or even what the king may believe, you will rule this land. Honorably, too, I think." Anna Belle pulled her hand away and stepped back.

"Your heart is strong, full of magic, full of the blood of this people, and more. There is much you must learn, but as a lowly forest fairy, it is not my place to be your teacher. Talk to the pretend prince. Ask him to tell you whether or not I'm lying."

Anna Belle started to breathe heavily. She bent over, trying to catch her breath. "That's what I - I came to t - tell you."

"What's wrong? Anna Belle, are you okay? Do I need to take you to the doctor?" As I said the words, I realized I didn't even know if there were doctors in this land.

Maybe there were medicine people, or perhaps everyone knew magical spells to heal themselves when they were wounded or sick.

"Call me Anna when I'm like this," she choked out. "That is what my friends call me."

"I will, Anna." I rubbed a hand across her back.

I also tried to remember a healing spell, but I didn't know what was wrong with her.

OceanofPDF.com

SENOR SAUCY PANTS

"Is there something I can do?" I asked, wishing I wasn't so magically inept in this land.

Anna shook her head. "No, it's the curse. No one can help me except Mizrabel, and she won't." She spat the last word out.

Bright, sparkling stars surrounded her entirely and then she was no longer a woodland fairy, but two brown rabbits again.

They wiggled their noses at me.

I kneeled on the floor next to them.

The one on the right climbed into my lap and burrowed under my arms.

The one of the left bit my outstretched finger and darted behind the curtains.

"Hey, where are you going?" I called after it.

Of course, there was no answer. I glanced at the bunny still in my lap. "I'm guessing you're Anna, and the other, more offensive one is Belle?"

She looked at me with her dark eyes, then hopped behind the curtain after the other one.

Though all the animals in Polonias could speak, I guessed Anna and Belle couldn't because of Mizrabel.

Or perhaps it was as with the posies. I didn't understand their language.

I followed them over to the curtain and pushed the heavy material back, but they were gone.

After carefully checking around the sill, I noticed a little door in the wall under the window.

I pushed, and the wooden door fell open.

Lying on my stomach, I tried to peer inside, but it was too dark. Using one finger, I closed the door and stood.

And made a decision. I wanted to talk to Snow.

Wrapping my hand around the hourglass, I closed my eyes and thought of Sharra. The castle. Snow's door just outside her bedroom.

With a whoosh, I sailed through the witch mists.

This time, I listened intently to see if I could understand what they were saying, but to no avail.

The noise was gone, replaced by the smell of old drapes and vanilla. I had arrived.

"Cindy," Snow said. She sounded as surprised as I felt. At least I didn't have to search for her.

I heaved a breath and opened my eyes. "How did you get here?" she asked, hugging me.

"This," I said, relieved to be here.

"You'll have to explain what it is some time." She glanced over her shoulder.

We were in the hall, and several worker vampires were waiting at the door, watching me curiously.

"I don't have long, but I needed to see you." Sometimes I got the nagging suspicion Snow didn't need me anymore.

Growing up, I was the one she went to and held for comfort and cheering up.

But she had Dorian for that now as well as others like her, so where did that leave me?

She hugged me again. "I'll always need you, Cin," she said, saying what I was thinking aloud.

Tears touched the edge of my lashes. "It's good to see you." I sniffled.

"And you. How are things going in Polonias?"

"Fine, I guess." I sighed.

"Tell me what's the matter." She took my hand and led me into her living room.

I flopped onto the couch and covered my eyes with my hand. "What isn't the matter?" I said, wiping my eyes.

"How can I help?" Snow sat next to me, propping my legs on top of hers.

I let out a sob, unable to understand what my problem was. "Maybe I'm going to start my period or something," I said and sat up.

"Tell me what you're doing tonight." Snow encouraged, changing the subject.

"I'm going to a party," I said, glancing at her.

Crap. Time passed much faster there than here.

I literally had only a few more seconds, and then I needed to get back.

"Ooooh, a party sounds fun." Snow clapped her hands in excitement, and I couldn't fight the smile that sprung to my lips.

She wasn't one of those girly-girls.

I was the only girl she hung out all through high school, so her acting all girly was pretty funny. "Who is hosting? The prince, Leo?" she asked.

I chuckled. "He'll be there, and really he's been nothing but charming. It's his father who doesn't seem to like me."

Snow took a deep breath, returned to her usual serious self. "Why does going to a party make you cry?"

I sat up. "The party will be fine. It isn't that - " I paused and rubbed my eyes.

How did I tell her everything?

How did I tell her about the posies and Polly? About Quilla and

Anna Belle? How could I -

"Just tell me, Cin. Tell me what's going on with you. I'm listening." She touched my arm, and I looked at her.

"Okay." I thought about where to begin.

"There's a woodland fairy named Anna Belle who's cursed and changes randomly into two gigantic bunnies," I said.

"I have a fairy godmother. Her name is Quilla and she's allergic to magic. Then there's Polly, the girl who is also a rose. She asked me to help her save this world. She said I'm her sister."

I shook my head. "I've been there a week, and I haven't done anything really, just walked around the castle. Plus, well, I'm still so sad about Gabe. How could he be such a jerk? And Leo is kind - to me and to everyone I've seen him come in contact with. I feel at home there, but at the same time, I'm also lost and lonely." A tear trickled down my cheek.

"Does that make any sense?"

"I get it." She shrugged. "Why not stay here? Don't go back."

I started, and my heart began to race.

It was my moment of clarity.

I had an effing choice.

Snow was right. I could stay and forget about all of it.

Then I remembered Polly and Anna Belle.

They needed me there. I still wasn't sure why, but it didn't feel right to abandon them. "I can't."

"Remember when we were little, and your dad would give us each a giant plate full of pasta?"

"Of course. I remember the tummy ache after we finished the whole thing." I wondered where she was going with that.

"As we got older, we were able to eat more and more. That's all you need to do. Take what you're doing, who you're meeting, what you'll become, one bite at a time, 'kay?"

I smiled. "I like it. Thanks for the pep talk."

"Welcome. Is that it?"

"How do I do all I need to and not feel so lost at the same time?" I studied her, knowing if anyone understood what I was going through, it was Snow.

"Take a forkful. Chew that. Do your best with that. Then, when you're ready, move on. It really does help."

"Are you saying being the vampire queen isn't all it's cracked up to be?"

Snow snorted. "Let's just say if I could choose to go back to the way things were before Christopher bit me, I might consider it."

"But then, what about Senor Saucy Pants?" I meant Dorian, of course.

Snow burst out laughing. Sucked in a breath and purred. Like, actually made a rumbling sound in the back of her throat. "We still would've ended up together, I promise you that. He's - " She trailed off, and I had a momentary pang of jealousy.

Why couldn't I have that?

I wanted to smack the smug right out of her voice.

"So glad one of us is happy," I admitted, knowing my time was nearly up. "I need to go."

"You will be too. I know it. Have fun at your party." She stood, and I did too.

She hugged me, and I returned it before stepping back and closing my eyes.

I took hold of the hourglass and thought Polonias and my room.

The witch mists were noisier this time like they recognized me, and I knew I needed to keep away from them.

After several moments, I opened my eyes and breathed with relief.

I was back in my room in Polonias.

The clock said my party started in five minutes.

Crap!

Well, at least I hadn't missed it.

Using magic, I did my hair and makeup and had the dress cinched up.

Then I slid on my glass slippers.

A knock sounded at my door.

OceanofPDF.com

MAGICAL TREES

LEO STOOD in the entrance looking handsome. He wore a blue and silver jacket and black pants, the ends tucked into shiny black boots.

His sandy-colored hair was combed back, but one lock kept falling over his right eye. He whipped it out of his face, then brushed his hair back with his fingers.

Perfect lips curved upward in a smile as I watched his eyes slide from my face down my body and back up again.

"You look magnificent, Cinderella. I hope you don't mind if I escort you to the party."

I smiled, glad he was there, that I didn't have to go alone.

"Thank you," I responded. "I would like that very much."

Especially since I didn't know where the party was being held.

Leo stuck out his elbow, and I took it.

We walked together down the hall, past several closed doors, through a large sitting area, down several sets of stairs until we finally arrived at a grand ballroom. It was twice the size of the one in Pops' house.

Music played in the background, and several elegantly dressed couples danced in perfect unison around the dance floor.

There was a large display of food next to a fountain of pink liquid. Round tables covered in thick blue linens took up one half of the floor while the dancers and the musicians shared the other side.

When Leo and I entered the ballroom, several heads turned toward us. Leo pressed his hand over mine.

Tendrils of cool warmth shot through my fingers.

I sucked in a breath and looked up at him. "Be strong. Don't let them see you're nervous."

I wanted to tell him I wasn't nervous, that I felt fan-freaking-tastic, that I didn't care what these people, my people, thought of me.

But all of it would be a lie. "Okay," I said softly.

Leo turned. "Care to dance?"

He gave me a look, one I couldn't comprehend, and bowed, just exactly as the prince in the Cinderella movie had, right before they danced.

It was like deja vu and an episode of Supernatural combined.

"Um, I have no idea how to dance the way they are dancing," I said, indicating the couples moving on the floor.

They seemed to move like liquid, each step, and sway flowing into the next. It was breathtaking, but way out of my league.

Leo's bottom lip brushed against my earlobe, and I shuddered. "You can with magic," he whispered.

I turned into him, so I could see his eyes. "Really?"

"Yes." He took my hands in his.

This time I was prepared for the cooling-warm jolt his touch brought, but it still surprised me, filled me with fluttery butterflies. "Exhailith duatith," he said, his eyes focused on mine.

An ache of magic shot into my fingers, up my arms, and through my body.

Leo winked. "Think you can handle it now?"

My body already responded as though it knew the steps since before I was born.

I grinned. "Yeah, actually. I do."

I allowed him to lead me onto the floor.

People observed us as we progressed to the middle.

Then Leo spun me into his arms.

"Here we go," he said, and our bodies began to move just like the others.

Those dancing stopped to watch, but only for a moment.

Soon they began dancing along with us.

It was exhilarating, being in control of my body, but at the same time not.

Leo was a great dance partner, and I realized I was laughing. Like, out loud.

When the song ended, Leo released me, and my body shuddered.

"That was amazing," I said.

His eyes raked over me.

"That it was." He took my hand.

I realized we were the only ones left on the dance floor.

Everyone's focus was elsewhere, and they spoke with excited whispers.

I sighed with relief until I felt Leo's body get stiff.

"What's the matter? Did something happen? Did I do something I shouldn't have?" I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"No," he said, his voice filled with awe. "Look at the trees."

I did. Before that moment, I didn't notice the decorations, including the trees potted and resting along all of the walls. The trees suddenly bloomed into flowers of all shapes, sizes, and colors.

My breath caught in my throat. "How beautiful," I said, stepping closer to Leo.

From the way everyone was speaking, and the tension in the room, I got the feeling the trees blooming wasn't a regular occurrence.

"Is this something new?"

Leo lifted my chin. "You did this." He seemed genuinely surprised.

"It's just as Polly said. You will save this world." He spoke as though he finally grasped something he hadn't believed before.

Like he didn't believe what Polly said until that moment.

If that was so, why would he make such an effort to bring me

here?

"Is that bad?" I finally asked.

"No, it's good." A huge smile broke out across his face. "Very, very good."

"Dinner is served," a man in a fuchsia suit said in a booming voice.

"You hungry?"

"A little," I said, only the teeniest bit nervous.

Leo led me over to a table where his father and two other people were sitting. He held the chair for me, and I sat while he pushed the chair under the table.

I was impressed by his chivalry.

Most of the boys back home seemed to be under the impression that chivalry was truly dead. Not that I could blame them.

Many women didn't like it when men did anything for them because they took it to mean they were more, and we were less.

I didn't see it that way at all.

Chivalry was kindness.

Once Leo was seated, food appeared in front of us.

It looked like vegetable soup and smelled delicious.

I was hungry but didn't move to eat it because I worried about doing something I shouldn't.

What were the customs of Polonias, especially when around the king?

I peeked over to see what the king was doing.

He seemed to be waiting for something.

I noticed one of the other women seated near him picked up her spoon and sipped.

Leo leaned over. "It's custom for the ladies to take the first bite, and then the men will follow."

"Oh." Crap, they were waiting on me.

I picked up my spoon and dipped it into the soup, lifted it to my lips, and tasted. It was every bit as delicious as it smelled.

Leo and the other men followed, and soon, thank goodness, everyone was eating.

Glasses filled with something dark red.

Thirsty, I moved to take a drink, but paused, leaning into Leo.

"Is there a custom for drinking I should know about?"

He smiled and seemed pleased I wanted to learn to do things right.

"Yes, the men usually drink first to make sure the wine is suitable for the ladies."

"Okay." I put my empty hand back in my lap and waited, thinking the king would probably prefer to see me choke on an onion rather than do something for me out of the kindness of his heart.

OceanofPDF.com

PARTY CRASHER

WHEN THE SOUP course was finished, the bowls and wine glasses disappeared.

Thankfully I was able to empty my glass before it vanished.

The second course was plates filled salad greens, along with chunks of pear and cranberry and celery, cucumber and slivered carrots.

Another wine glass appeared at the top of my plate. It held a clear, bubbling liquid. I took a bite of the salad, enjoying the textures and flavors as I waited for a blasted man to drink from his glass.

When no one did, I leaned over to Leo. "Care to take a drink so I can?" I winked, and he chuckled.

"Of course." He picked up his glass.

I watched his expression as he gulped down a large swallow.

He was focused on his father, as though they were having a conversation only they could hear.

Finally, Leo set his glass down. "I - " Leo began but wasn't allowed to finish before the king stood.

He raised his glass, and everyone else in the room followed suit.

"To Cinderella. We welcome you to our humble land of Polonias. May you live forever in harmony, and may you and your seed prosper in the land eternally." The king lifted his glass. Everyone followed, and a sea of hands, each holding their own glass of champagne, echoed the king.

"To Cinderella," they repeated, cheering before toasting in what seemed like a pleasant manner, then the moment was gone.

The men drank first, followed by the women before everyone returned to whatever they were doing before.

A feeling of loneliness swept over me.

That was the worst part about being here.

Feeling like I didn't have any friends.

With time, I thought Leo and I could be friends.

It felt like we were on our way toward that sort of bond.

I glanced over at the prince.

He was about to take a bite of salad.

"What?" he asked, then stuck the forkful into his mouth.

I enjoyed watching his lips move.

"Nothing." I popped a pear into my mouth, enjoying the sweet flavor.

Before I could say more, the lights flickered once, and then again, and then went out.

"Having a party without me? How typical." The voice was female and scratchy, like the growl of a prowling cat.

A red orb of light appeared in the center of the giant room.

The face of a woman materialized, and as the light grew brighter, I could make out more of her.

Black hair streaked with gray and green hung in a braid over one shoulder and down to her hips.

Her black dress glistened like eel skin, the collar low, barely covering her breasts. A slit in the hem went up to the middle of her thigh.

She wore some type of ankle boots; in the glowing red light, they seemed to writhe and hiss like snakes in a cage.

"Where is she? Where is the girl who's destined to save this world?" She raised her voice to ask the questions, searching the room until her eyes fell on the king.

Scared whisperings drifted along with the air.

"She'll kill us."

"Why has she come?"

"Tell the sorceress where Cinderella is."

I could just make out the outline of the king.

His fork was midway between his mouth and his plate, but he looked frozen.

Leo was on the edge of his seat. The gleam of a knife shone in his hand. He seemed ready to stand and fight.

"Show yourself, girl, or I'll start killing the guests." A red light shot from her fingers and scorched a table near her.

The occupants wailed and screamed in fear.

I stood hurriedly before I could talk myself out of it.

"My name is Cinderella. I've come to - do what I can to help Polonias. I don't know if it's my destiny, but I get the feeling everyone in this room believes you're looking for me." As I spoke, I lifted my chin, something my mother had taught me.

Leo placed his hand in mine and rose beside me.

I could feel the tension in his body, but I didn't have time to worry about whether I upset him.

"Mizrabel, leave this castle at once. You are not welcome here," Leo said.

Each word sounded like the boom of a drum and sent a shiver of trepidation down my spine.

In the next instant, the lights came back on.

Mizrabel sauntered over to us.

I studied her and realized she was probably beautiful once.

Her eyes were black as coal, and even her lips were dark.

I wondered if she wore black lipstick or if she came by the color naturally.

As she came closer, I could see the veins through her paperwhite skin.

Black blood seemed to pump through them.

Mizrabel kept her eyes trained on me, studying me with the same intensity I did her.

Not for the first time, I tried to picture myself as she would see me.

Blond hair. Perfect makeup. Lips glossed.

A sweet blue dress on my body along with sparkling silver shoes adorning my feet. I

was nothing but a child.

Fear snaked through my belly and ate up all of the butterflies.

All my life, I believed I was brave.

Staring at the woman before me, I realized I never understood what fear was.

Until now. Until her and this very moment.

She reached out a hand, and I noticed her long black nails.

I wanted to shrink away, but I held firm and took her hand in mine.

"It's nice to meet you," I said, and immediately felt stupid.

Her eyebrows lifted.

She stared at our hands, clasped together as a myriad of emotions traveled across her features.

Sadness, happiness, and anger, as well as others I couldn't figure out.

Finally, her eyes lifted and held mine. "It's nice to see you again, daughter."

Stunned, I didn't respond.

Leo stepped between us and separated our hands. "I'll not ask you again to leave. The next time it'll be with a witch blade to your navel."

Mizrabel lifted her head and cackled. "Dear boy, don't make threats you aren't prepared to keep."

I was still in shock.

Had the woman called me her daughter?

Did she mean it literally or figuratively?

Like, we can both do magic, so that makes me part of a long line of witches, which means we're somehow connected -

"Merde," I swore quietly. My head and heart pounded as one.

"I'll leave as soon as I make my toast." She spun in a circle, taking everyone in at once. A glass appeared in her hand, and she raised it.

"To Cinderella." She wrapped her free hand around my waist and pulled me against her side. "To save them, she must leave them and search for the glass lyre," she said aloud. \

Then leaned down to whisper in my ear. "When you find it, bring it to me. I'm not the evil monster I'm made out to be. You need my help to save this world from the Sickness. Remember that, Cinderella. My daughter."

She stepped back and spun me so we were face to face.

People were talking loudly, but it was only background noise.

It felt like there was just Mizrabel and me, and the rest of the world was nothing but landscape.

Her words repeated over and over in my mind.

I really wanted to ask her about the whole daughter thing, but now didn't feel like the right time.

What seemed important was finding the damn glass lyre.

"Where do I begin to look?" I finally asked, not expecting an answer.

She gave me a wicked smile before blowing some kind of red powder in my face.

I flinched when it touched me and began to see stars.

From what sounded like far away, I heard her say, "You'll find it in a place you may call home beneath books and wonderous foam."

"Direction?" I mumbled, wiping at the powder, but feeling woozy

like I hadn't slept in days.

"Go home, child." With those three words still lingering on her lips, the sorceress vanished.

OceanofPDF.com

I'LL GO WITH YOU

WHAT HAPPENED after Mizrabel left was kind of a blur.

People spoke words, but it all sounded like a muffled foreign language.

Someone lifted me, and I was carried, then laid on a bed.

Quilla appeared.

Between her sneezing and bright yellow and green outfit, there was no way I could mistake her for anyone else.

Her concerned face came close to mine.

She peered into my eyes - so did Leo and the king. Even Anna Belle and the leopard I hadn't talked to yet -

What was her name? Violet.

Even she came into the room and looked at me.

I couldn't figure out what they were doing or what was wrong with me. I knew I needed to get out of bed and begin looking for the glass lyre.

When the room was quiet, I closed my eyes, trying to imagine what Mizrabel meant about going home.

If she was my literal mother, wouldn't that mean Polonias was my home?

But if she actually meant where I was raised, I would need to go back to Salem, which made no sense.

I would remember seeing something as strange as a glass lyre. Wouldn't I?

My mind ran through different places within my parents' house.

Next, I moved on to Snow's, and finally, Professor Pops'.

Could it be at his home?

I scoured each of his rooms with my mind, trying to remember all I saw, but I couldn't recall every detail. I needed to be inside them and look around.

Which meant doing as Mizrabel said and returning home - to Salem Massachusetts - the place where I'd lived nearly all of my life.

Had this past week in Polonias been a total waste?

I knew the answer was no.

If I hadn't come, I wouldn't have met Mizrabel.

And meeting her seemed like the most important thing at the moment.

She told me what to do to save Polonias.

But why?

I guessed she had ulterior motives.

As I debated the answer, exhaustion won out in the end, and I fell asleep.

I DON'T KNOW how long I slept, but when I woke, all my dreams were in the forefront of my mind.

They were of my mother - well, the woman claiming to be my mother.

Mizrabel.

She terrified me, filled me with sadness and fear like I never knew.

But a tiny part of me, buried deep in the corner of my mind, wanted to get to know her.

Guilt raged through my body.

She was an evil witch.

I should be trying to find ways to defeat her, not get to know her.

Sunbeams touched my cheek, and I opened my eyes.

Leo stood at the window beside the bed.

He peered through the glass, and I wondered what he saw, what he

was thinking.

He no longer wore his party clothes but wore dark jeans and a forest green button-up shirt, the long sleeves rolled up to his biceps.

Light shone in his hair and on his thick dark lashes.

I admired his lips, the shape of his jaw, and the trimness of his waist. He was gorgeous.

"How long have I been asleep?" I asked, sitting up. My throat was parched.

Leo turned slightly, and a smile bloomed across his face. "You're okay?"

I slid to the edge of the bed. "Yeah, I think so. I'm just thirsty."

He poured me a glass of water, handing it to me.

I drank gratefully before handing it back.

He took it. "Sorry, your party didn't end the way it was supposed to. Cake and fireworks were on the agenda for the finale." His face grew dark. "But Mizrabel showed up and ruined everything. Do you remember that?"

"I do. I'm not sure what she meant or what I should do." I tried to stand, but my legs were shaky.

I guessed whatever the red powder was, it affected me negatively, like a poison.

His eyes left my face and drifted toward my body. I followed his gaze.

"Crap." I was in a white tank and boy shorts that didn't cover much. "How did I get in this?" I asked, pulling the bed covers up to my chest.

Leo rubbed the back of his neck, then turned away. "Anna Belle started to help, but then she turned into Anna and Belle and, well - " Leo trailed off and shrugged.

"Got it," I said with a short laugh.

"Quilla came in and finished getting you ready for bed."

"Oh." That made me feel a little better.

"Why don't you get dressed, and then we can talk." He used magic to open my bedroom door and strode to it.

"Sure."

"I'll meet you in the kitchen in thirty minutes." He walked out of my room and was gone.

I washed my face, put on some lip-gloss, and threw my hair in a high ponytail.

Since Leo was in jeans, I wanted to be as well, so I magicked a pair of sandblasted skinny jeans, a boho-chic white blouse with a gray tank underneath, and gray suede boots.

The heels were flat, and the tops zipped just under my knees.

Totally casual, but adorable. It made me feel more like me.

When I was finished, I used magic to open the door.

Quilla was pacing just outside.

A hand flew to my throat in surprise.

Her outfit was flamboyant as usual - bright yellow and pink dress, hair teased with butterflies pinned in, black pointy boots, and black and pink polka dot tights.

"What the hell?"

"Sorry, Cinderella," she said breezily, walking past me and into my room. She sneezed.

"I was just leaving to meet Leo," I said, but followed her back inside.

She didn't seem to hear me. The door shut, and Quilla grabbed my hand. "I've been up all night thinking about Mizrabel and what she said. Have you had a chance to think about it? Her fritzy toast, or curse, or whatever you want to call it."

I gave her hands a squeeze and dropped them. "Not really." I went to the same window Leo was looking out earlier and studied the

landscape.

Polonias was beautiful, full of color, and vibrant with life.

"No?" Quilla asked, moving to stand next to me. "How could you not?" She waved her hand, and my bed was made.

Then she sneezed. "I mean, that woman is dreadful."

I sighed. "She's my mother?" The question moved off my lips with the hope Quilla would deny it.

She didn't. "It's true. We hoped to wait a while before you found out."

"So, who's my father?" I crossed my arms and turned away. "Never mind, I don't think I want to know."

Quilla shut the curtains, throwing the room into darkness. "It's better if you know everything. The sooner, the better at this point, but first, you need to find the glass lyre. I spoke with Violet, the records keeper, and she said it's been mentioned several times in the Life Scrolls."

"What about Mizrabel? Why would she even suggest that I find it? Why would she try to help me if she's trying to destroy Polonias?" That part made no sense.

Quilla shrugged. "It isn't that your mother is against us, she's just never been with us."

"Well, that's as clear as mud." I tucked my hands into the pockets of my pants. "I think I'm supposed to go back to Salem, on Earth. If I go, will you come with me?"

Quilla's face softened, and she touched my hair. "Haven't you figured out that I'm always with you? Even if you can't see me."

She didn't answer my question directly, but I got the sense that she would be there if I needed her. "Okay, well, I guess I'm going home. Or back to Salem." A lump settled in my throat.

That meant back to the house where I grew up and the room where Gabe and I spent so many nights together.

He also broke up with me there.

If I returned, I didn't want to go alone.

"You won't be alone," Quilla said and opened the door.

"I won't?"

Leo walked in. He must've grown tired of waiting for me. "My magic is stronger than yours. I'll go with you."

OceanofPDF.com

EASILY LOSE MYSELF

I LIKED the idea of Leo coming with me. At the same time, I didn't.

It could get awkward. "Um, that isn't necessary." My heart sped up.

Leo tucked his hands in his front pockets. "I'm going." He threw his shoulders back. "That's final, Cinderella."

For him to use my full name made me feel like a child being scolded by an unhappy parent. I didn't like it.

Through gritted teeth, I said, "Since when did you start making decisions for me?"

He crossed his arms. "This isn't only about you. It's about this land. As the Prince, I feel it wise to go wherever you go." He raised an eyebrow, and I got the feeling he wanted me to understand more than what he was saying.

This had to do with his father, the king.

He must've ordered Leo to go with me, which meant he had to go. He wasn't given a choice.

"Fine," I said. "When do you want to leave?"

Leo stepped close. "Now," he said, taking my hand.

I didn't mention I used the hourglass to travel to Sharra the day before.

Instead, I took hold of it and said the words that would take me home while I thought of Salem, my house, and my room.

Leo's arms came around me, and I moved closer, enjoying his scent, like citrus.

As we moved through the mists, I saw the shadows of those dwelling there - beady eyes watched, as though hungry to consume me, and I clung harder to Leo.

When the wet air vanished, we stopped.

Leo opened his eyes, and a little piece of my heart softened. "You're a good guy, right, Leo?"

The question was sort of moot because if he wasn't a good guy, he wouldn't want me to know. But I hoped he was.

His hands found the belt loops at my hips, and he pulled me closer. "I'm your guy, Cinderella."

I didn't respond, pushing away from him.

We were in my room.

"Okay," I said, going to my phone, charging on the bedside table. I checked the date and time. Not only was it still morning, but it was the morning of the same day I'd left more than a week ago. Weird.

"It's good you brought us here. It's a great starting place in our search for the lyre." Leo wrapped an arm around my waist.

"You are an old pro already at traveling, too. I'm impressed."

"Thanks," I said as he walked over to my shelves, starting his search.

"I think I would know if the glass lyre was in here." I put my hands on my hips as he picked up one of my old journals and flipped through it.

I took it from him and returned it to its proper place.

His eyes captured mine, and he held my gaze. "We need to look around just in case. Sometimes things get put down and forgotten. Mizrabel said you should go home. It's logical we start here." He shrugged.

"Might as well start in your bedroom." He leaned down like he was going to kiss me. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. In fact, it might be great, his lips claiming mine.

But an image of Gabe filled my mind, and I resisted.

Leo glanced past me and at the bed before looking at me, an unspoken question on his lips.

It was obvious what he wanted.

Both of us together, rolling around in the sheets.

I don't know why I was shocked.

He was a man, and he had needs, just like me.

The old me might have taken him up on the subliminal proposition.

But since Gabe, my feelings for him, and Snow, seeing the way she loved her husband - I wanted that more than just sex.

Not that I was against sex.

Not even a little bit.

But, I wanted my own happily ever after.

Everything else felt like settling.

Exhaling, I moved away and checked under my bed.

Nothing but carpet. I stood. "Nothing there."

He watched me a moment longer before returning to his perusal of my shelves.

Everything looked exactly as it had when I left. Even my clothes were still thrown over the chair near my closet.

"Do you have anything that might be considered musical or, I don't know, something made of glass? We should check it out. See if there's magic within it." Leo moved over to my closet and went inside.

"You have a lot of shoes," he called.

I snorted and followed him. "Yeah, so? What's your point?" I pulled a pair of Jimmy Choos from their box.

They were made of crystal and cost over three thousand dollars.

When my dad got the bill, he nearly blew a gasket.

I thought for sure he would take away my credit card.

He didn't. Just told me not to spend that much money on a pair of shoes ever again.

As I studied them, searching for something lyrical, I wondered if he

let me get away with so much because of guilt or because he didn't care one way or the other.

It hurt to think the people I believed were my parents were just puppets, pretend parentals. I felt like all this time with them was a lie, that everything I ever believed was a mirage.

Leo took the shoe from me, interrupting my thoughts.

He flipped it over, studying the sole.

"They're glass slippers. Do these count?" I asked.

He smirked. "They're - pretty. Definitely not the glass lyre, though. You should send them to Polonias."

I raised a brow. So he knew what the lyre looked like? "Leo?" I began, but he turned away, taking the other shoe out of its box.

He whispered. "Prelilith Polonias." The shoes vanished.

"What the hell?"

"I've sent them back to your room. When you return to Polonias, they'll be in your closet." He smiled. "Now what about a glass lyre? Have you seen one of those?"

I wasn't sure how to react to him sending away my shoes without asking - without finding out if I was okay with it.

"Cindy?" Leo asked, touching my shoulder.

I needed to concentrate. Shaking my head, I sighed. "A lyre is what, exactly?" I asked, opening one of my drawers and pulling out a pale peach scarf.

"It's like a harp you hold on your lap," Leo answered.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of black lacy undies, holding them up with one finger. "Nice," he said, and I blushed.

"Put those back. There's no glass harp in my underwear drawer." I returned my scarf and closed the drawer.

He put my undies back and shut that drawer too.

"Fine. Does this house have secret passages, secret rooms, a

basement, or an attic of some kind?"

I thought about that. "Not that I know of, but anything is possible."

"Hmmm, okay." He placed a hand on the wall nearest to him and spoke a few words. Magic pulsed from his hand like the walls had a heartbeat.

He closed his eyes, concentrating.

I waited, knowing he must be searching the house with magic for secret passages.

I went back into my closet and explored some of the other boxes on the top shelf.

There were trophies, pictures of Snow and me as well as old boyfriends, trinkets, costume jewelry, and letters, but no lyre.

"Know anyone who might have a hidden passage or room in their house here in Salem?" Leo asked.

I returned the box I was looking through to its rightful place on an upper shelf and faced him. "I don't know," I said, though I immediately thought of Pops' mansion.

"This house doesn't have anything," he said, coming to me and putting his hands on my hips, invading my personal space.

He was so close he towered over me.

There was an island in the center of my closet, and he walked me back against it. "At least not that my magic can see." He eyed me. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing." I shook my head, looking down at the space between us. "Just old memories." I tried to push him away, but he held me fast.

"Can I kiss you?" His eyes searched my face for an answer.

I pressed a finger to his lips, ignoring the zing of white-hot cold racing through me. "I can't," I said, my voice barely audible.

It would be so easy to lose myself in Leo. His kisses. His hands on my body.

I felt sure the experience would be pleasurable yet also

meaningless.

He held me a moment longer before letting go. "Why are you fighting us?" He asked the question though he didn't seem to want an answer because he turned away, running a hand over my clothes.

I steadied myself as I tried to think. "I'm not ready to move on," I said, honestly.

Changing the subject, I continued, "There's - " I tried to tell him about the secret passage in Pops' library, but for some reason, nothing came out.

"Cinderella?" He faced me, his features questioning.

I tried again, but the words wouldn't come. So I sidestepped. "Off the top of my head I can't think of any place," I said, surprised I could lie. "Let's just keep searching my house."

I was confused. I didn't know why I felt nervous about telling Leo about Pops' house.

That seemed like a great place to go next.

"Okay," he said.

We rummaged through my room from top to bottom.

I checked to make sure my mom was gone before going into my parents' bedroom. I found plenty, most of which I didn't need to see, none of which was what we were looking for.

Then we searched the spare room, followed by all of the closets and the kitchen.

By the time we finished, I was hot and sweaty and hungry.

Leo magicked us some fried chicken.

We didn't do much talking, probably because I was so tired.

"Let's get some sleep and get a fresh start in the morning." I yawned and stretched, trying to figure out where we could sleep.

If we slept here, my parents would question the letter I had Quilla send, not to mention they would want to know about Leo and how Gabe felt about everything.

That would lead to a conversation I wasn't ready to deal with.

My parents loved Gabe.

Too bad, he didn't love me.

"Great. Let's go." He started for the stairs and my bedroom, but I stopped him.

"Not here," I said.

"Where then?" He looked confused.

"I don't - Hang on," I said, and ran into the bathroom down the hall from the kitchen.

OceanofPDF.com

MY THIGHS TREMBLED

CLOSING THE DOOR, I called Snow using magic. "Mirror, mirror, made of glass, find me Snow White, do as I ask."

Immediately I was able to see into Snow's bedroom. The vampire queen's husband stood, naked, his derriere turned toward the mirror.

I cleared my throat, looking away.

Dorian was handsome, but he was also like a brother to me, and there was something so wrong about ogling him.

He yelped. "Son of a - Snow, the damn mirror's for you." He dashed into the bathroom, mumbling something like, "Why can't mirrors just be used the way they were intended?"

I fought back a snicker.

Snow appeared in nothing but a towel. "Hey, Cindy. Long time no chat." She laughed, tucking the bath sheet more tightly around her.

"What the hell do you two do all day? Are you even handling the queenly stuff? What about the school?" I huffed. "Or do you spend all your time in this room? Doing - I mean damn." I shook my head, only a little jealous.

Okay, a lot.

Snow snorted. "We're newlyweds, Cin." She glanced back toward the bathroom then lowered her voice. "The truth is," she leaned in close, "I love sex with him. I really, really love it."

I snorted. "Merde, yeah. Sex is good stuff." I thought of Leo and his brazen offer earlier. Maybe I should change my mind.

It might help me relax.

"So good," Snow's cheeks flushed. "We did this thing earlier where - "

"Stop," I said, but laughed. "I don't want details."

Snow laughed too. "Sorry. It's only I had no idea what I was missing."

"Yeah, yeah." I put my hands in front of the mirror and shook them. "Look, I'd love to compare notes with you, but I have a question."

She put her hands on her hips. "I figured. What's up?"

"Well, I'm - no longer in Polonias. I'm back at my house in Salem, and Leo is with me. It's just the two of us. Alone." I lowered my voice. "And we need a place to stay."

"Why not stay there?" Her face darkened. "And why's he with you? What are you doing?"

I huffed, knowing she was questioning my being with another man when I still loved Gabe.

"We can't stay in my room because I don't want the complications that would go along with introducing Leo to my parents," I growled.

"Anyway, he's here to help me look for a glass lyre. Ever heard of it?" I wanted to tell her about the sorceress, Mizrabel, and that she claimed to be my mother.

But I didn't. Instead, I gulped down resigned breath.

"You know, I was at a meeting the other day where the glass lyre was mentioned. It's said to hold great magic and will give the one who possesses it untold power."

"That sounds about right. Did the person at the meeting happen to say where to find it?" I leaned against the counter, suddenly wishing my biggest worry in life was what to wear to school the next day.

Snow shook her head. "No. It was actually discussed as a myth. We were debating whether to bring it up as part of the Seven Magics curriculum."

"A myth? Snow, you're a vampire, and you live in a magical land with all sorts of creatures we believed were fictional not that many years ago. I don't believe in myths any longer. If someone mentions

something, it's most likely true."

"Possibly. I'll ask around, but I think the last time the lyre was seen was in Earth's realm. I bet Pops or Abernathy would know."

"Okay. Thanks, Snow. Do you mind if we stay at your house?"

"Great idea. Not at all."

"Are you done yet?" Dorian hollered from the bathroom.

"Coming." Snow laughed, not the least bit embarrassed.

In high school, she was kind of a prude.

It was true, being loved and loving the right person made all the difference in the world.

I bit back more jealousy.

Once, I thought Gabe and I had the same sort of love, or at least we were getting there, but now things were such a mess.

I swallowed my irritation. "I'll let you get back to - whatever," I said, smiling wryly. Snow deserved all the happiness in the world.

"Alright. Love ya, Cin."

I blew a kiss. "Love you, too."

Snow waved and disappeared out of sight, heading into the bathroom.

I spoke the words to shut the connection between us and took a deep breath.

When I returned to the kitchen, Leo was gone.

"Leo," I called.

There was shouting upstairs.

I ran up to my room.

Gabe had Leo backed against the wall, his forearm at his throat, and a sword at his stomach.

"What the - Gabe, stop!" I yelled.

My heart flip-flopped at seeing him again.

At the same time, I couldn't let him hurt Leo.

"You know this douche?" Gabe growled.

I sprang into action, hitting him on the arm and trying to pull him off the prince. "Yes. And he isn't a douche."

"You moved on already, huh? That was quick." Gabe shoved Leo, his piercing green eyes scrutinizing me, questioning.

Behind him, Leo coughed and leaned over, trying to catch his breath.

I knew I should go over and help him, make sure he was all right, but Gabe's gaze held me captive, and I didn't want to be let go.

"I haven't moved on," I said, swallowing down my need. "He's helping me with something."

"Cin." Gabe swallowed hard and took one giant step forward, scooping me into his arms and pressing my body against his.

I was momentarily lost in him, his strong arms that were so familiar.

Gabe smelled like light and crisp air and some kind of cologne - and - I missed him desperately.

"Gabe." My body fit into every one of his hard lines, and I longed to kiss him. "You - " I stopped.

Saying any more would lead to fighting, and I wasn't ready for that.

Not yet. I didn't want to let him go.

"When I sensed you were back, I came over. And found this clown in your room," he motioned toward Leo, "and no sign of you."

Gabe hugged me tighter. "Cin, I'm sorry," he whispered into my hair.

I met his gaze, my face hovering just below his, and he kissed me.

Softly and filled with questions, like feathers against my skin.

Everything else was forgotten, and I kissed him back with all the

love still in my heart, opening my mouth to allow him in.

Leo coughed. "Um, I'm still here," he said, irritated.

I heard him but couldn't make myself care.

My body begged me to forget everything.

Forgive Gabe.

Give him the chance to explain.

Snow gave me the details, but I wanted to hear the words from him.

After what he said, I deserved an explanation.

And, I realized, I wasn't quite ready to forgive him.

He deliberately hurt me then threw me away.

Sure, he was begging for my forgiveness now, but what if he changed his mind again?

I wasn't sure I could survive the hurt a second time.

"Sorry for what?" I asked, breathing heavily, my knees trembling from the intensity of our kiss. "Saying you never loved me? Breaking my heart into tiny pieces and then leaving? Lying? Or maybe it's your complete asshole façade." As I spoke, tears welled in my eyes.

"Tell me, Gabe. What are you sorry for?" I pleaded with my eyes, begging him to say something that would tell me everything was okay.

"I'm going to - step out," Leo said.

Neither Gabe nor I acknowledged him.

Gabe clenched his jaw, and I watched the muscles in his face tighten and release. "Why don't you ditch that guy, and then maybe I'll believe you're actually sad about me leaving, and we can talk."

He was so arrogant. "You have no idea what you're talking about or what's going on because it's always about you. I matter too, and I have a lot going on right now. Which you'd know if you ever bothered to focus on someone besides yourself." I turned away, wishing I could

make him disappear.

Gabe wasn't supposed to be around me anyway.

It was like a new commandment or something.

"Stupid chayot rules," I whispered.

Gabe touched me, and it was like fire, the heat of him burning through my shirt.

"You're right," he said. "You can tell me everything."

I missed him. Terribly.

Missed the way my body reacted to his touch.

Missed our time together.

But there was Polly, and Mizrabel, and Quilla, and a whole world that needed saving.

And I belonged to their world. They believed I could help. I wouldn't let them down.

Not only that, but the last time we talked, he said things I couldn't forget.

"I can't right now." I took his hands in mine and squeezed, hoping he would show me he understood and take an interest in what I was doing.

He didn't.

I exhaled and decided to set aside my feelings and ask him for help. "I'm looking for something," I said quietly, feeling defeated. "It's a glass lyre. Ever heard of it?"

Gabe snorted. "Sure." His eyes darkened again.

"It's said that possessing the lyre will give the owner untold power. Why?" Distrust filled his eyes.

He loved me, but only as far as it mattered to him.

"Do you know where it is?" I asked through gritted teeth, wishing things could be different.

"No." He shook his head and let out a mirthless laugh. "Ask the

false prince to tell you why he's lying."

I was confused. "Lying?" I glanced at the closed door, wondering what Gabe meant.

Did he know Leo? I thought about what I saw when I found them and wished I knew what they said to each other.

Leo came back into the room like he was listening on the other side of the door.

"Shut the hell up," Leo said, interrupting my thoughts. "If I'm a false prince, then that makes you a play angel." Leo was so mad his entire body shook.

Holy merde, I thought.

"Are you lying?" I asked tentatively.

"What would I have to lie about?" Leo threw his hands in the air and moved to stand near me, but I stepped closer to Gabe.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "You tell me."

My eyes kept going back and forth between the two men, and I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for myself.

Despite everything, I still loved Gabe.

I knew I was acting like an idiot, but the feelings wouldn't go away.

Gabe rolled his eyes. "I don't have time for this shit." He went to the window and pushed back the curtains.

"The glass lyre is a who, not a what." He slid the windowpane open and stepped over the sill, straddling it. His eyes held mine. "Leo knows that."

Without another word, Gabe stepped over the edge and dropped out of sight.

"Gabe," I whispered.

He kept leaving me.

Someday, I was going to have to do something about that.

OceanofPDF.com

STUPID BOYS

LEO CAME up behind me and touched my shoulder.

I shrank away, repelled at having someone other than Gabe touch my body. I was still mad at Gabe, but I didn't love him any less.

I couldn't shake the fact that Leo might be lying.

Stupid boys.

"Is it true? The glass lyre is a person?" I asked the question but already knew the answer.

Gabe had no reason to lie about that.

Leo went over to my bed and sat. He stared ahead, not looking at anything. "I hoped to wait until we found it - him or her or whatever."

I was frustrated. "Well, which is it? An it, him, or a her?" The words came out clipped, sarcastic - my way of dealing with things I didn't understand or was afraid of.

Also, I was tired and needed this day to be over.

So tired.

A spell from The Eye of Abernathy flitted off my lips. "Bohemia coverith irreavilth."

That would keep us invisible to anyone who came into the room.

I should've done that in the first place instead of asking Snow if we could stay at her old house next to Pops'.

My limbs were heavy with exhaustion as I made my way over to the bed.

"Why did you do that?" Leo sounded frustrated, but he looked as tired as I felt.

I pulled back my covers, got under them, and rolled away from him. "I can't do this anymore tonight."

"Cinderella?"

I sighed heavily. "Get some rest."

My heart still ached. "Sleep next to me if you want, but don't try anything. I'm not interested. Got it?"

He didn't respond, but I knew he heard me, so I relaxed. "Night, Leo."

I heard first one and then the other of his shoes hit the floor.

He lay down and adjusted the pillow next to mine. After several minutes, his breathing deepened.

I tried to sleep, but after several hours, I carefully got up and went downstairs and out the front door.

One moon - Earth's moon - hung full in the distance with thousands of stars twinkling against the night sky.

Puffs of smoke billowed from random fireplaces like dancing phantoms. I looked back and sighed.

This used to be my home, I thought, nostalgia creeping over my skin like tiny spiders.

I focused and spoke the word that would allow me to travel like a ghost.

"Abrevas." I skimmed along the ground, past and through fences and trees, down streets, through random houses and garages, even a bookstore until I reached Professor Pops' house.

But I didn't stop there.

Without a second thought, I went out the front door, past the kitchen, and down the stairs to the basement.

The door at the bottom was closed, but I went through it into the enormous room filled with stuffed or waxed or - whatever figures.

It was the Museum for the Supernatural.

I moved past the vampire, werewolf, fairy, and troll, each enclosed in their own casing, and over to the wall where the secret stairs were located.

It looked like an ordinary wall. Flat. Painted a light cream.

A picture of a seaside landscape hung in the center, but I knew it was all a mirage. I went through it and floated down the stairs and into the secret room.

Mizrabel's words ran through my mind so many times until it clicked. This secret room under Pops' library.

"Lumia." At the word, a blue light appeared over my head.

"Lithlia." The light rose toward the ceiling and got brighter.

This room was the same as the last time I was in here, complete with a TV, a bean bag chair, and the hole where the twisty slide exited.

There were shelves on either side of the TV, filled with movies, statues, a potted plant in desperate need of watering - and a glass freaking lyre.

"Really?" I walked over, and the light followed, causing the beautiful instrument to sparkle.

It was the height of a hardbound book.

I picked it up, noting that the glass was smooth and dense.

"I thought you were supposed to be a who," I said, grazing my fingers against the long, thin glass strings.

It didn't make any noise, just shone soundlessly. "This can't be right."

I spun in a circle, at a loss about what to do next.

Had Gabe lied?

Or maybe this wasn't the glass lyre I was looking for.

Perhaps it was just a coincidence.

It seemed too easy.

Gabe would've known if it was down here, and if he did, why not tell me, or use the power it supposedly contained for himself?

Dozens of questions thumped inside my head, making it hurt.

I was so tired.

The bean bag chair looked way too comfortable, and my head hurt way too much.

So I did the most logical thing possible - I sat down on it.

The soft material hugged my body.

It felt wonderful.

And I realized, for the first time in a long time, I felt safe.

No one knew where I was.

Closing my eyes, I allowed my mind to wander over the past, and the time I spent in Polonias with Leo, Quilla, and Polly.

Meeting Leo's father.

Wandering their old castle filled with tapestries, large paintings, and fireplaces bigger than an SUV.

My mind went to one fireplace in particular, and the picture hanging above it.

I was only in there twice, but I walked past it every day on my way to the kitchen.

The painting was of a family: a man, a woman, and two sons.

The woman and sons smiled, but the father kept his face stoic.

On his head, he wore a large golden crown, as did the woman. I guessed it was the king and queen when they were younger.

There was something familiar about the boys, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Was it their eyes, the way they wore their hair?

Perhaps it was the clothes.

Precisely the same, right down to the boots -

I DREAMED OF DANCING CLOWNS, their faces covered in white paint, red Styrofoam pinched on their noses. Orange curly hair bobbed on their heads.

They wore white one-piece suits with various colored polka dots, and they rode a unicycle, one clown doing the pedaling while the others sat atop his shoulders.

There were hundreds of them rising toward the ceiling, and they were all the same, exactly like the one below.

I looked up, trying to see the top-most clown, and a large clown face appeared on the ceiling, its evil black eyes glaring.

He opened his mouth and said something, but I didn't understand the words.

Over and over, he repeated the same thing. I could tell by the way his mouth moved, but there wasn't any sound.

I shouted for him to tell me again, keeping my eyes on the cycling clowns, but no matter how hard I listened, I couldn't hear the words.

The movements of the clown pedaling the unicycle became more sporadic until it seemed he was trying to run me over.

As one, their faces watched me, staring.

Abruptly, sounds erupted from their mouths, like a thousand buzzing wasps, but I still couldn't make out what they said.

Finally, I couldn't take it any longer and covered my ears.

One voice cut through the sounds of the others, and I heard it as clearly as though I spoke it -

---

"THEY'RE TWINS," I whisper-shouted, sitting straight up, knowing that was the word the clown from my dream spoke repeatedly.

I was still in the secret room.

The blue light from my spell continued to shine overhead, bathing everything in its peculiar glow.

The glass lyre rested on my lap.

I had no idea what time it was or how long I slept.

Grabbing the lyre, I rose and was about to put the instrument back on the shelf when something shimmered in the glass.

It scared me so badly I nearly dropped it.

Instead, I took a deep breath and peered closer, figuring it was just a shadow cast by the light I conjured.

"What the - " There was definitely movement inside the glass.

I was about to figure out what was going on when a noise sounded on the stairs.

Male voices.

They were irritated.

Before they found me, I quickly pulled a book from a row on an upper shelf, stuffed the lyre behind it, and slid the book back and whispered the words I used earlier to make Leo and me invisible. "Bohemia coverith irreavilth." Then I dove for the bean bag chair and acted asleep.

Keys jingled, and then the door opened.

I rubbed my eyes, pretending to wake up, and glanced sleepily at Professor Pops, Gabe, and Leo.

They stood in the doorway, various forms of shock and surprise and worry spread across their features.

Gabe, my mind shouted, happy to see him again so soon.

My heart started pounding.

He looked terrific if a little disheveled.

He studied me shrewdly as though he knew I was faking, but I played innocent.

Professor Pops came forward and held out his stand. I took it and stood.

"Hello, Cindy. Have a nice sleep?"

"Hi, Pops. Sure," I said, unable to take my eyes from Gabe.

Leo stepped in front of him, looking angry. "I woke, and you were gone. I hoped to find you here." He crossed his arms.

I was surprised he knew where here was.

Gabe took my hand. "I was worried when Leo said he couldn't find you."

Relief radiated from his face.

It was obvious he was concerned, but it was his own damn fault.

He lost his right to worry when he told me he didn't love me anymore.

He couldn't expect me to sit around and sulk, even though that's what I wanted to do.

"Don't you have humans to save?" I asked sarcastically, though I squeezed his hand.

He gave me a look I couldn't read. "I didn't ask for this job. I didn't want it. I can't believe you thought - "

Leo interrupted. "We don't have time for this," he said, grumbling. "Did you find the glass lyre?"

He searched the room, looking along the shelves.

I held my breath, hoping my magic held up and praying he wouldn't be able to sense the lyre.

He went through the shelves and the drawers before straightening.

"There's nothing in here."

Professor Pops gave me a look.

He knew the lyre was down here and was surprised I didn't share that knowledge with Leo. Before he could say anything, I gave the slightest shake to my head. He seemed to get my meaning and nodded.

"Mr. Henry, are there any other secret passages in your house? Any other rooms that might hold the glass lyre?" Leo walked over to the circle where the slide ended and looked inside. "What about up there? What's at the other end of this?"

Gabe responded. "That's the library. There isn't a glass anything in that room. It's filled with old books, a map of the world, and stubborn dust."

At one point, the library was Dorian's room, but after he married Snow, they returned the room to its original purpose.

Professor Pops patted Gabe on the arm. "It's okay. We should let Leo look, verify for himself. Who knows? He might find something."

Gabe gave him an odd look before agreeing. "Did you want me to take you up?" he asked Leo.

Leo gave him an unhappy glare. "That would be great."

The two of them went to the stairs.

"You coming, Cinderella?" Leo asked.

"I'll catch up with you in a few. I need to talk to Professor Pops alone."

Leo and Gabe went, and I waited until they reached the top of the stairs.

Then I went to the shelf, moved the book, and pulled out the lyre.

"Revealith."

"I had a feeling you found it." Pops wore a peculiar expression, as though he was thinking a question, but didn't ask because he already knew the answer. "Why not tell Leo?"

I shrugged. "I intended to, but something held me back."

I handed Pops the glass instrument. "I thought I saw something - someone - inside the glass."

"Really?" He studied the lyre, turning it over, searching for what I meant.

A face appeared inside. "There!" I shouted and then lowered my voice.

"Did you see? It looked like a guy." He looked like Leo, but that couldn't be right.

Professor Pops checked over it again. "I didn't see anything."

I took the lyre back. "Gabe told me the lyre was a person, not a thing." I studied the instrument more closely.

"I swear I saw the face of a man." The words of a spell came to mind.

I opened my mouth to speak it, but Leo's voice sounded from the top of the stairs.

"There was nothing in the library. Shall we go, Cinderella?"

I quickly tucked the lyre back behind the books and spoke the words to hide it.

Emotions radiated from the lyre - anger, sadness, fear.

For some reason, the lyre didn't want Leo to find it either.

"Please don't say anything, Mr. Henry. I don't know why, but I can't tell him."

"Leo won't learn of the lyre from me." He still looked to be holding something back.

"What is it?" I asked.

Pops shook his head. "Nothing, Cindy. You'd better go."

"If you're sure." I walked over to the stairs.

Turned back to Professor Pops. "I'll be back for it when I can," I whispered.

He nodded. "That'll be fine."

OceanofPDF.com

STOPPED LOVING YOU

WHEN I REACHED the top of the stairs, I gave Leo a sideways glance and knew I couldn't go. "Can I meet you later?"

I didn't know where he would go, and at that moment I didn't care.

It was apparent Gabe still wanted to talk.

Leo scrunched his brows together. "I thought you were through with him." He threw his hands in the air, frustration oozing from his pores.

"Please," I added.

"Sure. Whatever." Leo walked out of the kitchen, and I heard the front door slam.

Professor Pops came up the stairs and cleared his throat. "I've got some work to get done. If you need me, I'll be in my office."

"Thanks, Professor Pops," I said, suddenly feeling nervous Gabe and I were going to be alone together.

"Of course." He disappeared inside his office, closing the door.

Gabe came forward and wrapped me in a hug. "I hoped to see you again."

I clung to him and tried to forget everything he said to me that night, not so long ago.

But I couldn't. I stiffened. "I'm here," I said, but stepped back, pushing against his chest. "But has anything changed?"

I crossed my arms. "Did you decide you still love me?"

Gabe's face contorted, and he ran a hand through his hair. "I never stopped loving you," he whispered. "I lied. Your spells don't work on me."

"But you're still not supposed to be with me." Fatigue overwhelmed

my body, and I went over to the kitchen island and collapsed on one of the stools.

"What I said - There was no excuse." He ran a hand over the scruff on his face.

He hadn't shaved, and it looked good on him. "Forgive me." He put his hands out, pleading.

"Nothing has changed, including my feelings. Please don't lose faith in me, Cin," he said softly.

"I don't want to," I admitted, wishing my heart didn't hurt so much.

He leaned down and kissed me lightly but full of emotion. "I love you. Whatever happens, know that."

"You mean it?" I asked, blinking back the tears.

"I'm fighting against the ruling, though to a degree I understand why the command was issued, but I can't be without you. I won't." He ground his teeth together.

"I need you to know that." The way he looked at me, with so much love, for the first time in a long time, I believed him.

I saw how much he loved me by the way he looked at me.

"I don't want to be without you either," I admitted, touching my hand to his chest.

Gabe let out a huge breath of relief. "I brought you something." He reached into his pocket.

"You did?" Gabe wasn't the kind of man to bring gifts. At least I hadn't thought so.

He held up a bracelet.

Made of leather with a pair of silver wings attached. "May I?" He held it out, and I brought my wrist up.

When it was on, he turned over the wings.

Carved on the back were our names and the word forever.

"This is beautiful, Gabe, and so thoughtful," I said, touching it lightly.

The wings were cold against my fingers. "I love it."

"And I love you. I always will." He leaned down and kissed me.

It wasn't a marriage proposal, but it was more than Gabe ever gave me before.

He wanted to be with me forever.

It said so on the bracelet.

I wanted him. I wanted to wrap myself around him and show him how much I loved him, but he stiffened as though hearing something I couldn't.

"What is it?"

"I'm being called," he said. "I need to go."

His body seemed to move toward the exit of its own accord.

I clung to him, desperate for him to stay.

"I'm sorry," he said, frustration evident on his features.

He glanced away before giving in to the pull and walking away.

I pushed down a cry, willing myself to stay strong, my fingers tightening around the silver wings like a lifeline. At least he hadn't wanted to leave. That much I could tell.

"Gabe," I whispered, wishing I knew a spell that would fix everything between us.

When I heard the front door slam shut, I jumped.

Come to me.

The words shook me to my core.

This time I knew they came from whoever was inside the lyre.

Alone, I used the opportunity to go back downstairs.

The secret room was locked, so I used magic to get through.

I paused at the shelves, taking a deep breath before removing the instrument from its hiding spot.

"Revealith," I said like before, and it appeared.

Now that I had it, I was unsure what to do next.

The words to a spell entered my mind. "Forathua escapa revealantha fortimbrania."

Once I finished speaking the words, the lyre began to shake.

It left my hands and floated into the air. The shaking got faster and faster until it became a whirling blur.

There was a twinkle of light, and then it disappeared.

In its place stood a guy.

He looked just like Leo. I squinted, taking him in. "Leo?"

He straightened. "You know my name?"

"Do I?" This guy was thinner than Leo, his cheeks hollow.

His clothes hung from his body, as though he hadn't eaten a good meal in a really long time.

His hair was much longer than Leo's, and his hazel eyes were more golden around the outer rim.

"You aren't Leo, but you look like him." I took a step toward him.

Wow, he smelled terrible. "Plus, you stink." I pinched my nose.

He smirked. "Let's see how you smell after a decade stuck in limbo."

"Limbo?" I pursed my lips together, confused.

"That's right." He rolled back his shoulders and stuck out his hand.

"My name is Leolas Loyalor. Thank you for saving me, Miss - Cinderella?" A smile splayed across his lips.

I waved his hand away. "What the hell? How is that possible? I just saw him a few minutes ago."

I rubbed my eyes. "You can't be Leolas."

My heart raced with surprise and frustration.

There was so much about my own land I didn't understand.

This guy had similarities to the Leo I knew, but I sensed he wasn't the same man.

The guy's features turned angry.

He let out a frustrated growl. "You must be talking about my traitorous twin brother, Lawson."

"Lawson?" I said the name, feeling like I was in a dream.

Leo went over to the bean bag chair and sat. Then he let out a giant sigh. "Oh, wow, this feels like heaven."

He placed his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. "Why didn't I have this in limbo?"

Confusion settled over my features. "Will you please explain what the hell is going on?" I shook my head before pinching myself.

It hurt.

Yep, I was awake.

"Where are we?" he asked, glancing around the room.

"Adam Henry's house."

He gave me a once over and then asked, "This isn't Polonias?"

I shook my head. "No, this is Earth."

"Earth?" He shook his head. "My brother is a coward."

"Why?"

He ran a hand through his hair before shaking it. "Have you heard of Polonias?"

"Yes," I huffed. "I recently learned it's my world too." I wanted to say more but now wasn't the time.

"Right. I knew that." He smiled a bright smile that reached his eyes. "Excellent. Surely, you've heard the story of the twin princes?"

"Um, no. I haven't."

He gave me a strange look. "But you're Cinderella?"

"Cindy," I corrected. "I've only recently found out I'm from Polonias. I was actually raised by humans on this planet." It still felt

crazy saying that.

"It's true then. You are the - " He didn't finish.

"I'm what? What do you think you know?"

He held up his hands in the universal sign of I surrender. "Let me tell you a story." He sat up and leaned forward, scooted over and patted the spot on the chair next to him.

"Have a seat. This is going to take a few."

I turned back to the locked door and breathed in.

"Sure. Why not? What's one more thing?" In truth, I was more interested than I pretended to be.

After I was situated, he smiled. "Many years ago, my mother gave birth to twin boys, a feat unheard of in our land. She died not many years after we were born. My father raised us to become future rulers. He didn't give us a lot of love. The queen's death seemed to have sucked all of that out of him, but he taught us the necessities. As we grew, Lawson developed a knack for cunning. He was shrewd and more willing to make choices I thought were wrong. My father favored him. They started excluding me from training and outings. By the time I turned seventeen, my father and brother were more like friends than father and son.

"One night, Lawson came to my room and asked if I wanted to go hunting. I was excited and packed in a hurry. It was so long since the two of us did anything together."

He shook his head at the memory. "Looking back, I should've seen something was wrong, but I didn't. All I saw was an opportunity to spend time with my brother, the way we had when we were younger."

He paused, and I leaned forward, caught up in the story.

"What happened?" I asked.

"We snuck out of the castle and made our way into the forest. It was fun, like old times. At a stream, we set up camp and swapped stories over the campfire." He stopped, and I knew he was reliving

that time in his life.

"Near midnight, Mizrabel showed up. Have you heard of her?"

I shivered at the name.

Of course, I heard of her. She claimed to be my mother. "I have," was all I said.

"Right, well, apparently Lawson conspired with her to kill me. As soon as she appeared, he overpowered me and tied me up. I tried to use my magic, but the cords around my wrists nullified my magic. Fearful of what would happen, I pled with my brother and Mizrabel, but they wouldn't listen.

"Mizrabel conjured the magic needed to kill me. As the spell left her hand, one of my trusty friends, an amifox called Vale, sent his magic firing into hers as it reached me, making it, so I didn't die, but became trapped inside the glass lyre."

"What's an amifox?" I asked, knowing I couldn't follow the story entirely unless I had a visual.

He snapped his fingers and a creature that looked like a fox, except it was green with grass-green eyes, appeared in his palm.

"Amifoxes used to roam Polonias freely. They were everywhere." A shadow crossed over his face.

"After a year without being able to release me from the lyre, Lawson made a deal with the shadows within the witch mists, and the amifoxes vanished from Polonias." The magic he conjured to show me the amifox evaporated, and he let out a sad breath.

"Did you want to eat something? We can finish this later." He looked like he might be starving - literally.

"Not yet. I need to get my story out. I've been alone for too long. Talking to someone feels good." A wry smiled lifted his lips.

"Then, please continue."

He nodded, crossing his hands over his stomach. "Mizrabel said her debt to Lawson was finished, and she left him and me alone."

He shook his head. "Those within the witch mists betrayed my brother as well. They took the lyre from him and cursed the land of Polonias into a deep sleep." He looked at me. "You understand the time difference between Earth and Polonias?"

"Kind of. A day here is a hundred days there."

"Right," he said, closing his eyes a moment.

"After a while, I lost track of who had me or why, but I'm pretty sure I stayed on Earth. If I've been trapped in the lyre a decade here, how long have the people in Polonias been asleep?"

"A long time," I said, thinking their land was like a fairy tale from childhood. "It was Mizrabel who told me to find the glass lyre," I added softly.

He nodded. "That's only a little surprising. She's a sorceress of great power, and she has no ties to the kingdom. Before everything happened, she and I were friends. If I had to guess, Lawson discovered her secret and threatened her."

He turned away. "It's the only reason I can think of for her to betray me." He tilted his head, giving me a strange look. "She didn't seem particularly thrilled about killing me." He held my gaze. "I know Mizrabel's secret. Do you?"

I wrung my hands together, thinking I might, though I didn't know why it was a big deal. "Do I what?" I asked, feigning innocence.

But truth blew through my mind like the spells that were coming to me recently.

He took me by the elbows. The stench of him nearly knocked me over. "Come on. Don't play coy. You must know."

I crossed my arms. "What do you mean?"

"You are Mizrabel's daughter." He said the words matter-of-factly.

I pulled away. "How would you know that?"

"I told you she and I were friends." He looked down.

"I knew she was pregnant. When she delivered you, I helped her.

Minutes after you arrived in the world, you glowed like the sun, and we thought you might burst into flames." He smiled at the memory.

"It was scary at the time, but then you settled and looked the same as any other child of Polonias." He winked. "But you aren't like anyone else. You know that, right?"

I pulled from his grasp. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He shook his head. "Even though I considered her a dear friend, she never told me who your father was." He went back over to the bean bag and fell into it with a sigh. "I helped her get you into the human realm."

Fury roared through me, so strong it made me a little afraid. "Why didn't she want me? Was I so awful?"

"Dear Cinderella, no. But you were the answer to an age-old prophecy that bespoke of a fiery girl destined to save Polonias. The king, my father, believed that meant he would be overthrown. He kept a careful eye on every child born in the land as did his father before him and so on back for many generations." He heaved a deep breath.

He looked pale, but I had another question. "Why would he - Lawson - take on your name, though? Why not just say you died?"

"I was born first. That means I'm the rightful heir to the throne. Also, I was well-loved by the people. The people didn't like Lawson. They knew him for what he was. Corrupt, cold-hearted, and unfeeling. On the other hand, they knew that I cared a great deal for everyone - from the tiniest water sprite to the biggest tree troll." He squeezed his eyes shut.

I needed to get him some food. And a shower.

"So they would've been less upset to see Lawson go? Is that what you're saying?" I was glad we moved away from Mizrabel being my mother and the prophecy.

It was still too weird.

I had a mom and a dad here in Salem. They weren't perfect, but I

loved them.

"Basically," Leo answered.

He pressed the palm of his hand against the side of his head. "Whoa, now I'm out of limbo, I'm really, really hungry. Does Earth still having amazing burgers?"

"I'll make you something," I said, not fully listening. My mind went over his words, and I recalled the way Mizrabel looked at me with a mixture of happiness and worry.

The king didn't seem to like me.

I wondered if he knew the truth about what Lawson had done.

If I had to guess, I would say he did.

"Do you think the king knows?" I took Leo's hand and helped him stand.

He leaned on me. "I hope not, but it's certainly possible. We'll have to broach the subject with care."

I opened the door and led him through the Museum of the Supernatural and up the stairs to the kitchen. "If that's true, the kingdom is going to be a mess."

Leo sighed, "The kingdom is probably already a mess - " He paused and closed his eyes.

"Has it really been ten years since you ate anything?"

"I think so, which was fine when I was in limbo, but now?" He put a hand to his stomach, and I could tell he was woozy. "Let's just say I could eat."

"Sit," I said when we reached the kitchen, pushing him onto a stool. "I'll be right back."

"Sure." He looked like he might pass out. There was a bowl of fruit on the granite countertop. I grabbed an apple and set it in front of him.

"Eat this. It'll help until I can whip you up a burger."

He took a huge bite. "Thanks," he said as apple juices leaked down

his chin.

I smiled and ran down the hall to Professor Pops' office.

I slid to a stop, surprised the door was open. Professor Pops looked up.

"Tell me." He took his reading glasses off his nose and tucked them into his pocket.

I stepped into his office and quietly shut the door. "There was someone in the glass lyre. It's - " I shook my head. "Have you heard of the queen of Polonias having twins?"

Pops' face broke into a smile.

He leaned forward, clasping his hands together. "As a matter of fact, I have."

"Why didn't you say anything before? I might've been a little more cautious."

He gave me a skeptical look. "Really?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I would've at least asked about it."

Professor Pops nodded. "I'm sure you would have, but it wasn't my story to tell."

Always a teacher, I huffed inwardly.

I sat in the chair, even though I knew I needed to get back to Leo - the real Leo. "Mizrabel is my real mother."

Professor Pops let out an excited laugh. "Good. This is good. You're finally beginning to understand and see your real life."

I stood, shocked. "You knew?" I sputtered.

"You know. You - you - Does Snow know?" Did he know who my father was too?

Pops nodded. "As soon as Snow became the vampire queen, she learned about Polonias, including the land once had twin princes, but one was lost, even believed dead."

"Holy merde. I'm going to have to have a serious effing

conversation with Snow the next time I get a chance." I crossed my arms. "Right now, I need to feed a starved prince. Is it okay if I use your kitchen to make him something?"

"Have at it."

"Oh, and can I borrow a bathroom and some clothes? He really needs a bath." I waved a hand in front of my nose.

"Of course." He grinned. "Take whatever you need."

I leaned over the desk and hugged him. "Thank you, Pops."

OceanofPDF.com

THEY ARE BROTHERS

I WASN'T the greatest cook.

Okay, I sucked at all things cooking related, but I was at least proficient enough to put some ground meat in a pan and slap it on a bun.

I got him some chips, a pudding cup, and a large glass of ice water too.

When he finished it all, he was still hungry, so I made him a banana split.

That finally satisfied him.

"You are amazing," he said when he sat back in his chair.

I resisted the urge to blush.

It dawned on me after I put the cherry on the banana split that I could've used magic and made him a meal fit for a prince.

Too late now.

"Thanks," I said, putting the empty bowl in the sink and rinsing it.

He got out of the chair and came around, taking my hand. "I guess we need to go confront my father and brother."

I held my nose. "First, I think you need a bath."

If I had to be around him, he needed to smell tolerable.

Also, I wasn't ready to give him up just yet.

I hated to admit it, but I enjoyed being around him.

He gave off a quiet, kind aura.

Without a doubt, he and I would be friends.

Plus, he knew my real mother.

Despite myself, I wanted to learn more about her.

"You'll make a stronger impression if you don't look like that." I indicated his raggedy and stinky clothes, and he chuckled.

"I suppose you're right." He allowed me to pull him toward the bathroom.

He began unbuttoning his shirt.

I shifted uncomfortably. "You got it from here?"

"I'll manage." He laughed as he closed the door.

After a moment, I thought of something and knocked.

"Hi," I said when he opened the door.

He watched me with what looked like amusement in his eyes.

"Remember to hurry. Your brother, uh, Lawson, is around. He was helping me look for you. He could be back anytime, 'kay?"

His eyes went dark. "He's here?"

I nodded. "When Mizrabel told me to seek the glass lyre, he insisted on coming."

Leo gritted his teeth together. "Got it. I'll hurry." He shut the door.

I sat and leaned against the wall next to the bathroom, crossing my legs, waiting.

Quilla appeared and sneezed.

She wore a bright lavender dress with red and purple accents. Her hat was black, along with her tights, and her shoes were a shimmering red.

"Cinderella," she said, touching her nose to mine. "What's going on?"

I swallowed and shot a sideways glance at the bathroom door.

"N - Nothing. Just waiting for Leo to finish his shower."

She leaned her ear against the door. "There's definitely something going on. I can sense these things."

She put her hands on her hips. "Tell me. It's better if I know. Maybe I can help." She sneezed again.

I pulled a tissue from my pocket and handed it to her.

She waved it away, sniffling. "I don't need that."

"You sure?" I asked, covering up a worried laugh.

"Psshhhh." She sneezed again. "A - Are you sure everything is alright?"

"Yes, Quilla. Of course." I heard the water shut off.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

"I'm going to do a spell here in a sec. You better vanish before I give you a sneezing fit."

She pondered what I said, but only for a moment. "Fine. Tell Leo I said hello, won't you?"

"Of course, I will."

"Okay. Bye." She disappeared, leaving behind a sparkle of magic.

The real Leo opened the door.

He was obviously naked, his bottom half covered by the door.

He was lean and extra pale but still handsome - I tore my eyes from his glistening chest and met his grinning face.

"Where are the towels?"

"Just a sec." I ran to the linen closet and grabbed him a towel.

"Here. Sorry about that." I closed the door and turned, burying my face at my embarrassment.

I couldn't help but wonder about magic and cleanliness, and my mind went into the gutter for a second.

I heard him whisper some words, and then he immediately opened the door. "Ready," he said, looking dry and nicely dressed.

He had on a pair of jeans, loafers, and a navy blue rugby shirt. His hair was still damp and flipped up against the bottom of his collar.

It occurred to me he could've magicked himself a towel too.

"Now what?" he asked, standing next to me.

"I - um, am not sure." I thought about Mizrabel and the way the

king treated me.

I thought about Leo or Lawson or whatever his name was.

"Cinderella," Quilla popped in between Leo and me.

I screamed.

Leo fell back.

"Twixit. I knew it. I knew it!" She sneezed as she flew back and forth between us. "He's the lost prince." She clapped her hands with glee.

I put a hand over her mouth. "Quilla, keep it down. We have to keep Leo's return a secret."

"Oh, I know. I've always known."

She clapped again. "I can't believe you did it. I'm so proud of you, Cinderella."

I gaped at her. "What do you mean you've known?"

She huffed and put her hands on her hips. "Obviously, I knew who was inside the glass lyre."

"You could've told me," I said, stomping my foot with indignation.

Her eyes got soft. "If I told you the truth, would you believed me?"

We went down the hall toward the front door.

"I like to think so," I said and sighed.

Honestly, I wasn't sure.

With my hand on the knob, I turned to Leo and Quilla.

"What are we going to do about Lawson? He'll be back anytime. I don't think he'll be thrilled to see him." I pointed at Real Leo.

Quilla gave Real Leo a look.

He nodded while I stood there like a fool, wondering what was going on.

"It's simple, Cinderella. We need to go someplace where Lawson and his father can't find us until we want them to."

"Agreed. Where's that?" As I said the words, a swirl of magical dust

enveloped the three of us.

Professor Pops' house blurred and disappeared.

We were in a vortex of fuzzy color as though we were speeding through space.

The only sound was the rush of the wind.

Real Leo took hold of my arm and held fast.

The colors changed from bright to dull to gray and finally to black.

The world around me stopped moving and came into focus.

Old, knotted trees grew all around, their branches tangled together above so I couldn't see the sky.

The only sound was our breathing.

Quilla had a blue light in her hand, and it gave the creepy forest an unnatural glow.

The floor was covered in dirt and moss, and directly in front of us stood a door. It was carved into a giant tree trunk.

"Where are we?" I whispered.

Quilla stepped closer, as did Leo.

"It's the only place Lawson and his father's magic won't reach us," Quilla said.

The door flew open.

Mizrabel stood there, looking like she wasn't surprised to see us.

"Not to worry, Cinderella. You're safe with me," she said.

"Forgive me if I don't believe you," I said, unbidden anger rushing to the surface.

OceanofPDF.com

THE TRUTH

"GET INSIDE, AND WE CAN TALK." Mizrabel ushered us through the door to her home.

I expected the place to be small, a hovel, something that went along with the inside of a giant tree. I figured the furniture would consist of branches, leaves, and a fire pit.

Instead, the home was spacious and airy with billowing white curtains, a chandelier made of different colored gems, and a large open kitchen.

The floors were black marble.

A lush black rug sat in the center of the living area and surrounded by dark red furniture and a slate gray fireplace.

"The bedrooms are down the hall through there."

She looked at Quilla.

"You won't be staying here. You and your strange fashion sense will go back to wherever it is you came from."

She flicked her finger, and Quilla's outfit changed from lavender to a putrid green.

"Oh no, you don't," Quilla said with a sneeze and changed her outfit back. "Rude."

Mizrabel snorted and altered it again.

"Twixit. That's enough." Quilla switched it back.

Mizrabel walked into the kitchen and flicked her fingers, transforming Quilla's outfit again.

"Merde, are you two serious?" I looked at Leo, who smiled.

Mizrabel cleared her throat. "You're right, Cinderella, dear." She snapped her fingers, and Quilla's clothes went back to her special kind

of crazy.

"I'm out of here. If you need me, I'll be around." Quilla disappeared, leaving behind a trail of sparkles.

"Finally," Mizrabel said, walking to the fireplace.

She moved her hand, and a fire ignited, the heat striking my skin immediately.

Then she turned toward us. "Have a seat, you two." She clapped her hands together as we sat on the red sofa. "It's good to see you both again."

I glanced at Real Leo, uncomfortable and decided I should just call him Leo.

"I'm so sorry, Leo," Mizrabel said, and honestly looked sorry. "He was going to kill her. I didn't have a choice."

"All is forgiven," he said and meant it.

She didn't apologize to me. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"Good." She sat on the chair next to us.

"So, what's our plan? How are we going to get Cinderella on the throne where she rightly belongs?"

"Whoa. Hang on. I don't want to rule." I thought about Snow and all the trouble she was going through, trying to make everyone happy, keeping the peace between creatures, even between realms.

It was a lot to handle.

I didn't want that.

I wanted to marry Gabe and have lots of babies.

Where and when we would do those things, I wasn't sure.

The human realm didn't want me, and Gabe didn't like Sharra.

Leo looked at me. "It's your destiny. You were born for this." His eyes shone with admiration. "You found me and set me free. I'm positive you can do anything."

My heart started to beat faster, and I felt the heat rising to my face.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence." I patted his knee. "It isn't that I don't think I can do it."

I crossed my legs. "Of course, I could." I paused and smiled. "It's that I don't want to."

Leo's mouth fell open, and Mizrabel glared.

"So those humans raised my daughter to be a cowardly guttersnipe. Great." She began pacing, her long black robes swishing through the air.

The way she spoke to me about my parents pissed me off. "At least they cared. They took care of me. Fed me."

When they weren't busy, I thought. "You didn't want me. You're the cowardly guttersnipe. So, like mother like daughter, I guess." I went to the door, desperate to leave.

Leo came over to me. He gently took my hand. "Where you go, I go, Cinderella."

It was a sweet gesture, it really was, but I needed some time by myself. "I need a time-out." I yanked the door open.

Leo looked ready to stop me, but I slammed the door in his face and started walking.

I took a deep breath, moving over to a group of trees, toward a stream, I could hear a little ways off.

Prickly bushes scratched at my skin, but I ignored the pain, too overwhelmed to care.

At the stream, I walked along the edge.

There was a waterfall a little ways off.

When I reached it, I found a rock and sat, watching the water rush, allowing the noise to drown out all of my anxieties.

"Cinderella?"

I turned at the high voice, fear shooting through my belly until I saw it was Polly. Her rose petals opened so I could see her face.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, and then realized I somehow

made my way to Polly's spot.

I didn't remember using the traveling spell or doing anything that would allow me to move quickly from one place to another, so maybe Mizrabel lived close to her.

Polly rose out of the ground and came over to me, beautiful rose petals still a part of her, but she held a human form. "Is everything alright?"

I let out a ragged breath. "No, it seriously isn't."

She sat at my feet and leaned an arm across my knees. "Tell me about it."

Her kind eyes shone with her genuine concern.

I gave her a kindly smile; positive she didn't want to hear my problems.

She had her own issues, like that she was dying.

I noticed signs of wilting along the edges of her hair along her eyelashes and fingernails. My problems were pitifully lame compared to hers.

Lawson told me it was the Sickness killing her but was the Sickness and the witch mists the same thing?

Everything was so complicated.

As I watched her sweet face watching me, I knew I had to help her.

Whatever the truth, I wouldn't let Polly down.

"I mean it, Cinderella," she said after several long moments. "Tell me what's going on."

So I did.

It was cathartic, sharing all of my fears and doubts with a virtual stranger.

When I was finished, she took my face between her hands.

"You poor, poor thing."

"Thanks, Polly. I feel much better." I gathered my wits and went

over to the waterfall.

The spray misted against my face and arms.

"What are you going to do?" she asked gently, coming to stand beside me.

I noticed the slight hunch of her shoulders. Last time I saw her, there was a spring to her step. Now there was nothing. "Well," I said, plastering on a smile, "I'm going to do whatever I can to help you get better."

"I appreciate that." She grinned, clasping her hands together, and bouncing up on her toes.

My heart skipped a beat, then several more.

"What must I do for Polonias to be healed?" My throat was dry and scratchy.

A part of me still resisted, but there was no use. I needed to save her.

Polly took both of my hands in hers and turned me to face her. "It's easy, I promise."

I nodded. "Okay. Tell me."

"You must be married here at the heart of Polonias, where I was born, and it must happen before the winter solstice."

"Or what?" I swallowed.

"I'll die, Cinderella, as will Polonias. It's a horrible truth, but the truth just the same." She shook her head, forlornly.

"I can't hold off the Sickness much longer. I feel it overpowering me even now."

My heart pounded so hard I thought it would burst through my chest. "You said, saving you would be easy."

She nodded. "It is. You already know who you should marry. He knows as well."

A sob choked off any words I might speak. I wanted to cry.

"I want to marry Gabe," I said quietly, touching the bracelet against my wrist.

"I know, Cinderella, and you should." She batted her long lashes, watching me from beneath them.

"But there are laws against it. Some say our love is a sin." I choked on the words, hating to even say them out loud.

"That doesn't mean it is the wrong choice. Bring Gabe here." She smiled knowingly. "Your love will be safe here. Polonias isn't part of Earth."

I shook my head. "I don't think he'll come. He has a job to do on Earth. Protecting humans from scary creatures like us. It's sort of in his DNA just as magic is in mine."

I blinked back my anger, a flicker of hope burning in my chest. "But I could try. I could go to him and ask."

This was the twenty-first century.

I was waiting for Gabe to ask me to marry him, but I could ask him.

On Earth, our union wouldn't work, but here?

I knew it was a long shot.

He was the leader of the chayot.

Their sole purpose was to protect humans, but maybe he would do it for me.

"Go," she said kindly. "I'll be waiting."

"I'll hurry." I touched the hourglass and thought of Gabe.

OceanofPDF.com

ROYAL WITCH

OceanofPDF.com

WITCH MISTS

"WILL YOU MARRY ME?"

I said the words aloud, hoping practice would calm my nerves and steady my beating heart.

It didn't.

So I tried again. "Gabe, my one true love. Will you marry me?" I grunted. That sounded stupid.

I had just left Polly and was clinging to the hourglass charm dangling from the chain around my neck, desperate to reach Gabe. Before entering the witch mists, my thoughts were clear and focused on Pops' mansion since that was where Gabe lived when he wasn't out saving humankind from evil supernaturals. But then I became distracted by all I needed to do.

"I'll marry you." The voice came from within the witch mists and I started. Those words were the first I understood coming from the beings who dwelled within.

I turned at the sound, slowly seeking out the one who spoke. Though I knew I wasn't supposed to.

Leo - no, Lawson - advised some of the creatures within wanted to trap unsuspecting travelers.

"Who said that?" I squinted, searching for the culprit, my steps slowing.

All I saw were shadows.

Dozens of voices began whispering at once.

Some I understood.

Others I didn't.

The shadows pressed against my body, like wet clothes clinging after an unforgiving summer rain. My throat constricted and my pulse

raced erratically.

Everything muddled and I couldn't remember where I was or why I was there.

I couldn't think of anything, except for the mists and the darkness and sleeping. I no longer caring about -

"Gabe!"

His name brought me out of my stupor.

A quick perusal of my situation revealed I was no longer standing but lying on the ground within the mists.

Thick, thorny vines, so dark green as to appear black, enveloped my body, squeezing and constricting like a killer cocoon.

"Sereth habitha," I said with as much might as I could muster.

As the words of my spell filtered into the air, the vines withered, and I broke free.

Tearing away the ashen husks, I rushed to stand.

The voices started again, begging me to stay, to remain with them, to save them.

I ignored the words, grabbing hold of the hourglass.

Closing my eyes, I thought about home. That was the only word I could conjure.

Home. Home. Home. I repeated the word over and over in my mind.

After several minutes, the voices subsided, as did the cloying thickness.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes to see I was back in Sharra, inside my room in the castle.

Relieved, I fell onto my bed.

I knew I needed to hurry.

Polly and Polonias were depending on me, but I was exhausted.

Peace enfolded me and I closed my eyes.

Part of me longed to sleep.

Just for a minute or two.

The rest would rejuvenate my mind.

Since traveling back and forth, I couldn't remember the last time I got more than an hour or two of sleep.

My hands at my sides, I drifted -

A knock jerked me awake. "Yes," I said, my voice thick with fatigue.

"Miss Croswell, it's Heather. Are you busy?" She sounded upset.

"Just a minute." I had no idea what day it was here.

"Revealith daneth." The words left my lips slowly and a calendar appeared in front of my face, showing me it was Wednesday.

"Aneth," I said, and the calendar disappeared.

At the full-length mirror I used several spells to clean up and change into a light pair of jeans and a cranberry peplum top with short sleeves and a scooped collar as well as a pair of tan ankle boots.

The hourglass dangled from the chain and I tucked it inside my shirt. Getting ready like this wasn't the same as a shower, but it would have to do.

Next I said the spells to fix my makeup and hair, keeping my makeup sparse with mascara, gloss, and some blush, and my hair tied back in a loose braid.

The whole thing took less than two minutes.

"Miss Croswell." Heather knocked again.

I gave my reflection a once over, noting my blue eyes were still vivid, but tired.

"You'll do," I whispered to my reflection, and threw the door open, planting a smile on my face. "Hi, Heather. I wasn't quite ready."

"Sorry," Heather said, looking down at her hands. "I know we aren't supposed to disturb the teachers at their rooms, but - " She swallowed,

glancing sideways.

Two more girls appeared in the doorway beside her.

Kaylan and Kimberly, her roommates.

"We really need to talk to you," Kaylan said.

"About what?" I closed the door and headed down the hall, deciding I should take the conversation to my office.

The hall was big enough all four of us could walk side by side. Heather on one side of me and the girls on the other side.

"We know Heather identifies as transgender and we don't care. She's our friend and we want her back in our room," Kaylan said with a huff of frustration.

Kimberly nodded her agreement.

I smiled, glad the girls were so good to Heather. "I appreciate you letting me know. We will take your feelings into consideration."

"Good," Kimberly said, coming to Heather's side and taking her arm. "It isn't the same without her."

"You have some great friends," I said, looking at Heather and she agreed.

"Still, we have to take into account the whole school. There are rules and while I agree she should be with you, there are those who don't feel the same way. It's better Heather is moved, and the school not come under condemnation then the school get closed, right?" I met the gaze of each of the girls.

"Miss Croswell is right," Heather said, her voice soft but resolute.

I squeezed her shoulders. "We are still working out the logistics, but for now, I think the arrangement of you sleeping in your own room is the safest option." I gave her a serious look.

"Not only for your friends, but for you as well." I was thinking of Sera and the way she and Heather interacted.

She nodded. "Thank you, Miss Croswell."

"How's things between you and Sera?" We reached my office and I

unlocked the door by touching the handle.

It was enchanted so only my hand could unlock it.

Pretty ingenious, I thought.

"Fine," she said. I sensed she meant she was freaked out, insecure, neurotic, and emotional, but I kept that to myself.

I knew what happened when adults got into the middle of teenage squabbles without allowing them to work on them first.

Of course, Heather's case was a serious and sensitive matter.

At the same time, I didn't want her to feel isolated or humiliated either.

I rolled my shoulders.

"Good," I said as the girls followed me in.

When I was seated, they were still looking at me expectantly.

"Is there something else?"

OceanofPDF.com

SCHOOL DANCE

KIMBERLY STEPPED FORWARD.

"It's about the Halloween dance." She was tall with curly blond hair. Her lips where painted red, but she wore no other makeup.

"Oh?" I shuffled around some papers on my desk, waiting for them to go on.

The last two years, on October thirty-first, the ballroom was transformed into something out of a scary movie with blood spatter on the walls, cobwebs dangling from the ceiling, eyeballs floating in the punch bowl, and ghosts flitting around the frigid air.

The decorations were awesome, but change was good too.

"We know the student body officers are in charge, but we were hoping to do something a little less blood and guts and more light and fun," Kaylan chimed in.

She didn't wear make-up either, except her for lashes, which were thick and black, accentuating her brown eyes and brown skin.

Her hair haloed her face in a short afro.

"Yeah, like based on the movie, Hocus Pocus," Kimberly added.

Kaylan and Heather agreed.

"We could still do the haunted house, but just change up the dance decorations," Kaylan added.

"That's the dumbest effing idea I've ever heard."

The girls turned and I stood in time to see Sera lean against the doorframe. Her red hair was a tangle of waves, framing her creamy freckled skin.

The girls were in uniform - white shirt, plaid skirt, knee highs, and black shoes.

Somehow Sera made the outfit look edgy.

Her sleeves were rolled up to her biceps, her blouse unbuttoned more than was appropriate and her skirt was shorter than the others.

Sera was a conundrum.

When we first met, she was angry at everything, throwing her magic around like it was axe and everyone around her the target.

Briefly, I saw a kinder and more timid side of her and now, she was back to being a troll. I figured her truth was somewhere in the middle.

She was probably more confused than me. Perhaps she needed to see a therapist.

Some of the other students did and that seemed to help.

"Why is it dumb?" I asked, trying not to let the girl get under my skin.

"You must know the origins of Halloween." She came in, pushing past Kimberly and Kaylan, completely ignoring Heather, and sat across the desk from me.

There was another seat available, but the other three girls remained standing.

"It's about honoring the dead, not dancing, pigging out on junk food," she paused, eyeing Kimberly before continuing, "and dressing up in slutty costumes."

"What are you saying?" Kimberly snapped, crossing her arms defiantly.

Sera rolled her eyes. "Two things. Lay off the junk and pick a costume you aren't busting out of."

"What makes you think I would wear something like that?" Kimberly put her hands on her hips, glaring down at Sera.

She was indignant and rightly so. "You don't even know me, Sera."

"Because I've seen your pajamas. You might as well go to sleep naked."

"What's it to you what I wear?" Kimberly took a menacing step toward Sera, a flash of magic electrifying her fingertips.

"Why not use dark magic and actually bring someone back from the dead?" Sera's eyes twinkled with mischief. "That would feel more authentic and be damn cool."

The other girls paused, and the magic on Kimberly's fingers went out.

"Is that even possible?" Kimberly asked.

"Of course it is. Look at this place. Anything is possible," Sera said, every word filled with anticipation.

I needed to nip this line of talk in the bud immediately. "That's enough, ladies." I moved so my body was in front of Kimberly's. "Sera, you need to learn how to use the magic you have before you mess with something so sinister it could get you killed."

Sera looked away, but I got the feeling she wasn't going to let this go. Yet another thing I needed to mention to Snow and Coco.

"Get to class," I ordered Sera, pointing at the door.

"Whatever," she huffed and walked away.

When she was far enough down the hall, I faced the others. "You three need to get to your classes as well. I'll let Ms. Redding know your thoughts on the dance and we will see. Okay?" I casually crossed my arms. A move my mom used to make when I was a teen. "But remember, if you want real change, you need to step up."

"What do you mean?" Heather asked.

"Become a student body officer. Don't just expect change. Be the change. Got it?" I said quoting something I heard a long time ago.

Sheesh, I felt like a grownup.

When did that happen?

They mumbled their agreement and left, heading the same direction as Sera.

In the hall I heard Kimberly call Sera a bitch.

I couldn't completely disagree, but I couldn't agree either.

Sera grew up hard and fast as did many of the kids here.

But everyone dealt with adversity differently.

While Sera seemed to be acting out, I had to wonder what she would become. Something told me she was neither super nice nor a total bully.

After sending a magical note about the girls' Halloween idea to Coco, I opened a portal to Professor Pops' house.

I still needed to find Gabe.

The sooner the better.

Polly and the land of Polonias were depending on me.

Outside Pops' front door, I climbed the steps, took a deep breath, and knocked.

Waited. Knocked again. No one answered.

"Great." I descended the porch, debating where to go next when the door opened.

"Cindy?"

"Hi, Gabe." Ignoring his obvious surprise, I ran into his arms, hugging him tightly. "Just the person I was looking for."

He held me close, and I breathed in his scent, like baked apples and cinnamon. Home.

He was my home.

I hugged him tighter before meeting his lips with my own.

He tasted like cinnamon too.

As my tongue explored his mouth, I found his gum.

"What's up?" he asked, walking back into the house.

My hand in his, I followed him past the grand entrance with the enormous staircase leading upstairs and into the kitchen.

"I'm making breakfast. You hungry?" he asked.

"Starved," I admitted, clasping my hands together. Now that I was

with Gabe and we were alone, I was nervous about what I needed to do.

Marriage was a big deal.

"Pancakes and bacon or a ham omelet?" he questioned, heading to the refrigerator.

Both sounded amazing.

"Omelet." I loved me some pancakes and bacon but thought the protein would do me good.

Gabe nodded, getting the ingredients and setting them on the counter next to the gas stove.

As he whisked the eggs and warmed the pan, I licked my lips anxiously.

He noticed and paused. "What is it? Has something happened?"

"Kind of," I admitted.

"Well, then, give me the details." He suddenly sounded tired, but I ignored that, thinking only of Polly.

She was dying.

I had to help.

Taking a deep breath, I told him about Mizrabel, Polly, Lawson, and Leo.

When I was finished, I heaved another breath, held it several seconds before blowing it out.

"What can I do?" he asked, sprinkling chopped ham, shredded cheese, and scallions on the second omelet then folding it in half.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I decided to blurt it out.

"Marry me, Gabriel." My voice didn't sound like my own.

I swallowed, glancing down at my hands.

One of my nails was chipped. I studied it like it held the answers to all my questions as I waited for Gabe to respond.

Several long moments passed, and I couldn't take the silence any

longer.

I looked up.

Gabe smirked at me, sliding the omelet from the pan onto a plate before setting it in front of me.

His green eyes met and held mine. "Getting married will solve this Polly's problems?" He wasn't convinced. "Or are you that desperate to tie the knot?"

OceanofPDF.com

I flINCHED at both of his questions.

They were equally true but they were both important, too.

Gabe needed to understand the seriousness of the situation. At the same time, marriage was a big deal.

I knew that.

Millions of people struggled to make it work.

But for some damn reason, my marrying Gabe would save Polonias. How could that be a bad thing?

Frustrated and stalling, I picked up the fork and cut into the egg before shoving it into my mouth.

And sighed. The food was so good.

"Where did you learn how to make omelets?" I asked, changing the subject while I collected myself.

He took a bite of his eggs, chewing slowly. "Chayot headquarters. One chayot in particular, Delphina, is very adept at great-tasting art. She showed me how to make them."

"Delphina?" I ignored the jealousy forming in the pit of my stomach.

While she had a beautiful name, surely she had wrinkled skin, sagging boobs, and short curly white hair.

He nodded before shoving a huge bite in his mouth and chewing.

"She's been cooking for the chayot a long time," he added.

See? I knew she was old. "That's nice. She definitely has skills."

We ate in silence.

I thought of all the things I could say to make him understand how important it was for us to be married as soon as possible, but each

time I opened my mouth to speak, nothing came out.

After he rinsed our dishes, Gabe came around to me, and took my hands. "I do want to marry you. Someday." A shadow crossed over his face.

"But not now. You know I'm not even supposed to be dating you. Just doing this," he paused, taking my fingers in his and shaking. "Touching you is against the rules."

"I know, but in Polonias you won't have to worry about the rules. It's not connected to Earth, so the chayot rules don't apply." I swallowed.

My heart pounded in my throat.

I was asking him to give up everything for me.

If he came to Polonias, he would no longer be leader of the chayot.

He would no longer have to worry about the humans and whether or not they were treated fairly.

He and I could start fresh there.

Sure, it would mean I would have to stop teaching at the academy, but I felt certain we could build a life together in Polonias.

"Thank you for asking, Cin, but I can't." He dropped my hands and went back around the island and began wiping down the counter.

Frustrated anger flared up. "You can't or you won't?" My eyes found the wings attached to the leather around my wrist.

He wanted us to be together forever. That was what he said.

"Does it matter?" he asked, pausing to give me a surprised look.

Desperation shot along my veins. "It does to me," I said, rising and coming over to him. "I love you and you love me. It shouldn't be so hard to choose me over everything else."

His face fell and he rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I can't," he said softly.

"Maybe in a year or two when everything settles down, but right now, I can't step down. Too many people are counting on me." His

green eyes caught and held mine.

There was love in them. I saw it, but his love wasn't greater than his job.

He loved me as long as I didn't interfere with what he thought he needed to do.

"I understand," I said, removing the bracelet from my wrist and placing it on the counter.

"What are you doing?" he asked when I turned to leave.

"You've made your choice." I ground my teeth together, telling myself not to cry, but tears filled my eyes anyway.

I didn't want to break up with him.

I loved him, but I also wanted to be the most important person in his life. I was competing with billions of humans. Their safety, their needs came before me and always would.

He took hold of my wrist. "Cindy." He spoke my name quietly.

"What?" I faced him, hoping he would see how much I loved him and recognize what a gift that was.

His hands cupped my face. "I do love you. Know that." He shook his head. "But I can't stop helping humans and frankly, I'm surprised you would ask me to. They need me."

I snorted, pulling away. "The humans need help, I know. But there are thousands of chayot available and willing to come to their aid. I need you. I love you. The two of us marrying and living in Polonias will save the entire land. You still get to be the hero," I added, putting some distance between us as I clung to the counter's edge.

If I let go, I might crumble into a ball and I couldn't let that happen.

He crossed his arms. "It isn't about being a hero. You know that."

"Do I?" I was done.

Asking him took every ounce of courage I had but I failed.

I'd hoped with everything in me he would say yes.

Now that hope burned into a bitterness difficult to swallow.

Gabe and I were over.

"I need to get back." Pulling the hourglass from my shirt, I hesitated.

The last time I travelled through the mists, I was nearly strangled to death by malicious vines.

"Cindy," Gabe said again, imploring.

The bracelet he gave me still rested in one of his hands.

His plea angered me.

Gabe be damned.

The mists be damned.

I thought of Polonias.

"Good-bye, Gabe," I whispered, closing my eyes.

In my mind, I thought of Polly sitting beside the waterfall, her petals even browner.

I kept my thoughts on her as I traveled through the witch mists.

There were voices, but I blatantly ignored them, concentrating on reaching the heart of Polonias.

The noise of the water crashing into the pond filled my ears and I knew I was there.

Back in Polonias.

My heart sank because I didn't have good news.

My failure would mean the death of all in Polonias.

Opening my eyes, I saw Polly.

She leaned against one of the boulders, allowing the spray to dampen her petals.

OceanofPDF.com

SACRIFICE

"I'm glad you're back, Cinderella." Polly gave me a small smile.

"You won't think so when I tell you Gabe said no." The words caused my already broken heart to fracture further.

"I am sorry, Cinderella, but there is still a way. Do not lose hope yet, sister."

"How?" I asked, wiping at my eyes, resolute in my willingness to do whatever it took to save her and this land.

That she called me sister didn't go unnoticed, but I thought perhaps it was a way of greeting others within the land and not literal.

At least that's what I wanted to believe at the moment.

"Your marriage to Gabe would have saved our land. He is your soul mate, regardless of what those above him say. I sense the truth of it. But had you never left Polonias, you would never have met the angel, which means there is one from this land you can marry. His name is -
"

Before she could continue, Leo pushed through the lushness of the forest surrounding Polly's secret spot.

He lifted a hand. "Is it okay if I come over?" He directed the question at Polly.

"Of course, your highness." She bowed slightly and stumbled.

I took hold of her elbow, steadying her, alarmed by how super light and easy she was to move.

Leo came forward, taking hold of her other elbow and helping her sit on the boulder. Spray from the waterfall dampened our skin. My hair became frizzy, I could feel it. Leo's hair turned wavy and made him even more handsome.

"She told you, didn't she?" he asked softly after a long while.

"Told me what?" The way he looked at me made my insides quiver.

He was exceedingly hot in ways Gabe wasn't.

At the thought of Gabe, the fractures deepened.

"I'm the man you should marry. Doing so will not only bring us lifelong happiness, it will save our land. Together we can rule Polonias in love and kindness," Leo said, a slight smile pushing up his mouth.

As he said the words, I felt their rightness just as I felt there was no way I could go through with it.

I hardly knew the man.

Why would I tie myself to him?

But if marrying him was the only way?

If doing so would save Polly and all Polonias, could I be selfish enough to say no?

He reached around Polly and held out his hand.

"Should we do it now? Once we are bound, the mantle of power will automatically fall to you and Polonias will heal immediately."

"But why me? Shouldn't the authority fall to you? You are the prince after all." I pulled away and Leo retreated, crossing his arms.

I didn't want to be queen.

Seeing all Snow went through for the supernaturals showed me exactly what I didn't want. I liked teaching at the academy.

That was good enough for me.

"The Loyalor bloodline is adequate, but if they possessed true power, then the Sickness would have no control over the land or me. You, Cinderella, come from the original bloodline. It is you who can accomplish this task." Polly looked at her hands before meeting my eyes. "I am sorry, but it's true."

I shivered at her words as something dawned on me. "You called me your sister. If I have the power to save the land and free you and it from the Sickness, then why don't you?"

Her smile was sad as she studied me. "We are sisters, that is true. When I was born, it was for the purpose of forming Polonias. Our parents were narcissistic enough to think that fashioning a realm separate from Earth but still attached wouldn't have any consequences."

A tear leaked onto her cheek. "They were wrong. After a few hundred years, they saw I was beginning to die and knew they needed to produce another heir to save Polonias. By then, our father abandoned the land and our mother became Mizrabel, the sorceress. During those years, her hatred for our father grew, but she still loved him and agreed to create another." Her eyes caught and held mine. "You are that creation."

"You were born solely to be the heart of this land?" That disgusted me.

How could Mizrabel and my father be so cruel?

She nodded. "But do not feel sorry for me. It's been such a pleasure to be part of this land for so long. I have loved it - "

Her voice trailed off and she gave Leo a sideways glance before her cheeks tinged with color.

"My only sadness is I didn't get to experience what it means to fall in love, marry, and have children of my own." As she spoke, she looked at her hands. "It's my one regret."

"That really stinks," I said, taking her hand in mine. "It wasn't right, what our parents did to you. But - "

"Because," she said, cutting me off.

I was going to ask why our parents sent me to Earth.

Polly seemed to read my mind.

"Once you were born," Polly continued, "our father saw just how far gone Mizrabel was. It was he who took you from our land and sent you to the human realm."

She smiled sadly. "He did it to keep you safe."

"It worked for a while, I guess, but if I knew about you, about Polonias, I could've helped sooner." I shook my head, frustrated with all that was happening to a people and land I knew nothing about.

They were my people though and Polly was my sister. "So Leo and I must marry?" I asked, getting us back to the subject.

I still had unanswered questions.

The biggest? Who was my father? But knowing wouldn't change anything.

"Yes," she said. "The two of you married will heal the land completely." Polly pleaded with her eyes, asking me to do the unthinkable and marry a man I hardly knew.

I didn't want to. I wanted to marry the man I loved, but he didn't want me.

So, if Polly said marrying Leo would heal her and Polonias, then I would do it.

Because the alternative - standing by and letting an entire land as well as my sister die - was out of the question.

I only wished there was something I could do to fulfill her one regret.

She deserved to fall in love.

I didn't know how, but I would find a way.

After more than a thousand years of serving Polonias, helping her was the least I could do.

"Cinderella?" Leo asked, bringing me from my thoughts.

He moved, kneeling in front of me, holding out his hands.

I slid my fingers between them and felt warmth followed by a shock of emotion similar to the white hot cold I felt with Lawson, but with him it was a lot stronger.

I flinched, my eyes watering at the sensation.

"A part of me had doubted, but this - " His voice trailed off as he considered our entwined hands.

"It really is you. The one we've heard about since before anyone can remember," he said, his voice awed. "Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

I glanced at Polly. Her face shone with hope.

That blasted word again.

"A bond is there, not as strong as the love that would have developed between you and Gabe, but your marriage will work, Cinderella," Polly said through a coughing fit.

Purpose filled my veins.

I would do this.

It was worth the sacrifice to save her.

"Yes," I said.

The time was right.

Perfect, in fact.

"Let's get married right now."

OceanofPDF.com

POLLY'S PARADISE

IF I HAD to pick a place to be married, this wasn't bad.

It wasn't Paris. Definitely not.

And that was okay.

In a lot of ways, Polly's garden was even better.

The magnificent waterfall colliding into the crystal clear pool, to the lily pads with lilies floating along the surface, to the way the lush grass danced lazily in the soft wind.

There were dozens of flowers growing wild along the edge.

Trees surrounded this place - the heart of Polonias.

Polly's Paradise.

That was what I wanted to call the place.

Beyond the physical beauty was Polly herself.

My sister.

Her sweet disposition radiated around her.

She belonged here.

That much was obvious.

Maybe it was because it was part of her.

Then there was Leo.

We were nearly strangers.

He didn't love me any more than I loved him, but this wasn't about love.

It was about magic, and it seemed our magics bound together would save Polly.

I needed to go through with this.

"You'll marry me?" Leo asked again, and I saw the doubt behind his

eyes.

He thought I would say no.

"It's the right thing to do. So yes. Yes, I will marry you." Nausea formed in my stomach.

What would Gabe think when he found out?

Not that it mattered.

I asked him first and he turned me down.

Polly was dying and Polonias was dying with her.

This was the only option.

As soon as I agreed to marry Leo, Quilla appeared.

"Cinderella." She clapped her hands excitedly, sending magical sparkles into the air, which caused her to sneeze.

She sniffled. "It's a wonderful day."

Leo stood and pulled me up with him.

"Hi, Quilla." It was apparent she knew much more than she ever let on, making me curious about her fairy godmother status.

But I didn't have long to debate as she pulled me into a quick hug before turning her focus back to Leo.

He smiled at her. "Nice to see you again, Quilla."

My fairy godmother became nervous and excited and a giggly girl all at once.

It was adorable.

"Let's get you out of those ugly human clothes and into something that befits a king of Polonias," Quilla said.

"Work your magic," Leo replied, smiling down at her.

I didn't know whether to take offense or not. I was a big-time fan of many human clothes. Fashion was my forte.

Quilla spoke several magical words and Leo's outfit changed from jeans and a tee shirt to dark gray pants, a navy and gray jacket, and black boots that stopped at the kneecap.

Leo looked down, watching the transformation of his clothing in awe.

"Nice," he said. "I'm thinking I need a haircut as well."

"Absoltootinlutely," Quilla said, walking around him like one would study a sculpture. "Not too short, but something to enhance your square jaw and handsome face."

The two of them were funny to watch together.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Traxes freemus." As soon as the last word left her lips, his hair shortened to just below his ears.

The rapid change in his appearance surprised me, but he looked good.

Just like his brother, though Leo's eyes were softer than his brother's, kinder, yet at the same time confident and powerful.

"What do you think?" Leo asked, turning in a circle, his arms out.

"Not bad," I admitted.

I would've said more, but Anna and Belle, the twin rabbits that created one whole woodland fairy, hopped out of the forest at Leo's back.

When they moved past the prince, Anna came over to me and rubbed her furry side against my leg.

I leaned down and scratched behind her big ears.

Belle scurried atop Leo's shoe and pooped pellets.

"How charming," Leo said, shaking them from his boot.

Anna and Belle darted into each other, but before they collided, there was a flash of light and poof! They changed from two bunnies into one woodland fairy.

"Anna Belle." I clasped my hands together, happy to see her.

When she stood, she bowed. "Please, just call me Anna."

To Leo, she said, "I'm so sorry about your footwear, your highness."

Leo's gaze showed surprise as he looked from the fairy to me and back again. "Anna Belle, that was you? I - " he ran a hand through his hair. "Don't worry about it."

It appeared Leo hadn't known she was cursed into two bunnies.

I sensed a story there.

One I would be interested in hearing, especially since Leo seemed so uncomfortable.

Anna Belle peered closer at him. "It is you. The lost prince. The king told us told us you were dead," she whispered, her face going pale.

Leo smirked without humor. "Surprise."

Anna blushed. "Where have you been? What happened?"

While Leo explained about being trapped in the glass lyre, I turned to Polly. "It seems we're going to have an audience for the nuptials."

She giggled and her petals changed from a pale pink to fuchsia. "That's good. Witnesses." She scooped a handful of water to her lips and drank.

Leo came to stand beside me. Anna was behind him.

"Should we start?" He took my hand in his.

Tingling magic skittered up my arm. "Yes, I believe we should."

I turned to Quilla. "Have you told anyone else? Leo returning was supposed to be a secret."

If Leo's twin brother Lawson found out, there would be trouble.

"I only told Anna Belle and - " she paused and put a hand to her head. "I believe I told Violet as well. She should be coming too."

"That isn't good, Quilla," I said, butterflies fluttering in my belly. "I think we better hurry."

"Yes, let's get this ov - " Leo paused. "I mean, let's do this." He ran a hand over the back of his neck, only slightly embarrassed at his slip.

His words were like a knife to my guts.

This wasn't how I saw myself getting married, not even in my wildest dreams.

"Someone's coming," Anna whispered.

Rustling echoed through the forest.

There were snapping twigs and the sounds of growling and panting.

A big cat appeared.

A leopard wearing a lilac dress.

She walked on her hind legs briefly before falling onto all four.

I covered my mouth to keep from laughing as I relaxed.

"It's Violet," Polly said, hugging herself.

The historian let out an anguished roar as she came through the trees, stopping beside Leo.

"Violet, it's good to see you," Leo said.

"I've waited for this day for many years," she said and bowed, her spectacles sliding down her nose.

"So, I was right, and everyone knew about the twin princes but me." I placed my hands on my hips, pouting.

"It wasn't that we were keeping secrets on purpose, Cinderella. Most of us didn't have a choice." Violet pushed her wiry glasses further onto her nose and adjusted her dress.

"Everyone is here, I believe. Shall we begin?" Polly asked, placing herself in front of Leo and me.

OceanofPDF.com

WEDDING A STRANGER

ANNA, Violet, and Quilla stood off to the side of us.

Quilla kept wiping at her eyes like a doting parent watching her only child being married off.

I found it comforting since my actual parents weren't here.

Polly cleared her throat. "Now is the time of restoration. Our land has waited for this day for more than a thousand years. To be a part of this mending is - "

"Twixit. By all that is magical, wait!" Quilla jumped in front of Leo and me, waving her hands in the air.

Sparkles flew everywhere, causing her to sneeze.

"What is it?" I asked, concerned.

"You aren't dressed for a wedding."

I looked down at my basic human clothing and shrugged.

"It's okay." It really wasn't.

I wanted to look gorgeous on my wedding day even if I wasn't marrying the man of my dreams.

But how I looked wasn't as important as getting married and making things right in the land.

"It is not okay." Quilla stomped her foot, speaking words I didn't understand.

As she spoke, my clothing was replaced by a stunning dress.

Airy and whimsical, the color was the palest blue, almost like ice, the bodice strapless and formfitting and covered in pale blue gems.

The skirt was long, gauzy, and had three tiers with thousands of small, pale blue gems attached.

"It's beautiful," I said, turning from side to side, trying to take it all

in.

I lifted the dress, so the hem came up to my shins. I was barefoot. "Shoes?"

"Ah, yes. I saw a pair in your closet." Quilla spoke the words to a spell and they appeared on my feet.

They were the ones Lawson sent via his magic to Polonias. It felt like forever ago even though it wasn't.

Leo chuckled. "Are those made of glass? They're pretty."

"They are," I said, smiling. "Thank you." I let go of my dress.

"What about my hair?"

"On it," Quilla said. She spoke some words and I felt my hair rearrange itself. Before I had the chance to ask for a mirror, one appeared in her hands. "What do you think?"

My hair was up in a chignon with a black ribbon wrapped around the top of it.

Around my neck still hung the chain holding the hourglass, but there was also a black ribbon choker with a diamond seven point star dangling from it.

The charm was lovely, and I reached out to touch it.

"You've outdone yourself, Quilla." I lifted the star between my fingers, feeling the vibrations of magic within.

It was obviously a very powerful charm. "Where did this come from?"

She gave me a brilliant smile. "Me. As your fairy godmother, I had to get you something as extra special as you are," she said and sneezed heartily.

Quilla clasped her hands together. "Another time, I'll tell you where I got it and how best to use it."

"Thank you," I said, taking her hand.

She smiled, pleased with herself.

"Can we continue now?" Polly asked, moving so she was in front of us again.

Quilla covered her face with her hands. "Yes. Sorry, Polly."

"It's alright," she said to Quilla.

Then she turned to Leo and me. "Take each other's hands."

Leo wrapped his hand around mine and winked, then held up his free hand. "May I say something first, Polly?"

"Please." She smiled, obviously smitten by him.

"Cinderella, I don't really know you, and we're kind of going about this backward, but - " He ran a hand through his hair. "After the ceremony is finished, I think we should celebrate. Throw a ball. Invite everyone. Let it be a new beginning for all of Polonias and for us. What do you think?"

My broken heart fluttered to life. He really was a good man. Marriage to him would be full of surprises, all of them exciting and wonderful.

Leo leaned forward and whispered in my ear. "Also, there's something I'd like to ask you."

I shivered at the way his breath disheveled my hair. Thoughts about what he would ask crossed my mind, but I pushed them aside.

"I can't wait." I gave him a small smile.

He grinned and kissed my cheek. "You look stunning," As he spoke, his lips brushed against my ear, sending sparks of icy heat into my veins.

I bit down on my bottom lip to keep from sighing.

"Okay, Polly. I'm ready," Leo said, stepping back.

Polly started speaking again.

"Now is the time of restoration." She gave Quilla a pointed look.

My fairy godmother blushed.

"Our land has waited for this day a thousand years. To be a part of

this mending through marriage is something to be treasured."

She glanced first at Leo and then me. "Magic created this land and magic will heal it. That magic is the essence of each of us, of the trees, the flowers, the sky, the water, and every living thing. With the return of Cinderella and her marriage to Leolas Loyalor, our land will become whole again."

Quilla let out a sob as Violet purred happily.

Anna blinked back tears.

"Leolas, Prince of Polonias, do you take Cinderella into your heart? Will you protect her, love her, cherish her, and do all in your power to bring her happiness?"

Leo swallowed.

I wondered if he was nervous but when he answered, his voice rang out confident and clear.

"With all that I am, I will. I do."

My heart hammered against my ribs.

Hard and fast.

I was suddenly afraid.

This was really happening.

I was effing getting married to a stranger.

Polly glanced at me. "Cinderella, Healer of Polonias, do you take Leolas Loyalor into your heart? Will you protect him, cherish him, and do all in your power to bring him happiness?"

It felt like rock shards were in my throat. "I - Yes, I do. I will," I said, my voice raspy.

A dark cord appeared and wrapped itself around Leo's wrist and mine.

I felt my eyes go wide as wonder coursed through me.

On my ring finger, what looked like a tattooed vine wrapped itself up to my knuckle.

I saw the same thing happening on Leo's ring finger.

There was a strange pulling from inside me, near my heart.

When it finished the pull became stronger and it brought tears to my eyes.

I looked at Leo.

The tattoos on our ring fingers flitted back and forth between silver and gold. His stayed on silver. Mine twined half silver and half gold.

A large diamond appeared in the center, sparking in the sunlight.

"Wow," I whispered.

"It's beautiful, though not as lovely as you," Leo whispered.

"Sweet talker," I said, my voice shaking. I knew I was doing the right thing, but that didn't stop my nerves.

Polly smiled, showing her childlike teeth. "As the heart of Polonias it is my honor to pronounce - "

"Stop," Mizrabel shouted.

She appeared at the top of the waterfall, seemingly floating above the center of it.

Holding out a hand, she sent a bolt of magical lightning into Leo.

He flew backward, the bond holding us together severing.

OceanofPDF.com

TRUST IS FOOLISH

"LEO!" I cried as pain tore through my insides.

I worked to ignore it, focusing on the fallen prince. His head had smacked hard against a rock and he lay on the ground, his eyes closed. I knelt in front of him, placing his head in my lap, trying to think of a spell to heal him.

One came to mind and I raised my hand as the words formed on my lips.

"Silence," Mizrabel said, shooting a blaze of magic at my chest.

Unprepared, for the impact, I fell back.

"Do not speak," she yelled, twisting her hand and causing my mouth to seal shut. She floated down, getting closer to us.

I was confused. Was Mizrabel on my side or not? It appeared all she knew was how to betray those she was supposed to love.

Quilla and Violet were huddled together, and I wondered why until I saw Polly behind them. They were protecting her.

Anna jumped into the air, her wings beating against the air as she moved toward Mizrabel. She held something in her hand, but I couldn't tell what it was. "You will leave Polly and Cinderella - "

Mizrabel turned her hand clockwise and Anna doubled over as she cried out in pain.

I tried to help, carefully laying Leo on the ground beside me before I stood. There were multiple spells I could use against the woman who supposedly birthed me but my damned mouth wouldn't work.

Still, I knew some magic could be used without words and I held out my hand and thought of stopping Mizrabel.

She glanced over at me and smiled as she turned her wrist again, squeezing her fingers into a fist.

Anna's wings stopped beating and she fell to the ground.

"Her demise is on your hands, child," Mizrabel said.

Tears streamed down my face as I crawled over to the woodland fairy. Her skin was ashen, the color of death. Her eyes were still open, but there was no life behind them.

I closed them tenderly. I'm so sorry, I thought.

Violet roared and ripped off her encumbering dress.

Then she went after Mizrabel on all fours. She was a big cat. As the historian leaped in the air, Mizrabel spoke some words and Violet turned to stone before crashing to the ground.

When she hit, the stone body cracked into four pieces.

"No," I screamed, breaking through the spell and rushing over to Violet. I hadn't had the chance to know her well, but I guessed she would've been an invaluable friend.

Quilla glanced over, giving me a sad smile. "Save this land, whatever the cost, Cinderella," she said and turned to face Mizrabel.

"What do you think you can do to me? You're allergic to magic and you have no wings. You are nothing but a glorified sparkler," Mizrabel said, sending a bolt of magic from her hand.

My fairy godmother countered it and sent it back. "I can stop you," she said before sneezing.

Mizrabel cackled, preparing to send another blast of magic at her.

"Don't hurt her," I shouted, rolling onto my knees, trying to stand, but my blasted shoes caught on the hem of my dress and I went down again. "Please." With my skirts practically around my neck, I stood, huffing angrily.

"Isn't that sweet. My daughter already cares for the people of this land." She gave me a mocking smile and sent her magic into Quilla with such ferocity, it shot into my fairy godmother's chest and came out the other side.

A final breath escaped Quilla before she fell to the ground.

"No. No. No. No. No." I grabbed hold of my head, weeping uncontrollably.

In a matter of seconds, three of my newly acquired friends were dead.

Leo was probably dead too, and Polly didn't have long left either.

Tears fell from my cheeks like rain as grief filled every crevice.

"How could you?" I cried. "Leo trusted you."

"Trust is foolish," Mizrabel said, her eyes blazing with fury. She pushed her sleeves up past her elbows and came at me.

I crawled over to Leo, thinking perhaps if I kissed him, even though he was unconscious, I could still somehow save this land.

A final effort before my mother killed me.

At the moment I reached Leo, the king burst from the forest followed by the false prince, Lawson. Both were on horseback and they rode toward Leo and me, stopping just short of trampling us.

I looked over at Polly.

She was on the ground, clutching her stomach as though Mizrabel had taken a piece of her when she killed our friends.

Another wave of grief washed over me, but I fought it back.

Giving in wasn't an option. Not now.

"Get back in the ground," I hissed at Polly, worried Mizrabel would come for her next.

I still didn't understand why she and the king and Lawson were doing this.

If Polly died, Polonias died, and the only way to save the land was Leo and me marrying. Everyone should be on board with this plan. Not so.

Polly raised her head and looked at me. "I will do as you say, but our mother won't kill me. At least not yet. Her goal is revenge." She pressed one hand into the dirt and roots surrounded her, pulling her into the ground before she settled like a lily blooming on its pad.

I heard her sigh with relief at being surrounded by the earth once again.

That her suffering was lessened, if only momentarily, eased my tension slightly.

The king stepped over Polly and came to stand directly in my path, blocking out the light. He glared down at me like I was a thing to be scraped off his boot.

Mizrabel moved to stand beside him, her features a haze of triumphant malice.

"You see, King Loyalor. I told you she was here."

"Very good, Sorceress," the king said, sliding off his horse. His face was red with anger and he blustered, "But are we in time? Has she married the boy?"

His eyes glittered with such resentment, it almost felt palpable, and for the briefest moment I debated using the hourglass around my neck to get out of Polonias.

But I knew I couldn't.

On shaky legs I stood, rolling my shoulders back and lifting my chin, though my bottom lip wouldn't stop quivering.

My friends are dead, I thought, as another wave of grief overwhelmed me.

I swallowed down the sob building in my throat and gripped my hands into fists.

"I was just in time," Mizrabel said, crossing her arms like she was superior in every way to those around her.

"Good." King Loyalor slapped me. "How dare you come into my kingdom and try to usurp me? Did you think you wouldn't be met with resistance? That because you're from the supposed original bloodline, you can just waltz in here and take what is mine?"

Stars danced before me as I went down, my eyes watering as the pain exploded along my jaw and cheek.

My hand went to the place where it burned, knowing there was a handprint.

I wanted to be strong. To stand up to him, but my body shook with devastated sadness.

It was like the blow jolted everything I was holding back to the surface.

Burning beneath the sadness was anger. At him. At Mizrabel. At my father, whoever the hell he was.

I wanted to destroy them all for what happened.

OceanofPDF.com

SAVE THIS LAND

"GET UP," King Loyalor shouted, grabbing me by the arm, shaking me. "Answer me."

"Keep what's yours. I don't want any of it. All I want is to save Polly and this land and if you were smart, you would want that too," I spat, shoving away all emotions but the anger.

"She's lying," Mizrabel said. "She only came here to take her place as queen of Polonias."

My moth fell open in shock before I quickly closed it.

Mizrabel was playing the king.

That much was obvious.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked her, ignoring the king, even though my arm pulsed with pain where he still held me.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm here to help the king save his land from the likes of you," she said.

"You're the one who's lying," I said between clenched teeth and knew without a doubt Polly was right.

My mother wanted revenge. Did she want Polonias destroyed? It seemed that she did.

Turning my focus back to the king, I tried to relax. "Mizrabel doesn't care about you or Polonias. Let me save this land and then I promise you can keep it. All I want is for Polly, Leo - " My voice trailed off as I thought of Quilla, Anna, and Violet.

Part of me didn't want to believe they were gone.

Mizrabel killed them like they were nothing.

My devastation turned to anger, and I fueled it until it was brimming. "I don't care about ruling."

"Is that so?" His grip on my arm loosened as doubt clouded his features and he looked at Mizrabel.

"Don't believe a word out of her deceitful mouth." Mizrabel sidled up to him, pressing her body into his. "You know the truth, your majesty," she said lustfully. "Let's talk privately a moment."

The king released me and the two of them went over to the edge of the falls.

With the roar of the waterfall in the background, I couldn't hear what they said and didn't care.

I needed to know that Leo was alive. He was still on the ground with Lawson standing beside him, like he was in some sort of a trance. I had a momentary worry that Lawson killed his brother.

"He's alive, Cinderella," Polly whispered from beneath the petals of her flower. "The ceremony won't be complete until you and Leo kiss. That seals the magics and gives you the power to heal Polonias." She poked her head out from the center of the petals.

"I'll make it happen." I glanced over at King Loyalor and Mizrabel.

They were still talking, their backs turned.

Before moving away, I had a thought. Like a magical lightbulb pinged on inside my head. "Why can't you marry Leo? You like him, don't you? And you know him a lot better than I do."

Polly was my sister after all, which meant we were from the same bloodline. And if she married Leo, that would also solve her desire to marry and have children.

"I - " she paused. "I never really thought about it," she said, tears filling her eyes. "But no." She shook her head. "I am the heart. If I married, I would change as would my power. Our land might die anyway."

I wondered whether that was true. Why couldn't she still be the heart and marry? "I guess," I said, knowing there wasn't time to figure out the truth.

"Okay." As stealthily as possible I snuck past Lawson.

"Leo," I whispered.

His chest still rose and fell, giving me hope.

Our lips were inches apart and I leaned down, closing the distance between us.

"No, you don't." Lawson grabbed me around the waist and threw me away like trash on garbage day.

My knees hit the ground and pain shot up my legs as my skirt tore.

"Wake up, Leo" I shouted, hoping he could hear me.

There was blood in his hair and on the grass beneath him.

He moaned and one eye fluttered open before closing again.

"Quiet, daughter." For the first time I saw the hatred blaring within Mizrabel, like the glamour finally fell away and her true feelings were revealed.

I shuddered, trying to pull away.

"Tie her up and get her on the back of my horse," the king ordered.

Before Mizrabel could respond, he turned his anger on Lawson. "Why didn't you kill your brother like I asked?"

"I - " Lawson looked around like he wasn't sure what happened.

To keep him from discovering what Polly had done, I screamed.

When they were looking at me, I held out my hands to the king. "You don't want to kill your son. And you don't want to kill me. You need us to keep the Sickness from taking over the land." This was old news.

I already said as much, but I had to try something.

Mizrabel was on me in two steps, lifting me off the ground by the neck.

I clawed at her hand.

Gasping and choking, I pleaded with my eyes, hoping this was just another ruse, that once again she was tricking the king and Lawson,

and was on our side.

"I can kill her now and be done with it," Mizrabel said, her grip tightening.

"No. She must be made an example," the king said. "The people need to watch her die so they know I will not tolerate dissention. You do your part and find another way to save us."

Spots danced before my eyes and the edges turned black. I would be unconscious in seconds and all would be lost. The words to a spell filled my mind and I spoke them as best I could. "Rua-tha grislin-gr we-nwillow."

As the spell filled the air, Mizrabel's eyes grew wide.

She released me, falling back.

"What have you done?" she demanded, studying her hands as they began to shimmer.

From my crumpled position on the ground, I watched as the spell took effect. I meant to keep her away from me, but it was doing more than that.

She was disappearing.

"How could you do this to your mother?" Her voice was laced with anger and fear as spears of light cracked through her skin like the rays of the sun shining through stormclouds before it set.

"She must suffer death in the magical fires of Evanoa," Mizrabel screamed. "It's the only way to stop her." With her final word, she was gone.

A hush fell over everyone. Even the waterfall seemed to quiet its rumble as we stood in stunned silence.

Lawson yanked me off the ground and held me to him. "It'll be a pleasure to watch you die," he whispered.

Then he cast a spell to bind my hands together before tossing me on the back of his horse.

"Bring your brother as well," King Loyalor ordered. "I'll deal with

him myself."

OceanofPDF.com

AWAIT MY FATE

AS WE MADE our way back to the castle, I could see Leo's eyes were open. He was watching me but said nothing.

What was there to say? We failed.

Several times I tried to utter words to a spell that would set me free, but they wouldn't leave my mouth.

Frustrated, I huffed. "What's wrong with me?"

Lawson chuckled. "It's the cuffs. They won't allow you to perform any magic."

"Figures." I sighed, wishing there was something else to do, but it seemed I was out of options. Merde. I was tres pissed and couldn't do a thing about it.

"You were supposed to be my bride. Now you'll burn. What a waste." Lawson glanced back at me. "Perhaps I can have my way with you before you die." His smile turned oily.

"That will never happen," I spat, disgusted.

He didn't speak again.

We rode through the forest, over a hill, and into a lovely meadow filled with pink and violet flowers. We kept going through the town built around the castle.

The streets were paved with stone.

Four wooden bridges went along the outskirts, passing over a river.

As we passed cottages, bakeries that smelled of freshly baked bread and cinnamon rolls, the townsfolk stopped what they were doing and watched.

No one spoke.

A giant fountain stood in the town square.

On it a statue of a boy who looked a lot like Lawson stood next to a girl. Both had an arm around the other's waist.

In their other hands they each carried a pail.

Water poured from the pails into the circular well below.

We continued on like ghosts, moving through town like the people weren't even there.

When we reached the other side, we crossed a drawbridge that led to the castle.

At the front doors, the king climbed off his horse and told the guard to take Leo away.

Lawson slid off his horse and carried me himself, throwing me over his shoulder.

I beat against his back and kicked my legs until he muttered a spell that left me unable to do anything but hang there like a dishrag.

No one stopped him or tried to help.

If someone noticed me, they turned away.

Lawson climbed several sets of stairs, puffing as he went, before traipsing down a hall and up another set of stairs.

At the top, he adjusted me on his shoulder before going to a door, which he opened before walking inside.

The room was thick with dust and darkness. Drapes covered the windows and grubby sheets covered the furniture. Obviously, the room hadn't been used in a while.

"Where are we?" I asked.

He didn't respond but went to another door where he climbed another set of stairs.

These were circular and narrow and my head kept bumping against the slick rock wall.

At the top, he opened another door. The interior was dark like the other one but didn't seem as dusty.

"Home sweet home," he grunted, yanking open a set of curtains.

Bright light shone in, allowing me to see the sparsely decorated room with a bed, a chair, and a small table.

"This is where you'll remain while we prepare for your execution." He dropped me onto the bed, his eyes raking over my body.

There wasn't much to see since I was still in my wedding dress, but his gaze made me feel dirty.

Like he could see through my clothing to what lay underneath.

My hands were still bound together with the unseen enchanted cords, but I moved my arms to try to cover more of myself.

Lawson smirked. "You should be afraid." He climbed on the bed, an arm on either side of my head and one knee on either side of my hips.

He tried to kiss me, but I turned my face away, pushing my hands against his chest.

"I'll take what I want and there's not a damn thing you can do about it." He pressed closer, grabbing my chin in one hand.

"You're mine to do with as I please," he whispered, pressing his lips to mine. "At least until you die."

I fought against him, but he weighed nearly twice what I did.

Without my magic, there was only one thing left to do. With as much force as I could muster, I sent my knee into his groin.

Pain crossed his face before it went white and he rolled off me, curling into a ball, moaning obscenities.

Grabbing hold of the covers, I used them to heft myself off the bed. I moved to the window, which was as far away from him as I could get in the small room.

A quick glance outside revealed I was at the top of the castle and the ground was a long, long way down.

"Don't you dare touch me again," I said, my breath coming in irregular bursts.

He gave me a look of pure evil as he got off the bed and went to

the door.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you burn," he said, slamming the door shut.

He locked it and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

Taking the hourglass from my cleavage, I thought of Sharra.

Of the beautiful land, my room there, and all of my things.

The magic began to work, but only for the briefest moment before I slammed into the wall.

"What the hell?" Undeterred, I lifted my dress and threw my leg over the window sill. Though the window was open, it was like an invisible wall was there, and I couldn't get out.

A sob of desperation racked through my chest.

Leaning against the wall, I stared out the window, trying to run through my options.

A slight breeze blew into the room, smelling of roses.

Below was the town.

In the distance, was the fountain of the boy and the girl in the center. People milled about. Some seemed focused on their tasks. Others meandered. Beyond the town was the hill, the forest and the heart of Polonias - Polly's Paradise.

"Help," I screamed. "Please! Someone! Help!"

Either no one heard me, or they pretended not to.

I stayed beside the window until my legs quivered and I fell to my knees.

Even then, I didn't leave the opening.

Soon after the sun set, a slot I hadn't noticed before slid open and a plate of food was pushed through before it sealed shut again.

It was vegetable soup, bread, and water.

It tasted good and I ate it all.

When I was finished, I climbed on the bed.

Exhaustion pulled my eyes closed.

Sleep would be a kind respite.

OceanofPDF.com

BURNED AT THE STAKE

I WOKE to the smell of smoke. I opened my eyes and saw I was tied to a stake.

A roaring fire blazed only a few feet from me.

People were standing around, gawking and whispering as they watched.

A bulky guard with beefy hands unrolled a parchment. His voice boomed out across the open field.

"Cinderella, by order of King Loyalor, supreme ruler over the land of Polonias, you are hereby sentenced to burn at the stake until such time as you are dead." He glanced at me, and through the billowing smoke I held his gaze. He cleared his throat. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Only one word popped into my head. "Merde." A curse word in French.

One of my favorites.

Truthfully, it was the only one I remembered.

The man rolled his eyes along with the parchment and stepped off the podium and into the noisy crowd.

"Gabe," I whispered before repeating his name in my mind over and over. "I need you."

Another guard shoved a torch into the fire, lighting it.

When it was fully ablaze, he moved toward my pyre.

My knees quivered with each of his steps.

Death was mere moments away.

"Don't do this," I pleaded, catching hold of his eyes with my own. "Please."

He glanced down at the wood under my feet before sticking the torch into it until flames appeared, then moved to another spot and did the same thing.

Noise from the crowd picked up. I suddenly noticed the rotten fruit in people's hands. A woman threw a tomato and it smacked me on the forehead, the juices leaking into my eyes.

I wanted to cry, to mourn my impending death since no one else would. Tears filled my eyes as the guard came around from the other side, tossing the burning torch onto the wood. It stopped just before reaching the edge of my dress.

"Ignithea," he said and the fire roared higher.

I wasn't ready to die, but I didn't see a way out of my situation.

If Gabe knew what was happening, surely, he would come for me.

At least I hoped.

Maybe he would be happy to be rid of me.

Smoke filled my nose and I coughed as my eyes watered and tears streamed down my face.

Frightened butterflies beat frantically in my belly.

Memories - some recent and some from long ago - careened across my mind.

I thought of Gabe and wondered why I wasn't enough.

Lawson appeared through the haze wearing a cruel smile. "After you die, I'll make sure no one remembers your name." His arms were crossed, and his feet were hips-width apart.

He intended to stay until I was burned alive and witness the whole thing.

I couldn't meet his gaze and focused on the magical flames swirling around my feet, scorching my dress and my shoes.

The heat became so unbearable I wished I could shrink from it but moving wasn't an option.

I was bound to a stake. Several spells came to mind and I shouted

them, but the magic did nothing to the fire or my situation, like the blaze had melted away my magic.

The crowd laughed and jeered, pointing at the crazy girl in the fancy dress.

"I'm so sorry," I cried out.

Sorry for my friends dying and sorry I couldn't save them.

Sorry for letting Polly, Leo, and all those in Polonias down, though they didn't know it.

The taunting from the crowd got louder and I knew the end was close.

I thought of my adoptive mom and dad.

They would be sad I was gone but wouldn't know what happened.

I knew they would miss me, and I would miss them too.

I thought of Snow, my best friend, and my ex-angelic boyfriend and wished things between us were different.

My students at the academy came to mind next.

Heather, Sera, and the others.

I thought about Professor Pops, of the other teachers, and about how much I enjoyed shaping young minds.

As the fire caught hold of my dress, I lifted my chin, the only part of my body I could move, and defiantly waited for the end, wishing it wouldn't be painful.

Knowing I would suffer and thinking perhaps I deserved it since I hadn't been able to save Violet, Anna, and Quilla.

As their faces appeared in my mind, I cried out.

Whatever came after death, I hoped I would see them again.

I closed my eyes as the fire melted my dress and burned my skin. It was more than I could bear, and I screamed out in pain.

From the haze of my suffering, I heard a roar followed by shrieks of fear.

All I could think was they were disgusted at seeing the way my skin flowing from my bones.

I screamed again and again, hoping it would end soon.

"Ecudous!"

At the word, the flames vanished, but my skin still burned, and I sobbed in agony.

"Make it stop! Make it stop!"

"Just who the hell do you think you are?" Lawson asked, sounding like the entitled asshole he was.

"Oratheth subdueth," the other male voice commanded.

His words filtered through my pain, like a dream I could almost remember.

Then the pain was gone.

A healing balm overtook the agony and my skin felt cool and refreshed.

At the sudden change, I opened my eyes.

A man wearing a fifteenth century surcoat with a hood covering his head had Lawson by the throat and lifted him in the air.

Lawson's feet dangled like he was a puppet without strings.

"You will not harm another soul," the man said.

There was a snapping sound as he broke Lawson's neck.

Then the body landed in a heap at the stranger's feet.

I blinked several times, unable to believe what I witnessed. The man had saved me and murdered Lawson in less than a minute.

"My son! You killed my son," the king cried from a distance as he began flinging black magic at the man.

With the flick of his hand, the stranger flung the magic back at the king who fell to the ground and didn't move again.

The royal guards came at the man next.

Dozens of them, but he defended himself as though they were

nothing more than annoying fleas.

When they were all down, the man turned to me.

"We need to get out of here," he said. "Refusith," he added, and the bonds holding me broke.

I fell to my knees, fumbling as I worked to get off the smoking pyre.

My rescuer stepped onto the wood and took hold of my arm, lifting me like I weighed nothing and helping me onto solid ground.

"Thank you for saving my life," I said, rubbing at my sore wrists and ankles.

My voice was shaky and hoarse from all of the smoke I inhaled.

"Of course," he replied.

As he spoke, some of his face came into view, but not enough that I could make sense of what I saw.

He turned away and let out an evil laugh before addressing the remaining onlookers.

"All of you would do well to open your eyes to the destruction your king is bringing forth. Go back to your homes and ponder whose side you wish to be on." As he spoke, his eyes swept the fearful crowd. "In your hearts, you already know the truth. Stop turning a blind eye and fight for a change!"

People were weeping and moaning now.

The man let out a disgusted breath and faced me.

"Let's go." He wrapped an arm around my waist and we lifted into the air.

"Who are you?" I asked, unable to believe we were flying and wondering how.

"In Polonias I am known as Stryker, the keeper of the witch mists." He didn't elaborate further and I didn't press.

He didn't look like the type to suffer questions either.

We floated past the town and all of the houses, the hill, and through the forest.

When we arrived in a meadow on the other side, Stryker brought us down.

"Stand clear," he said, pushing me away even as he moved farther from me.

When he was twenty feet away, his body began to shimmer.

Before my eyes, Stryker transformed into a golden dragon.

"Abernathy?"

OceanofPDF.com

STRYKER

"HELLO, CINDY," he said, breathing out two puffs of smoke.

I shook my head in shock, unable to believe my eyes. "What the hell? Is it really you?" Part of me wondered if I died back there and this was some kind of afterlife dream. I hadn't seen the dragon in two years, since he helped me save Snow's mom. After our return, he simply vanished.

"Yes, child, it's really me." Like a cat, he curled himself into a ball and rested his head on his front paws. "It seems your life is still crazy. I thought after you saved Ariel and began teaching full time, you would settle down a bit. Perhaps even marry your chayot boyfriend. Obviously, I was mistaken."

"Obviously," I said, crossing my arms.

He chuckled, sending twin clouds of smoke from his enormous nostrils.

"How did you get here? How did you know I was in trouble?" I wiped the soot and tears from my cheeks before rubbing my palms on the bodice of my dress.

It had a really rough day, but it still seemed to be in one piece.

"I've been alive a long time. I've seen many realms and worlds begin and end. Polonias is relatively new. I like it. The fairies treat me like I'm royalty. They like to polish my scales. It tickles." He closed his eyes, making a purring sound. "I knew you were in trouble because we are connected, you and I."

Connected? I guessed it had something to do with The Eye of Abernathy, the spell book I was given when I first discovered I was a witch. "Oh," I said. After everything that just happened, I was shell shocked. I couldn't figure out why the dragon seemed so calm about

what occurred. "You killed Lawson," I blurted. Over the last two days, so many had died. In my mind, all of their deaths were needless. "Why did you do that?" I didn't like Lawson and I was glad to be rescued, but killing him? It was so final. What if he could have been rehabilitated?

"The boy was wrong. There wasn't an ounce of good left in him. His death saved the lives of many." Abernathy opened one eye, licking his chops before settling down.

"They're all dead," I said, falling to my knees on the grass as my body tumbled into the fetal position. The memory of friends' deaths washed over me, drowning me in sorrow. And though I was parched, that didn't stop me from sobbing for many, many long minutes.

Abernathy let me get it all out without a word. When I was spent, I dragged myself over to the pond and drank before rinsing off my face and arms. Feeling a tiny bit better, I searched for Polly. We were in her garden. When I left, she was in the earth, her petals keeping her safe. I didn't see her now.

"Have you had enough?" Abernathy asked quietly, opening his eyes and studying me not unkindly.

"Enough what? Death. Yes!" I sat on a rock and glared him. "What are you doing here?" I was thankful he came. Definitely. But why? How had he known I was in trouble and why did he care?

He nodded. "I don't like death either, but Lawson got what he deserved, and I don't regret my decision." His golden eyes were unflinching, and I shuddered. "And I would think my presence here was self-explanatory. You were in danger and needed rescue, so I came."

"Who told you I was in trouble?"

"It's a good question. One I will answer when the time is right." He closed his eyes, letting me know he wouldn't say more.

Damn dragon!

I tried another tactic. "So what do you know about all of this?

About Polonias dying? About my marriage to Leo? About Polly?"

"Quite a lot, actually." Abernathy yawned, flashing all of his sharp teeth.

"Then tell me," I said, trying to hold in my fear and anger and sadness. "Please," I added belatedly.

"Polonias is different from Earth. It was created with a heart, just as you and I were. In the case of this world the heart is a living, breathing, beautiful creature."

"Polly. Yes, I know. Our parents created this world and her. My mother is Mizrabel. Blah. Blah. Blah. Tell me something I don't know. Like who's my father? Then I'll know who's to blame for this mess," I said, tucking some wayward hair behind my ear. It was wet and sticking to me face.

"Since you're unwilling to listen, perhaps you should tell me what you know," Abernathy said, his voice quiet.

"Fine." I explained about Polly, Leo, and why he and I needed to marry. Abernathy listened intently and I was surprised. I half expected him to close his eyes and start to snore. When I finished, the dragon blinked.

"You haven't completed the ceremony. Kissing Leo will save this land as you say. Finding him should be our top priority." The dragon stood, shaking himself. "Your husband might still be in danger. If the king hasn't killed him yet."

"He isn't my husband," I said, sounding defensive. I really didn't want him to be. "But he is a friend and I would very much like to save him." I stood too, adjusting my blasted skirts. They needed to go. "Verity homelith," I said. Jeans and a tee shirt as well as Chuck Taylor high tops replaced my dress and glass slippers. The attire made me think of Snow. She would be proud of this outfit. It's practically all she wore during her sophomore year at Salem Academy.

"Climb on," Abernathy said.

I only hesitated a moment before using one of his legs as a step

and gripping his scales to heft myself up. When I was settled, he leaped into the air. Though I wasn't normally a fan of flying, I appreciated the crisp and clean breeze. It was rejuvenating and I took a deep breath, though I worried the townspeople would see the giant flying dragon and sound an alarm. After several moments, I realized no one was about. Not even a single guard at the castle. It was like a ghost town and I guessed they were probably mourning the death of their prince.

"The fate of this land goes all the way back to how Polonias was created," Abernathy said, his deep voice choppy against the wind. "This world possesses a heart, a living, breathing heart, as you know. But she's more than that. Her feelings, her desires, her happiness and sadness flow into this world and into its people, linking everything and everyone. Polly gives them, you, and all of us life. At the same time the connection allows her to know everything and everyone. Because of this continuous ebb and flow the people of Polonias feel things more intensely than they would on Earth. That is why here you feel so much for your friends, even for Lawson, and especially Leo, though you've only known them a short time." His chuckle whipped against the air.

I listened intently. Did Polly love Leo? Was that what he was saying? "Is that why she must spend time in the ground?"

"It is. Doing so fosters her connection."

"Interesting," I said softly. It was more than interesting, actually. It was fascinating. And it made sense. It explained so much. Part of them existed in me and part of me existed in them. But then - "How can the people not know King Loyalor lied, that he and Lawson intended to do Polonias harm?"

Abernathy smacked his lips but didn't answer.

"Abernathy?"

"Deep down they know. But it's difficult for people to rebel against wrong, even when they know they should. In a lot of ways the people

are numb. The Loyalor family ruled Polonias a hundred and five years before the curse fell over the land, causing it to sleep for a thousand more. While the Loyalors' rule hasn't been the greatest, it hasn't been bad either."

"There's so much I don't know about this place and it's my home," I said, softly as I watched the town and the castle come into view.

"Before the curse, a prophecy was revealed stating one whose power came from the original family would be born and would save Polonias," Abernathy continued without acknowledging my sadness.

"Are you saying that's me?" I studied his fantastical golden mane before gazing out over the beautiful town.

"So it would seem," he said, but didn't elaborate. The dragon was infuriating.

"But if my mother - if Mizrabel comes from the original family, then why can't she save Polonias and her own daughter as well?"

"Because the magic needed to heal the land doesn't come from her side of the family tree. It comes from your father's."

My pulse quickened. "And do you know my father?"

"Of course I do."

OceanofPDF.com

TO THE RESCUE

ABERNATHY LANDED on a patch of grass behind the castle. Again no one was about.

"Where is everyone?"

"In Polonias, when a member of the royal family dies, everything shuts down and the people go into seclusion until the funeral." Abernathy lay down on the grass, crossing his front paws and resting his head on top.

"But then how will they know when the funeral will be?" His answer seemed too easy.

"It's always the same day and the same time and will be held in the grand hall of the castle."

"Does that mean there won't be anyone guarding Leo?" That gave me a ray of hope.

"There shouldn't be. Be ready, just in case." He smacked his lips. "Leo is in the cellar. Enter through those doors there." He indicated a set of double wooden doors just off the castle, near the base, angled into the ground. "Off you go. Rescue your husband, Cinderella."

"I - He isn't my husband." My thoughts were everywhere as I slid off his back and went over to the doors.

"If you say so," the dragon said.

"Will you wait?" I didn't want to go alone.

Abernathy stood, and I thought he would, but then he flapped his wings.

"I'll be around when you need me, my child," he said, and took off into the sky.

The sun was setting, but there was still enough light to watch the vine tattooed on my finger was already fading, and I guessed our bond

was weakening as well.

Leo and I needed to seal our marriage with a kiss as quickly as possible.

As if to enunciate the urgency, the ground began to shake, scattering the leaves and causing the shutters to shake. Was it an earthquake or something worse?

I didn't ponder further but quickly used a spell to unlock the door before opening it.

With only a moment's hesitation, I went down the stairs.

They seemed to go on forever, the air getting chillier.

A stench like stale water and dead fish lingered.

"Gross," I said, wrinkling my nose. "Lumia." At the word, a ball of light appeared, illuminating the long hallway.

Steeling myself, I moved slowly. "Leo," I called softly, searching within the cells on either side. They were empty and my heart sank when I reached the end. "Leo," I said a little louder.

There was another hallway turning left, leading to another set of stairs. Down at the bottom, I opened another door.

With each step, my fear increased. What if this was a trap?

"You can do this," I said aloud.

The stone walls were covered with moss and leaked water where the ceiling met the wall. It was so cold now, I could see my breath, and that made me worry.

If Leo had been here two days, he might be frozen.

At the single door, I glanced inside. Someone lay in the center of the cell. Even in the blue witch light he looked bad.

"Leo," I whispered and ran forward.

He moaned lightly. "Cinderella."

Using magic, I unlocked the door and went to him, rolling him on his back.

"I'm here," I said, brushing some hair off his face. "You're going to be alright."

He coughed and his breathing rattled like old cans tied together.

"Ho - How are you alive?" he asked.

Even as sick as he sounded, I could hear the surprise in his voice.

"How did you find me?"

I pulled his head into my lap. "I had help from a friend," I said, stroking his cheek.

"I - Do you have any water?"

I didn't, but I knew a spell. "Miras." Water filled in my hands. I brought it to his lips. "Drink."

He drank until my hands were empty.

I filled them again and he drank until they were empty again.

"Better?" I asked when he was done.

His hair was matted, and dried blood caked a portion of it. His shirt was torn and it hung off his shoulder, and there was a large gash in one thigh.

Blood soaked the pant leg. It didn't look like it was still bleeding, thankfully.

"Yes." Leo tried to sit but grabbed hold of his ribs and fell back.

"We need to get you out of here. Can you move?"

"I don't know." He tried to stand, but flinched, letting out a howl of pain.

"Why didn't you use your magic to heal yourself?" Now that the ropes were gone, it wasn't blocked for me.

"My father took it from me," he said, wincing as he hobbled into an upright position.

"Bastard." I stood back and examined him.

Part of me wished I felt something other than friendship for him.

During our vows, Leo said we would be happy together.

I didn't doubt that.

He and I could make a marriage work.

But I wanted more.

Not just the icy hot feelings I received every time Leo and I touched.

I wanted - fire.

I wanted Gabe.

Exhaling my frustration, I shook the feeling away.

The damned angel didn't want me.

"Let me fix you up. Hold still." I started with his head and worked my way down. When I was finished, I magicked him some new clothes.

Then I stepped back and examined my work.

He looked like a model.

"How do you feel?"

"Much better," he said, placing his hands on my hips and pulling me to him.

I smiled, knowing this had to be.

Our kiss would save this world. But -

"I have an idea," I said, placing a hand over his mouth.

It was my left hand and I saw the vine tattoo was nearly gone.

"What is it?"

The ground shook again, sending dirt and debris down around us.

"Let's get out of here." I took his hand and led him out of the cell, up the stairs, down the hallway, up another set of stairs, and outside.

"Talk to me," he said, when we were safely out of the cellar. "Cinderella, what is the matter?"

I looked at him. "Do you love me?"

He looked away a moment before taking my hand. "I barely know

you, but I believe, over time, we can fall in love."

Giving him a bright smile, I squeezed his hand.

"Let's go find Polly." With the hourglass in one hand and my arm around Leo's waist, I thought of her waterfall and her beautiful paradise.

With the magic we made great time.

Polly was out of the dirt and seated beside the pond, hunched over, her bare feet swinging in the water.

"We don't need to be here to kiss. Anywhere will do," Leo said, his eyes lingering on Polly.

"I know, but I have a plan." I knew he wasn't in love with my sister, but he loved her, and I felt confident she loved him too.

How could I stand in the middle of a love that could be beautiful if given a chance to grow?

"Come with me."

OceanofPDF.com

IT'S MY TURN

POLLY HEARD us coming and glanced over her shoulder.

A smile splayed across her lips but didn't reach her eyes.

"Cinderella. Leolas. It's good of you to come. It won't be long now," she said, her voice soft, her eyes lingering of Leo's face.

I could have just kissed Leo and had the whole affair over with, but while I was in the fire, about to be burned, a thought came to me.

And I knew as I stood there that my plan would work. "Listen, Polly, I have an idea."

She turned her body so one leg was draped on the rock. I sat beside her, pulling Leo down with me.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well - " I didn't know how to begin so just blurted it out. "You love Leo," I said, blatantly putting it out there.

She sucked in a breath but didn't deny it.

I hurried on. "And since you and I are sisters, that means if you married Leo, it would save the land just the same as if I married him."

"We already talked about this. Polonias needs a heart." She coughed, her shoulders shaking violently.

Leo ripped off a piece of his shirt and gave it to her. "I'm sorry I don't have a hankie," he said.

The man was thoughtful and kind. I was a fool not to be in love with him.

"Thank you, your highness." She dabbed the blood on her lips.

"Yes, I remember. Our land needs a heart," I said when she was settled.

I glanced from Leo to Polly, knowing what I was about to do

would be a sacrifice, but it was about damn time someone stepped in to take this burden from Polly.

She'd suffered long enough. "And I'm going to take your place."

Her eyes widened in horror, but there was also a glimmer of hope.

"You've been the heart for more than a thousand years. It's my turn," I went on, swallowing down my fear.

I didn't know what being the heart entailed exactly, but I did know I would never love another the way I loved Gabe.

And if Leo and Polly could find the kind of love Snow and Dorian had - the kind of love I wanted for myself - then trading places with her would be worth it.

"I can't let you do that," Polly said, taking my hand.

I glanced at Leo. "What do you think about this?"

He looked shocked, but only for a moment.

A huge smile brightened his face. "Polly," he said softly, coming to stand in front of her.

In that moment, I realized there was so much about the two of them I didn't know.

Being the heart would allow me to get to know them better, to get to know all of Polonias. It was the right thing to do. I could live with that.

"What needs to happen to make me the heart so the two of you can marry?" I asked, blinking back tears.

They weren't of sadness but determined commitment.

With Gabe out of the picture, taking her place wouldn't even be much of a sacrifice on my part, except I would miss teaching.

Polly stood, her legs trembling. The ground began shaking again as well. "Are you sure about this, Cindy?"

"I am," I said, nodding my head.

Seeing her happy would make me happy. Maybe she could be

happy enough for the both of us.

"Then Leo and I must marry immediately and as soon as we kiss, the power of the heart will leave me and transfer to you." She glanced shyly at me and then at Leo.

The way he looked at her, I knew without a doubt he already loved the girl. "Cindy, are you certain you want to do this? It's such a gift and one I will treasure." He looked at Polly. "I will always treasure you."

"I'm completely certain," I said.

Polly nodded, all business now. "We must take each other's hands," she said to Leo.

As he did, a cord appeared and wrapped around them.

"Cinderella, you must place your hands over ours so that the power of the connection can pass from you and into me. At the same time, my powers as the heart will transfer to you." She smiled encouragingly.

"Okay," I said, swallowing nervously.

The ground shook, longer and harder this time.

"Quickly now," she said.

Once my hands were on top of theirs, the cord circled my hands as well.

I watched with gritted teeth as they spoke the words to each other.

The same words Leo and I had said to each other.

When Polly finished speaking, the vine tattoo left my finger and appeared on hers followed by the beautiful diamond.

It sparkled in the nighttime sky as though the stars themselves came down to shine upon their union.

"You may kiss to seal this union and save Polonias," I said.

With those words I felt a new power.

It travelled from the tips of my fingers and throughout my body.

Suddenly I could feel so much more, an overwhelming wash of emotions all at once.

I fell back, landing on my butt.

Pain shot through my spine, but I barely acknowledged it.

With blurry eyes I watched Leo and Polly kiss.

Not understanding how or why, I witnessed the icy hot connection form and blaze between them.

When they broke apart, Polly touched her lips and smiled, but only briefly before she ran over and knelt beside me, taking my hand. "We need to get you into the earth so you can heal Polonias."

The land groaned, and a crack split the ground near me.

"Hurry, Cinderella." She and Leo helped me climb into the crack.

As the ground closed around me, I felt it sigh with relief.

Warmth and cold.

Roots and worms.

Death and life.

Happiness and sadness.

Good and evil.

It all pulsed around me and through me, making me claustrophobic.

Like my life force was being siphoned from me as the land renewed.

It was my moment of truth.

The life I had known was over.

No more Gabe, no more Snow or marriage or children. No more teaching.

I closed my eyes, desperately wishing Polonias would just swallow me whole so I would no longer feel.

Leo and Polly were talking.

I heard their voices, but they were muffled and seemed far away.

Other voices came and went as the land healed, eradicating the Sickness.

After what felt like a lifetime, some semblance of control returned and my body relaxed, giving in to what I had become.

OceanofPDF.com

HEALING TAKES TIME

MY EYES BLINKED OPEN. I appeared to be surrounded by a cocoon.

Pink and white.

I pulled my hand from the dirt and touched it.

So soft, like a petal, and I knew instantly that's what it was.

As the new heart of Polonias, this was my flower.

Soft footsteps came toward me. I wasn't sure what to do, so I waited inside the blossom, listening.

In moments, I sensed it was Polly and Leo.

They were happy. So happy! And there was more. She was already expecting.

Without knowing how, I came out of the ground, my flower, a vivid pink peony, became clothing as I found purchase atop the grass.

My eyes first caught and held Leo's.

He looked the same, only the worried edge to his features had gone.

When I noticed Polly, I gawked. She no longer looked like a thousand-year-old child, but a woman with long blond hair, bright blue eyes, and womanly curves.

She looked like me. "Polly, you look beautiful," I said, utterly shocked.

Going to her, I took her outstretched hands.

"Hello, sister," she said warmly.

We embraced for a long moment. "How long have I been in the ground?"

"Nearly a year," Leo returned, resting a hand on Polly's stomach.

I clapped my hands with joy. "And you're going to have a baby."

"Yes. A girl. We'd like to name her Cinderella, if that's okay with you," Polly said, her eyes searching my face.

My hands found their way to her stomach. The child kicked and I laughed. "Of course," I said, beyond pleased for them.

"Care to sit?" Leo asked.

"Yes, we have so much to tell you." Polly grabbed hold of my hand again, walking us over to her favorite spot along the edge of the pond.

Everywhere I looked, from the forest to the grass, even the water seemed brighter, more alive.

As though all this time Polonias had been existing in a shadowy room. When Leo and Polly married and after I became the heart, the shadows vanished, allowing Polonias to be full of light.

When we were situated, Leo and Polly shared their lives with me.

I already knew most of their story and guessed it had to do with being the heart.

But it was still good to have them tell me.

For the next several hours, they shared about Lawson's funeral, about the funerals held for Violet, Quilla, and Anna.

They also told of the king and his imprisonment and the changes that came over the people.

"What about Mizrabel?" I asked when there was a lull in the conversation.

"We haven't seen her. Not once has she shown her face. We aren't even sure she's still alive," Leo said.

"She is," I said, not knowing how I knew, but feeling the truth just the same. Then I raised an eyebrow. "You look so much older now," I said to Polly, still unable to believe the changes to her physical form.

She smiled. "As soon as the magic of the heart shifted from me and onto you, my body changed into the woman I was meant to be." She looked down at her rounding belly. "But I look alright, don't you think?"

"Amazing," I said, reassuring her and only feeling a small pang of jealousy. She had everything I ever wanted.

"In a lot of ways, I think you and I look alike." She smiled shyly.

"We do." I hugged her tightly.

Leo watched the two of us, a content look on his face. "We appreciate all you did for us. Polonias is saved. Our people are cheerier than they've ever been."

He took Polly's hand. "We are happier than we've ever been too."

"Good," I said, my heart filled with gladness for them.

They deserved every happiness. "It's time for me to go," I said, standing and heading back over to my hole in the ground, though I wasn't ready to get back into the earth just yet.

Still, the dirt called to me, yearned for me.

"Do you want to have dinner with us tonight at the castle? We would love to visit with you longer," Polly said.

"That sounds - " I stopped at the sight of Abernathy in the distance, using my hand to shield my eyes as I watched him fly in a meandering pattern across the sky.

His scales shone in the early afternoon light like a golden mountain.

"Don't be afraid," I said as Abernathy came closer, though neither of them looked worried.

"Of Abernathy?" Polly snorted and Leo laughed.

"He's like an oversized kitten, though don't tell him I said that," Leo added, covering his mouth while he chuckled.

"You've met him?" I was surprised.

Usually the dragon kept to himself.

"He's been to visit us many times since our marriage," Polly said, her eyes sparkling with kindness and something else. Maybe devotion.

And I wondered at that.

"Cinderella, he's our - " But she didn't get to finish because the dragon whooshed past them, landing in the grass only a little ways off.

My hair blew around me like a fan until he tucked his wings at his sides and walked over.

"You're awake," Abernathy said, blowing smoke from his nose as he spoke.

"I am," I replied, surprised I was glad to see him.

"About time," he growled. "Because I cannot allow you to be the heart a moment longer."

I crossed my arms, studying him intently. "Why does it matter what you want?"

"Cinderella, the time has come for you to know the truth." He sat back on his haunches.

"What's that?" I didn't hide my confusion. Being the heart of Polonias let me know everyone's truth. At least I thought so.

"I, dear girl, am your father." Abernathy paused to let his words sink in.

It took a minute. That was a revelation and one I wouldn't have seen coming in a million years. "You?"

"That's right. Mizrabel and I are your parents." He curled himself into a ball but kept his eyes on me.

"You're a dragon," I said, incredulous. "How did you and Mizrabel - " I couldn't finish. Sure interspecies mating occurred once in a while, but a dragon and a sorceress? Unless she used magic to transform herself into a dragon.

Or he transformed into a man. Stryker! That was the body he used with Mizrabel.

At that thought, my mind went to Heather, but I pushed my student's woes from my mind.

I couldn't do anything for her now.

Snow and Coco would handle the situation just fine.

I was where I needed to be.

"That's true, but as you know, I can be so much more." He shifted before my eyes into the man I knew as Stryker.

In that form, he'd killed Lawson and he'd saved me.

And apparently, in that form, he'd done his part to create me.

Anger sprang to life from a place deep within and I gripped my hands into fists.

"Then you and Mizrabel are to blame for all of this. Polly and I were nothing but a means to an end for the two of you. What? You were bored, so decided to create this land, and who cared if Polly and I had to suffer for it?" I was shouting, stomping in a circle and throwing my hands in the air at the same time.

Leo and Polly looked at each other before focusing on me. They already knew. That much was obvious, which meant they'd had time to let the truth about our parentage sink in.

Me?

It was going to take a while.

"Because of you, Polly spent more than a thousand years as the heart of this land, unable to grow, unable to fall in love, unable to have any sort of a real life.

How could you do that to your own daughter?" I was standing directly in front of him, so close I could feel the heat from his breath.

Abernathy closed his eyes a moment before focusing on me. "You are right, of course. This is our fault. Mostly mine."

He lifted his head. "Before the curse put a sleep over the land, I intended to perform the spell necessary to free Polly from her role as the heart. But by then Mizrabel was so angry with me for leaving her that she placed a curse over Polly, making it so Polly could never be free of her bond. Mizrabel is a miserable woman and wants the whole land destroyed, which is why she also created the Sickness."

He blew out his breath with such force I had to take a step back. "The only way to break her curse was through a selfless act of sacrifice from you, Cindy." He shook his head and smacked his lips like there was a bad taste in his mouth.

"But why not tell me all of this a long time ago?" It still shocked me that someone could harbor as much hate as Mizrabel did, but over the last year, as the Sickness in the land was healed, I felt it.

Burning and twisting like the vines in the witch mists.

"If I told you, then the act wouldn't have been a selfless sacrifice.

I wanted to, believe me, but I couldn't risk either of your lives." Abernathy smiled, showing all of his sharp, white teeth. "But now you are awake, and the time has come."

"So you can fix this?" I was incredulous. But more than that, I was still angry, though I wasn't sure why.

I slapped his muzzle, but doubted he even felt it through his thick scales.

"You son of a bitch. You evil, good-for-nothing dragon. You horrible, rotten, awful excuse for a dead-beat dad!" I was back to walking in a frustrated circle, trying to work off some of my anger.

"I am sorry, daughter. This was not what I meant to happen when we created the land. Mizrabel and I were in love. The creation of this land, of Polly and you was supposed to be a branch of our love - " His voice trailed off.

"The way we went about creating Polonias was a mistake, but I intend to remedy our folly now." With more energy than I'd seen from him before, he leaped to all four feet, shaking out his mane.

"Stand back."

OceanofPDF.com

THE DEATH KEEPER

A NOISE CAME from deep within the dragon, almost like the sound of a thousand men humming at once.

As it grew louder, I moved back to Polly and Leo.

They took hold of my shoulders, protecting me.

As well as the uproar coming from Abernathy, the color of his scales began to change. Shifting from their usual golden to an orange-red.

Heat radiated off him, like a fire in an enormous furnace, causing me to sweat.

The noise grew louder and louder until Polly, Leo, and I had to cover our ears.

The sound reverberated off the dragon and all around us until I moaned at the pain.

Abernathy's scales changed again from orange red to a stark white and his eyes rolled back into his head.

When I didn't think the noise could get any louder, he lifted his head to the sky and opened his mouth, sending a stream of fire into the air.

It shot high into the sky before arcing in every direction like a spider's web until the whole land was covered in a fiery ball.

The air became thin and it was momentarily hard to breathe.

But before I could become truly afraid, the fire turned to ice and then shattered into billions of tiny sparkling crystals falling down around us.

It was beautiful.

Polly said so as we watched them twinkle.

I would've agreed, except something was happening inside me.

Like the souls of a million beings were forcing their way out and through me.

I screamed, my legs sagging as my knees buckled.

"What's wrong?" Polly and Leo asked, hanging on, working to keep me for falling on the ground.

"It hurts," I said, as vine after vine, appeared on my skin, green at first before turning black. They seemed to sear themselves into my skin as they burned.

"Make it stop," I cried, tears raging down my cheeks and dripping onto my hands.

The petals of my flower dropped from me one by one.

Each withering and turning to gray dust before hitting the ground.

Vines grew up at the location of the ashen petals, pulling the ash into the earth.

As each petal fell, the pain subsided.

When the last one was taken into the ground, I felt better.

Until I looked down and saw I was completely naked.

On my skin light scars, almost like vine-shaped burns, covered the entirety of my body. I would've been shocked, except I was too embarrassed.

Polly quickly said a spell, clothing me in a sky blue dress.

"Thank you," I said, gratefully.

"Are you alright now?" she asked, concern weighing heavily on her features.

"Yes, much better." I took a deep breath, held it, searching for the power and magic of the heart, but it was gone.

"Is she no longer the heart?" Leo asked the dragon.

I was shocked to see he had changed as well. He was no longer golden but black as a moonless night. Even his golden eyes were

changed to a deep blue.

He looked scary, but he also looked tired.

It was the first time I saw Abernathy looking weak.

"Correct. The heart is no longer a person, but the land itself. It courses with magic." He dropped onto the grass and closed his eyes.

I went to him, worried, even though I was still upset with him. Polly was right there with me.

"Father," she whispered.

"I am fine, child," he said, opening one eye as he spoke. "I just need some rest."

"And the witch mists?" Leo asked.

I appreciated his concern for the land. It was obvious he was a good king.

"They are no more. The creatures within have been freed. Returned to the land. Polonias is a clean slate, Leolas Loyalor. Treat it well." He was snoring in an instant, but woke again almost immediately, his eyes fixed on me.

"And time in Polonias no longer moves more quickly than the other realms. It will pass here the same as in Sharra." With that he gave a snuffle-snort, closed his eyes, and was asleep.

A rush of gratitude over what Abernathy had done for the land and for me filled my veins. I didn't even care that I was covered in white vine tattoos. It was worth it to be free.

Free!

I loved Polly and I loved Leo.

They were my family and I wanted to know them both.

But first I wanted to go home.

I went to grab the hourglass from around my neck but it was gone, though the diamond star Quilla gave me was still there.

At thoughts of her, I wanted to pay my respects. "Can you take me

to see the graves of Quilla, Anna, and Violet?"

Polly nodded. "Of course, sister."

WE MADE our way back to town, leaving Abernathy to rest.

I had no idea how long it would take for him to recuperate after what he'd done.

When he was better, I would thank him, though I didn't know whether I could ever forgive him.

That wasn't true. I was alive because of him.

I had Polly because of him. And I was no longer bound to this land because of him.

Free!

The graveyard wasn't quite like those on Earth.

It was surrounded by an enormous fence and at the entrance stood the statue of a woman. In one hand she held a scythe.

The other hand was out and there were coins resting on her palm.

Leo took three gold coins from his pocket and placed them in her hand.

"Now we can enter," he said, stepping over the threshold.

Polly went after him. I followed close behind.

As soon as I passed through the gate, a thick blanket of magic pressed against me as though it were testing my worth.

"What am I feeling?" I asked, moving closer to my sister and Leo.

"It's Evenlyra, the death keeper. Her magic resides here. It's harmless if you have a long life ahead of you. However, if you're close to death, her magic assesses and measures the worth of your soul while she decides whether to let you live and exit the graveyard or die and keep you within."

My heart raced as I waited for her to decide whether I should be snuffed out or not.

The heaviness of her magic eased and lightened, and I breathed easier.

Apparently, it wasn't my time to go.

"They're over here," Leo said, walking us along the edge near the fence for a moment, until we came to a path leading to the center of the cemetery.

There was a large white building with a wooden door in the center. No one spoke. We didn't want to offend or disrespect the dead.

At the door, Leo knocked twice before pushing it open.

I swallowed and went in.

As my eyes adjusted to the low light within the tomb, I noticed there were three people standing in one of the corners, speaking softly.

One of them turned and I recognized her.

"Quilla?" I covered my mouth, unable to believe what I saw. She wasn't dead but alive. Or was it her ghost? I wasn't sure.

Polly gasped beside me. "Anna. Violet."

"How?" Leo asked, an arm going around Polly, desperate to protect her.

"Are you real?" I went to the three of them who looked as shocked as we felt.

"I can't believe it," Violet said and then roared. "I know that asshole killed me. I felt my life leave my body." She still wore her black dress, her glasses perched on the end of her nose.

"As did I," Quilla said. She also wore a black dress, but it had undertones of burgundy and shimmered as she moved.

She wore black stockings and shoes as well as a funny hat that suited her perfectly.

Most surprising of all were her see-through black wings.

"My wings," Quilla exclaimed, tears filling her eyes.

They fluttered behind her, lifting her off the ground.

Anna ran her hands along her body, crying happily. "How is this possible?" she asked, her eyes on me.

"Abernathy," I guessed, rushing to them and pulling them unceremoniously into a hug, not even caring that I was crying so hard, snot was running down my face.

"This is amazing," I said, my heart softening a little toward the dragon.

The six of us made our way back to the castle.

Leo, Polly, and I took turns catching them up on all that had happened since their untimely demise.

We worried the townspeople would freak when they saw the three of them back from the dead, but it was as though they couldn't remember the funerals or even that they died.

People greeted us as though all was right in the world, and I guessed it was, thanks to Abernathy.

His magic was incredible.

And I was his daughter.

After we enjoyed a lovely dinner together in the castle, I explained how I needed to get back to Sharra.

My heart ached to be teaching at the academy.

Even though these people were my family, teaching was my calling and I had missed it terribly.

It was a joyful goodbye because I promised it wouldn't be for long. Not only did I want to get to know my sister and her new husband as well as Quilla, Anna, and Violet better, but I also wanted to meet my niece when she arrived.

"But how will I travel?" I asked, wishing I still had my hourglass.

Quilla touched the seven-pointed star necklace. "With this, of course." She grinned. "It works just the same as the hourglass only it's much prettier and suits you better."

I hugged Quilla. "Thank you."

She waved the words away. "I hope you'll use it often."

"I will." I placed the star between my first and second fingers and my thumb. "Do I just think of where I want to go, like the hourglass?"

"That's right. Give it a try." She stepped back, giving me a once over. "Goodness alive, let's get you changed before you go."

"What's wrong with her dress?" Polly asked, putting her hands on her hips, only mildly irritated with my fairy godmother.

"Oh, it's lovely, dear. Only Cindy needs something a little less princess and more kick ass when she returns to Sharra."

I decided not to mention that Polly's dress was great for Sharra and let Quilla use magic to whip me up a pair of black ankle boots, jeans, and a black tee shirt covered in a long, rainbow striped sweater that was almost like a duster. "This is amazing, Quilla. See you all soon." I adjusted the necklace in my hand and thought of Sharra, of my office and of my best friend Snow White.

OceanofPDF.com

HE'S LOOKING FOR ME

I KNEW I was back in Sharra because of the smell of musty old spell books.

Travelling was different this time.

There were no witch mists.

Nothing to distract me or sway me from my goal.

It was a relief and yet another reason to be grateful for what Abernathy had done.

Happy to be in my office, I used a spell to check the date and time.

It was late Friday night. Snow was probably asleep, but I needed to speak with her. Only a little hesitant, I went to the mirror hanging next to the door. "Mirror, mirror - " I paused. It was the first time seeing my reflection since the magic I held when I was the heart left me.

My face looked the same, but the white-looking burns of the leaves and vines still covered my face and neck. I checked my arms as well and knew they were all over my body.

At the sight of myself, tears formed and fell onto my cheeks.

It wasn't vanity.

I didn't mind the marks and whether they stayed or not mattered little to me.

That they were there reminded me of all I'd been through the last year while in the ground in Polonias.

Now I was free!

Until I became a part of the land, I hadn't understood the scope of all I gave up to free Polly.

What it meant to exist only for others.

Wiping my tears, I blew my nose, working to make myself stop crying. When I was mostly under control, I leaned against the sink.

"Mirror, mirror, made of glass. Show me Snow, do as I ask."

My reflection wavered until it vanished, revealing Snow's room.

It was dark, except for a small glow of light coming from the left.

"Snow," I whispered.

There was a tiny gasp before Snow came to stand in front of the mirror. "Where are you?" She looked frazzled.

"Home. Back. I'm here in my office." The intensity of her question had me flustered. "I'm safe," I added.

She glanced back at the bed before sighing heavily. "Can you meet me in my sitting room?" she asked.

"I really want to talk." Her brows furrowed and her lips were turned down in a frown.

"I'll be right there."

"Good." She came in closer, her eyes roaming my face. "Are you sure you're alright? What happened to you?" She touched the mirror.

"I'll tell you everything when I see you."

I used magic to return the mirror to normal before leaving my office and heading down the hall and up the stairs.

At the door to Snow's floor was a vampire, Dina.

"What is your business here?" she asked, flashing her fangs.

Surprised, I held up my hands. "Snow is expecting me, Dina."

She tilted her head to the side a moment before nodding. "Very well, but keep it down. The princess Jasmine is sleeping." She carefully opened the door, letting me through.

As I walked down the hall, I worked to keep the heels of my shoes from making too much noise, but it was literally quiet as a tomb.

At Snow's sitting room, I knocked once before entering.

Snow wore a white bathrobe with blue trim and held a goblet of

blood in her hands.

When she saw me, she set the glass down and ran to me, giving me a hug.

"You're okay," she whispered, lifting me off the ground slightly.

For me, it was nearly a year since I last saw her, though it was only a little more than three days for her. "Yeah, I'm good," I said, between gasps for air, grateful to see my best friend.

She released me, taking my hands as we sat. "What happened to your face?"

I told her everything.

About Mizrabel, Leo, Polly, and all that happened since I'd been gone.

Snow listened intently, only interrupting when she needed clarification.

When I finished, she blinked back tears, a finger tracing the vines on my face.

"Do they hurt?" she asked softly.

"No," I said, twining my fingers with hers.

"I'm fine. More than fine. I'm so happy to be free."

She swallowed, pulling her braided hair over her shoulders and tucking some hair behind an ear.

"When you became the heart, I sensed the change. Like you were alive, but also not. It was strange and I was scared." She looked at me, tears brimming along the edges."

"I'm sorry Snow." I hadn't thought about how my decision might affect her. That wasn't nice.

"Now that you're okay, all is forgiven." She smacked my leg lightly. "Just don't let it happen again."

"I won't," I promised.

"I was so worried, I tracked down Abernathy. When I told him

what I was feeling, he agreed to take care of it." She picked up her drink and sipped. "It's a good thing since he was responsible for the whole mess."

How grateful I was for Snow. She understood me without even knowing why.

"He's my father," I blurted, crossing my arms, holding in all the emotions about him I wasn't ready to deal with.

Snow leaned forward, resting a hand on my knee.

"Shut the fracking door. He's also my cat, Gatsby, and Kenmei, too." She shook her head. "If there's one thing I've learned lately, it's that the more I think I know, the less I actually do. Also, is it just me or does Abernathy seem to have more than a few issues?"

It was my turn to be shocked.

The cat and Kenmei?

"Right?" I snorted in disgust. "I thought I was an only child, but there's Polly and who knows how many more. Abernathy has been alive so long, I could have hundreds, even thousands of half-siblings." I shuddered at the thought, though there was a small part of me that wouldn't mind.

I considered Snow my sister and now I had Polly too. It might be cool. Or maybe not.

"Cool, but gross." Snow stuck out her tongue, interrupting my thoughts.

"What is it with grownups? Aren't they supposed to be an example?"

"Sadly, I think we're considered grownups at this point." I didn't want to believe it.

"I guess." Snow let her head fall back against the couch and let out a noise of disgust. "I still feel like a kid."

"I know. But the other day I told some of my students to be the change! Like something a grownup would say. What the hell?" I stood,

going over to the window.

"After all we've been through, nothing should shock us, but here we are, completely shocked."

Millions of stars hung in the sky and I stared, using the moment to ponder all that I learned in the last few hours.

"He's Gatsby too?" I met her gaze and she nodded. "I guess if I were thousands of years old, I would want to switch things up as well."

"I guess," Snow added.

We were silent a few moments, each lost in our own thoughts.

"So Polly told you Gabe is your soul mate?" Snow asked, breaking the silence.

I rolled my eyes. "That's right," I said, clamping my teeth together before turning. "But I'm not sure what to do about it. I proposed and he turned me down."

"You did?" She pushed her bangs out of her eyes, glaring.

I nodded, sheepishly. "Yeah, I forgot to mention that part."

"He actually came to Sharra looking for you," Snow said.

"I told him where you were, and he demanded I show him how to get there." She clasped her hands together, grabbing hold of one knee before crossing it over her other one.

"I told him the magic of Polonias was beyond the scope of my power." She shook her head at the memory. "Needless to say, he was really upset and left cursing and mumbling about asking Abernathy."

It was my turn to be shocked. "He came looking for me?" I went back over and sat beside Snow. "When?"

"A couple of days ago. I'm surprised he didn't find you. That guy was determined." Snow tucked her feet under her butt and took another drink. "But you haven't seen him?"

"No." I shook my head, my heart racing.

Had he changed his mind about marrying me? It would've been nice to know a year ago, at least according to Polonias time, but still.

I wanted to see him - to know what he was thinking.

"Maybe he realized what an amazing woman you are and that he would be damned lucky to call you his wife and decided to tell you so?" Snow raised her eyebrows before downing the rest of the blood and setting the goblet on the end table.

"It's possible."

Could I leave Sharra and find him? Should I?

I was both invigorated and exhausted.

Plus there were other issues to worry about. "Has anything more happened with Heather?" I asked, changing the subject.

That was a question I could've saved until tomorrow, but I didn't want to be alone yet.

"She's still in her own room." Snow crossed her arms. "And Sera is a handful. That girl is getting herself into trouble almost daily. One of the students told me he overheard her saying she wanted to raise someone from the dead at the Halloween dance next weekend. I looked into it, but she swears he was misinformed."

She closed her eyes briefly before opening them again. "I know she's lying, and I have her advisor, Tori, keeping an eye on her, but Sera is devious and smarter than most, which is a terrible combination, especially with all of the magic she possesses."

"Counseling might do her good," I said, trying to think of a way to help both girls.

If only I could show them how alike they were and that a friendship was better than being enemies.

Easier said than done.

"I was thinking the same thing.

Mr. Lucian is on alert and he promised to make an appointment with her. I have Sera coming into my office on Monday after school to discuss how she's liking things so far." Snow sighed. "We'll see."

"You have a lot going on," I said, standing. "I'll let you get some

rest."

"It's fine," Snow said, hugging me again.

"Come to family dinner on Sunday? Jasmine has been asking about you."

"I'll be there," I said, heading to the door.

"Oh, and Pops is going hunting tomorrow morning. There's another supernatural in need of our help."

"What time?"

"Seven in the morning at Pops' house." She smiled, heading toward her sleeping quarters.

"I'll be there," I said, opening the door.

"Good." Snow paused. "And Cin?"

"Yeah, Snow?"

"I'm so glad you're okay." She smiled sleepily.

"Me, too."

OceanofPDF.com

MAKE US WORK

I GOT ready for sleep the old fashioned way and climbed under the covers, after setting my alarm for six.

It was nice to be back in my own bed.

As I drifted off, I thought of Abernathy - my father - and hoped he was healing up okay.

In my dreams, I saw Abernathy flying through the night sky of Polonias, his black scales blending in until he was in a different sky, this time during the day.

He landed on the lawn in front of a castle I recognized.

He was in Sharra.

Several worker vampires and guards circled him, but after he spoke, they dispersed, going about their day.

"Cindy," someone called, knocking loudly on my door.

I glanced at the clock and saw it was a little before six. "I'm awake," I said, groggy, not knowing who it was.

"It's Abernathy. He asked to speak with you." The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't put it to a name.

"I'll be out in a few."

There was no response.

Climbing out of bed, I hurriedly pulled on gray camo pants, a gray tank top, and combat boots. I tied my hair back and put on just the bare minimum of makeup - mascara and gloss.

As I dressed, I thought about my dream.

Had Abernathy sent me the vision of him flying through Polonias and into Sharra?

It seemed the likeliest answer.

Outside, I went down the steps and out onto the main lawn where Abernathy appeared to be sleeping again.

I walked slowly, checking out his black scales that were slowly changing back to gold.

When I was near enough, I touched one. It was hot and I flinched.

"Be careful. I don't want to burn you," Abernathy said, his deep voice rumbling the ground around us.

"Your color is coming back." I moved so I could see his face.

His eyes were lightening too.

"I don't know that I'll ever return to completely golden, but this works." He chuckled lightly.

"Thank you for what you did for me and for Violet, Anna, and Quilla." I checked my feelings and found I wasn't nearly as upset with him as last night.

Whether it was because of sleep or something else, I wasn't sure, but I was glad the anger was mostly gone.

"It's my pleasure," he said, blinking slowly, one eye trained on me. "I've come to tell you that I'm leaving for a while and wanted to say goodbye."

"Why?" I asked. "What about teaching?" I wasn't going to pretend I didn't know he was Kenmei.

His chuckle intensified. "You can take over my classes."

I swallowed, trying to understand what I was feeling.

Now that I knew he was my father, I wanted to get to know him better.

"Don't worry, daughter. I'll be back, but I need some time to finish healing."

"Okay," I said, my voice sounding small.

He stood, his wings stretching out behind him.

"Wait," I said.

"Hmmm." He eyed me tiredly.

I told him about Heather and her struggles.

"It's a tough situation and I feel for her," he said, when I was done. "With magic, there are limitations, even for me." He tucked his dark wings back at his sides.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He'd just saved an entire land from destruction.

Surely there would be magic strong enough to change a girl into the form she desired.

"You know I can transform into other creatures, including the cat, Stryker, Kenmei - " He trailed off, closing his eyes.

"There are other forms as well, but they are of no matter. The thing is, each time I transform, I remain the same gender. A male. Regardless, and no matter how hard I try, I cannot transform into a girl."

"You've tried?" Those were stories I wanted to hear at some future date as well as his reasons.

"Yes. Heather's situation is delicate, and I wish there was a way to use magic to help, but after all these years, I haven't found a spell capable of doing what she wants."

He blew some smoke out of his mouth. "It seems ridiculous the magic doesn't exist and when I'm fully healed, I intend to see what I can do. But as things are right now - "

He blinked again and I saw how drained he still was. "Tell her the answer is no, but only for now."

"The humans can change a female body into that of a male and vice versa. You would think magic could do the same." I kicked at a piece of grass, frustrated for Heather.

"I'm sorry I cannot be of more help." He extended his wings again.

"I appreciate you looking into it - when you are able," I added softly, wishing he wouldn't go.

"Goodbye, Cinderella." Abernathy ascended, his enormous wings causing my hair to whip my face.

A question popped into my mind and I called after him, "Did you name me or did Mizrabel?"

He chuckled. "We named you together. Cinder, since I was created from the cinders of the first fire and Ella after her mother."

With that, he was gone.

No one had seen Mizrabel in a while.

Not since the spell I used on her made her disappear.

Part of me worried that I killed her.

The other part worried about what would happen if I hadn't.

Taking hold of the star necklace I always wore at my throat, I closed my eyes and thought of Professor Pops' house, his driveway, and his front porch. The smell of the air changed from sweet apples to cinnamon and a hint of the ocean.

Giddiness sent me up Professor Pops' porch stairs two at a time.

I knocked and didn't have to wait long before the door opened.

"Hi," I said, my heart stopping altogether.

Gabe's green eyes shone with happy surprise and relief when he saw me.

He was so handsome, his dark hair seemed a little longer than the last time I saw him, and his eyes appeared to be a deeper green.

"Cindy." He stepped out onto the porch and wrapped me in a hug. "I thought I lost you," he said.

"Almost, but not completely," I whispered, enjoying the spicy scent of him and the warmth of his body against mine.

"When did you get back?" He released me but studied my face.

"Last night," I said, softly.

"What's this?" His thumb gently trailed its way along the scars that crisscrossed my skin like white tattoos. They were everywhere.

I wasn't sure whether they would remain for good or fade.

He cupped my cheek and I leaned into his hand. "I'll tell you all about it. I promise," I said, taking his hand in mine.

His eyes searched my face before he nodded and we went into the house together, heading toward the kitchen.

"Tell me," he said, leaning down as though he might kiss me.

My lips parted, but we both remembered at the same time that we were no longer together. He'd told me he didn't want to marry me.

I moved away, heading to the refrigerator for some water and taking a long drink.

When I finished, I turned.

Gabe was watching me, his face soft. "Who did this to you?" He pointed at my wrist.

I told him everything, ending with how Abernathy removed the magic of the heart of Polonias, leaving these vines in its wake.

He wrapped me in another hug. "But you're okay?" he asked, clinging to me like I might fly away if he let go.

My heart softened a little. "I'm better than okay, actually. I'm free."

"I'm so glad." He squeezed me tight for one more second then moved away. "Are you here to go after the supernaturally inclined teen?"

I sighed. The chayot in him wouldn't be buried, even if he wanted to try.

"I am, if Pops hasn't left yet." I glanced at him from under my lashes, thrilled to see him, but nervous too.

"He hasn't." Gabe took a bite of a bagel smeared with cream cheese and topped with strawberries.

My mouth watered. I was famished for real food.

"Good," he said after chewing several times and swallowing.

I gave him a questioning stare.

He clarified. "It's good you're here to help. You're a calming influence on the supernaturals."

I took his compliment with a smile, wishing he would offer me the other half of his bagel.

"Do you want this?" He handed me the other half and I immediately bit into it without a word. "I'm taking that as a yes." He chuckled and I smiled around my mouthful.

After he finished his half, he wiped his mouth and went to the sink.

"Pops is in his office." He dried his hands before pushing them into his front pockets. "I can't go with you. Jesse - " He paused, shaking his head.

"My boss demanded I meet with him and I have to go this morning, but it'll be fine." His eyes softened. "I lost you once. I can't lose you again."

He took my hand. "If you'll have me, I want to make us work."

I took a napkin from the counter and wiped my mouth. "I'm not going anywhere," I said, studying the intensity of his face.

If he was my soulmate like Polly said, then I needed to put aside my need to make him into someone he wasn't and love the man he was.

"Good." He looked like he wanted to say more, and I waited.

"I love you, Cindy, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to prove that to you and win you back." There was fire in his eyes.

Chayots were the definition of stubborn and I wanted to believe him.

"Can't wait," I said, hoping it was true as I headed out of the kitchen and toward Pops' office.

OceanofPDF.com

PARTY SPARKLES

THE NEXT WEEK was back to work and I enjoyed every second.

Each class filled me with renewed vigor.

I also spoke with Sera about seeing our resident therapist, which she agreed to do.

We discussed the rumors that she wanted to bring someone back from the dead. She denied any part of it.

As Snow said, it was obvious the girl had lied, so I determined to keep a close eye on her by asking if she would help with the setup of the haunted house.

After some reluctance, she finally seemed to have a therapeutic breakthrough and for the briefest moment I saw a glimmer of kindness from Sera.

The student body officers agreed to change the theme from gory and horrific and instead would recreate several iconic scenes from the movie Hocus Pocus, although they were keeping the haunted house scary and even decided to amp it up.

I figured Sera would love that and each time I saw her, she seemed to be enjoying herself. Hopefully that would keep her distracted.

The decorating committee created magical cutouts of the Sanderson house as well as flying witches that looked a lot like the characters from the movie riding brooms and even vacuum cleaners.

At the entry to the haunted house hung a smoking cauldron that would tip over at random intervals, dousing party goers with sparkles.

On Friday, after classes ended, I was in the ballroom assisting with hanging the twinkling lights and a disco ball for the Halloween dance the following night.

Just as I stepped off the ladder, Gabe showed up.

I was surprised to see him and a little worried.

He hadn't been to Sharra in a really long time, not since Snow and Dorian were married. "Is Pops okay?" I asked, going to him.

Gabe smiled, kissing me thoroughly on the mouth.

Unable to resist, I lost myself in him.

Opening my mouth, deepening the kiss, and allowing our tongues to explore.

The kiss affected me everywhere and tingles covered my body.

I'd missed kissing him, especially like that.

When I reluctantly pulled away, I became aware of the students around us making jokes.

"I thought we were still broken up?" I couldn't hide my smile at seeing him here though.

He looked amazing in his dark jeans and a gray tee shirt.

"Get back to work," I growled jokingly at the students. "I'll be right back." I took Gabe's arm and led him out of the ballroom and into the hall.

"I don't want us to be," he said when we were alone.

He pushed his dark hair off his face.

His green eyes shone with mischief. On his left wrist was a leather bracelet with wings. Was it the one he gave me that I returned?

"But what about your angel boss. Has he changed his mind?" It was apparent Gabe was taking his words about getting me back seriously.

But nothing had really changed between us.

He was still the leader of the chayot, and he was still not supposed to be with me.

I was still a witch, not to mention the daughter of an ancient and very powerful dragon, supernatural to my core but not one ounce a chayot.

His face turned sour. "No." He crossed his arms. "Here's the thing.

I've thought long and hard. Hell, I've tried to fight what I feel for you, but that fact is, I can't be without you and I don't think I'm supposed to be. If the last several days have taught me anything, it's that I'm better with you. A better man and a better chayot."

He took the bracelet off his wrist carefully.

It was on tight since his wrist was so much bigger than mine.

"I want you to have this." He took hold of my wrist, but I pulled away.

Fear clouded his gaze, but he kept going. "Cindy Croswell, I want to marry you more than anything. There isn't a woman in the world I want to be with more than you."

I shook my head in frustration. "Gabe," I cried, so happy to hear him actually saying the words.

Things had worked out for the best in Polonias, but life would've been so much easier if he and I had married there and were living in that land.

We wouldn't have to worry about what his boss thought or whether Gabe was comparing me to other supernaturals.

"Is that a real proposal or are you just messing with me?" I asked as he slid the bracelet on my wrist, securing it.

"I'm completely serious, but I know you aren't ready to believe me," he said, a sad smile on his lips. "It's my fault, and I know I've made a lot of mistakes, but I want to prove to you that I'm not going anywhere. I spoke with Snow and as of Monday, I'm going to teach Abernathy's classes while he's gone."

I covered my mouth with the back of a hand. "But what about your duties to the chayot?"

He shrugged. "They aren't going anywhere, but I put my second in command, Anna, in charge. She'll handle the day to day. If she needs me, she can come and get me or send someone for me."

Gabe's smile grew. "I'm going to stay here and see you as often as I

can. I'm going to take you on dates. Or, well - " He chuckled, looking a little sheepish, which was entirely too adorable because Gabe never wanted to look vulnerable, "I don't know Sharra as well as you do, so I'll ask you out and then you can show me around this land, if you want."

I was still trying to comprehend what he was saying. "You're going to live here?"

He took my hands, kissing the back of each one, his eyes shining with pleasure. "That's right. I've already secured a room and moved over some of my stuff."

"But - " I seriously couldn't believe it.

Joy like I hadn't felt in a long time bubbled inside my chest.

"You're sure about this?"

He was still a chayot and responsible for the lives of the humans in their realm.

It was more than his job, it was his sacred duty.

Ingrained in his DNA like blond hair and blue eyes were in mine.

But he was willing to set that aside for me.

That was new.

"Very sure." He leaned in, pressing his lips softly to mine.

Desire roared up inside me and I wound myself around him, wrapping a leg around his hips.

"Gross," Ignacio said.

I growled before taking a deep breath and stepping back, wiping my mouth as I looked at the elf magic student over Gabe's shoulder. "Did you need something or are you just here to rattle me?" I tried to smile, but I'm pretty sure it was more a bearing of teeth.

Good thing I wasn't a vampire.

Ignacio glanced down the hall, checking to make sure we were alone before tucking his hands in the pockets of his pants. "Look, I'm no snitch, but I heard Sera telling some of the other students she was

going to raise someone from the dead tomorrow night during the dance. She said she found a spell and already has most of the ingredients." Worry frustrated his features and he bit his bottom lip. "Is that even possible?"

"It's highly unlikely." I'd read through that particular spell before and knew it was a very complicated black magic ritual that required several items that were very difficult to collect.

Gabe faced the kid, tucking his hands in his pockets the way Ignacio's were.

Apprehension over what Gabe would say about how all supernaturals were bad filled my stomach and I placed a hand on his arm.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Last I saw, she was in the haunted house, but she asked some people to help her collect one of the missing ingredients and they took off." He shrugged. "I'm not sure where they were heading."

Ignacio wiped a hand over his face. "I'm all for experimenting. Everyone does it, ya know? We all want to use our magic. Except I'm bringing my girl, Fern, to the dance tomorrow night and don't want her getting hurt."

"You did the right thing telling us. It takes a lot of courage to do what you did," Gabe said, clasping the kid on the shoulder and giving him a look that said he understood what the guy was going through.

My shoulders relaxed as relief washed over me. Gabe understood the mind of a teenaged boy better than I did and I was glad he remembered that. "Mr. Henry is right. Thank you, Ignacio. I'll look into it."

"We'll look into it," Gabe corrected, putting an arm through mine.

Ignacio raised an eyebrow, giving us a look that said we better, before heading back into the ballroom.

Gabe's arms went around my waist. "Mr. Henry, huh?"

I batted at his chest playfully. "Easy, tiger. We need to find Sera. The sooner the better."

"Any ideas where to start?" Gabe asked, turning serious.

His question raised my hackles and I answered defensively. "Not to worry. She's here in Sharra, so none of your precious humans will get hurt. We're all supernatural here, including you."

"Cindy," he said, looking hurt.

"Sorry," I said. And I was. I'd let myself fall into old habits with him and that's why I knew this whole soulmate thing between us was going to be tricky. We both had a lot of issues to work through. Taking his hand, I started toward the stairs. If I had to guess where Sera might go for the ingredients, it would be the basement. "I might have an idea."

OceanofPDF.com

RESURRECTION SPELL

SERA WASN'T in the basement, but I found the spell book I thought she would've taken since it contained the spell for raising someone from the dead.

That it was still in its place on the bookshelf concerned me.

Mizrabel had contacted and used her once before, which meant it was possible the sorceress might do it again.

The bigger question was why Mizrabel had chosen Sera in the first place.

Sure, the girl was vulnerable and thus easy to manipulate, but it had to be more than that.

It seemed too coincidental that Mizrabel had chosen Sera just before I found her.

Plus, Mizrabel was my mother.

Had she somehow known I would find Sera?

Did something tie Sera and me to each other?

If I knew how to reach Abernathy, I would have, but he was still recovering from the ordeal of freeing me as the heart of Polonias.

I was on my own.

The most worrisome question: Who did Sera intend to bring back from the dead?

If Mizrabel was involved, I thought I might know, I needed to find Sera and stop her before she did something she couldn't come back from.

After the basement, we checked the forest.

"So, are you going to invite me to the Halloween dance?" Gabe asked as we made our way back to the academy, intent on searching

Sera's room for any clues.

I was surprised he mentioned it, but pleasantly so. "Do you want to go? I have to chaperone, but you could help me."

He smiled, kissing my fingers, and for a moment I saw the Gabe I fell in love with when we were still in high school. "Is that your invitation? No writing it out in a spider's web or chocolate or something?"

I laughed, and he joined in.

Pulling us to a stop, I thought of a spell.

"How about this?" I asked, sending the question "Will you go to the dance with me, Gabe?" into the air where it shone with golden dust.

Pixelettes fluttering in the distance saw it and repeated the question a hundred times around us, making Gabe and me laugh with delight. .

"Better," he said, his eyes shining in wonder. "And the answer is most definitely."

"I'm so glad." I watched his face, enjoying the joy visible in his expression. It'd been a long time since he looked so happy.

Gabe bent down and brushed his lips against mine lightly, and it was like I was lit on fire. Hungry desire had me throwing my arms around him as he deepened the kiss, his hands on my hips.

We were standing in the hallway near Sera's room and someone cleared their throat followed by a rattle of giggling.

I reluctantly pushed Gabe away and saw Kaylan and Kimberly were standing in front of us.

"We didn't want to interrupt, but you're blocking our way," Kimberly said, giving us a look that said we were too old for public displays of affection.

"Sorry about that, ladies," Gabe said, pulling me against the wall and giving them his most charming smile.

They both sighed noticeably. It was understandable.

Gabe was beyond gorgeous.

"Miss Croswell just asked me to the Halloween dance, and I was accepting," Gabe continued.

"Wow," Kimberly said, shaking her head as she moved past us before unlocking the door to her room.

"Did you need something from us?" Kaylan asked, batting her eyelashes at Gabe.

"We were looking for Sera. Can you see if she's in there?" I tried to let go of Gabe's hand, but he wouldn't let me.

"Sure, hang on." Kaylan went inside followed by Kimberly and shut the door. They were laughing and talking, but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

"One of them is coming back, right?" Gabe asked, a question on his features.

"I hope so."

Gabe gave me a sly grin. "Well, while we wait - " he said, kissing me again.

"For goodness' sake, we were gone like ten seconds." Kimberley had a hand on her hip in disgust, after she opened the door, but I could tell she was holding back a smile.

"Is she in there?" I asked, giving Gabe a sideways glance.

He was impossible to resist when he was so tender and sweet.

"No, but if we see her, we'll be sure to tell her you're looking for her," Kimberly said with a knowing smile.

"Great, thank you. See you tomorrow night?"

"Yep." And she closed the door in our faces.

"Where to now?" Gabe asked, his arm around my waist.

"Let's go to Heather's room."

When we arrived, Heather came to the door and told us she hadn't talked to Sera all day.

She looked relieved and I couldn't blame her. Sera was a bully to Heather.

I thought about telling her what Abernathy said, but I didn't think it was a topic I should discuss with Gabe there.

He was kind to her though, and I appreciated that.

It was good to see Heather had won herself another champion, but I kept wondering when enough would be enough for him.

The man was an angel created specifically to keep humans safe from the likes of me - from all supernaturals.

It couldn't be easy trying to help when he knew all the trouble we could cause.

"If she isn't doing the spell from that book, then maybe Sera is just blowing hot air, trying to get attention or seem cool," Gabe said, his hands in his front pockets. "She could be trying to find a way to fit in."

"It's possible." I took hold of his arm, grateful he was sticking it out and hadn't said anything degrading or mean about any of my students or the teachers at the academy.

"But highly unlikely," I added.

I didn't believe for one second Sera was joking.

The girl was powerful and set up a seance within days of arriving at the Seven Magics Academy.

From what I knew of her, if Sera set her mind to doing something, she would find a way to make it happen.

I couldn't remember all of it, but I knew the resurrection spell called for a seven pointed star to be drawn, with each tip accommodating a black candle.

In the center of the star would be placed a cauldron containing blood from the one performing the spell as well as a body part of the deceased, dirt from the deceased's grave, and a piece of a unicorn horn as well as other items I couldn't recall.

Since unicorns no longer existed, I was positive Sera couldn't

complete the spell, but something told me my optimism was misplaced.

We searched for hours with no success, and it was after midnight when Gabe finally walked me to my room.

Curfew went into effect hours ago.

The kids working on the dance and haunted house were safely back in their rooms, but Sera still hadn't been found.

"Get some sleep," he said. "She has to eat. I'm sure we'll see her at breakfast."

He leaned in, kissing me lightly, and I clung to him, wanting to invite him in.

It had been too long since we were together and I wanted him.

But I also wasn't ready.

If he was going to win me back like he promised, then I needed to know he was serious this time - that he wanted all of me, including the supernatural parts.

"Night," I said, when his lips left mine.

"Want to meet for breakfast?" he asked, cupping my face in his hands.

"Nine o'clock?" I asked, leaning against the door.

"See you then." He touched the wings on the bracelet briefly before walking away.

I watched him go until he turned out of sight, surprised by the multitude of feelings I held for him.

It was love, no doubt, and I wanted more than anything for us to be together.

OceanofPDF.com

GLIMMER OF FEAR

I CLOSED my bedroom door and locked it before going to the mirror and asking it to show me Snow.

Thankfully, my best friend was still awake and alone in her study.

I shared with her my thoughts and theories and told her I was going to Polonias and not to worry if she didn't see me in the morning since I didn't know how long I would be gone.

Guilt pierced my heart momentarily after saying goodbye and changing from the dress I wore for school into a pair of jeans, boots, and an oversized indigo sweater with a V neck.

Why hadn't I asked Gabe to go with me?

He could have come and seen the place of my birth.

My bloodline had kept the land of Polonias alive.

Aside from that, the land was in my heart and I wanted Gabe to know that part of myself.

Confused and irritated with myself, I took hold of the diamond star attached to the black choker around my neck.

If my theories were correct, then Sera was in Polonias.

I didn't know how it was possible since travelling to my land wasn't as easy as creating a portal to go between realms.

Still, my guts were telling me that's where she would be, and I had to at least check.

Closing my eyes, I pictured the castle and the graveyard where Anna, Violet, and Quilla had been buried.

Violet had mentioned that Lawson was buried there as well and I figured that was the best place to start looking.

A slight wind caused the edges of my hair to tickle my face and the

ends of my sweater to flutter against my stomach.

Darkness surrounded me as I opened my eyes.

"Lumia," I whispered.

As the light appeared, I noticed I was directly in front of the iron gate where the statue, Evenlyra, stood watch, her hand held out in anticipation of a gold coin.

"Damn," I whispered.

In my rush to get here, I'd forgotten.

Could I take one from her hand and then return it?

"Definitely not." My heart sinking, I took hold of my necklace, preparing to return to my room.

But before I closed my eyes, the gate swung open.

Surprised, I glanced up at the death keeper.

"You may enter," the statue said, her unseeing marble eyes on me.

It was disconcerting to have a conversation with an object that should have been inanimate, but I held my ground.

"But beware, there are those within the graveyard who seek to take away your life, dear Cinderella. If they succeed, I will have no choice but to reap your soul."

I stared a moment, unable to respond to her words. I was grateful she warned me, but she also threatened me as well.

Not a great situation to be in.

"I understand," I finally said, clamping my lips together in a determined line.

Before stepping through the gate, I snuffed out my light, knowing it would give me away.

Darkness fell over me and I waited for my eyes to adjust.

It took a few minutes, but I could finally make out the path running along the perimeter as well as some of the nearer headstones.

Tentative, I made my way inside.

"You can do this," I said, making my way along the path, working to remember when to turn. In the shadowy distance, I could see the tomb.

Nearly colliding with a tombstone, I finally reached the large crypt and moved slowly to the opening.

There were voices coming from inside and I stopped to listen.

"Take some of his hair then," the first voice said.

"It smells," the second voice responded.

I knew immediately it was Sera.

"Are you sure I have to do this?"

"Yes, girl. You must," the first voice returned, exasperated.

I knew the second voice then.

It was Mizrabel's.

My pulse pounded angrily.

She was coercing Sera into performing black magic, and it was obvious she wasn't completely on board.

Perhaps I could talk some sense into her.

I'd used a spell to make Mizrabel disappear once before, I could do it again. I even remembered the words.

Rolling back my shoulders, I stepped into the room.

"Sera," I said, sounding deceptively calm.

She gasped, spinning to face me, a jolt of magic shooting from her hands.

I saw it coming and stepped out of the way so it hit the wall behind me.

A chunk of stone broke off and crashed to the floor.

"Miss Croswell?"

"That's right, Sera. I've come to help you." I put my hands up, showing her I meant her no harm.

"Hello, daughter," Mizrabel said, ripping a chunk of something

from an open crypt and shoving it into Sera's hand.

"Daughter?" Sera goggled at me.

I recognized the hourglass hanging around her neck from the silver chain.

Lawson had given that to me. It must've stolen it back.

"Oh, didn't you know?" Mizrabel moved to stand beside Sera.

"No," Sera said, shaking her head. "She's your mom?" she asked me.

"She brought me into this world, but I was raised by a human woman from Salem, Massachusetts. She's the only mom I've ever known." I took a step toward Sera.

"Don't listen to her. She lies. That's all she does. You can't trust her," Mizrabel hissed. "Now go. You need to get back to Sharra. The moon will be in the right spot tomorrow night. Do it then and not a moment sooner."

"Miss Croswell?" She kept switching her gaze from me to Mizrabel.

"It's okay, Sera," I said. It was better if she was gone. I didn't want her to be near when Mizrabel and I fought.

She nodded and I tried to smile. "I'll see you back at school."

The girl grabbed hold of the hourglass with her free hand and was instantly gone.

Her skills with magic really were impressive.

"There, now it's just the two of us. We can have some mother daughter time." She shoved Lawson's dead body back inside the crypt.

It snapped shut, but she didn't take her eyes from me.

"Why are you doing this?" Now that Sera was gone, I no longer wanted to be here either.

I got the best of Mizrabel once and felt sure she wouldn't allow me to do so again.

Still, the words to the spell I used on her before flitted across my mind. Rua-tha grislin-gr we-nwillow.

"Revenge," Mizrabel said simply. "I thought you already knew that."

"But then why not go after Abernathy?" His magic could defeat her, I felt certain.

A glimmer of fear crossed her face. "I could. He's weak after what he did for you, but I'd rather make everyone he loves hurt instead."

In that moment, I understood her.

At least to an extent.

Even though Abernathy didn't choose her, she still loved him.

Was this how Gabe and I would turn out?

Him going about his life while I suffered to the point that I became bitter and lashed out in revenge.

My eyes went to my wrist and the bracelet with the wings on it.

"I'm sorry, Mizrabel," I said quietly.

"You will be," she said and vanished.

I returned to my room in Sharra.

Exhausted, I got ready for bed.

Under the covers, I stared at the ceiling as sadness for Mizrabel weighed heavily on me.

Was I becoming my mother?

OceanofPDF.com

TIES THICKER THAN BLOOD

IN THE CAFETERIA the next morning, there was a happy buzz in the air.

The dance was that night.

Curfew was being extended to midnight and the students were excited.

I got myself some scrambled eggs, cottage cheese, and salsa, and coffee to drink as well as some water.

I searched for Gabe and spotted him over by Professor Pops.

The two of them were having a serious conversation and I didn't want to interrupt.

"Miss Croswell," Heather called, waving.

I went over and sat across from her.

She was by herself, which would give me the chance I needed to tell her what I found out.

"Hello, Heather," I said, sipping my coffee.

Mixing the eggs, cottage cheese, and salsa together, I took a bite. Then noticed Heather watching me.

"What? It's good. You should try it sometime. High in protein and delicious."

The girl made a face before dabbing some peanut butter on her banana and taking another bite.

Gabe and Pops were done talking and he waved me over.

I held up a finger.

"So, Heather, I wanted to give you an update on some things." I told her what Abernathy said and watched her joy deflate into sorrow. I couldn't imagine what she must be going through.

"I'm so sorry," I finally said.

Tears wet her eyes, but she sniffled and didn't let them fall. "Thanks for letting me know."

My heart broke for her. "Is there anything I can do for you?" I wished I could just fix the whole situation and make it all work out.

Life was so damn unfair sometimes.

Heather shook her head as Kaylan and Kimberly walked over and sat on either side her.

"I'll see you girls tonight," I said, picking up my tray and heading over to Gabe and Pops.

The men smiled as I made my way over.

My heart fluttered at the sight of Gabe.

He wore a white tee shirt that was tight against his biceps and brought out the tan of his skin.

"Hey," I said as I sat next to him.

He caressed my hand.

I glanced at Pops and he nodded.

"Everything is fine," he said. "We were just discussing whether or not he should be here."

That surprised me. "You don't agree with Gabe's decision to live here and teach?"

Pops' face softened. "I think it's wonderful what he's doing, and I wish you both the very best. The problem is, he hasn't resolved his issues with a certain archangel. He's only postponed them. At some point, Jesse is going to realize where Gabe is, and he might just show up here and punish my son on the spot." He gave Gabe a pointed look as he spoke.

Pops was such an amazing father. He truly thought of Gabe as his son, even though Gabe was adopted.

Some ties were thicker than blood.

"Should I go talk to this Jesse?" It made me nervous to think of confronting an archangel. This was the first time I'd heard Gabe's boss called that.

From what I knew of the angel hierarchy, an archangel was the highest, strongest form of angel while the chayot were one of the lowest.

Gabe shook his head adamantly, and I saw real fear on his face. "No. Please. He might smite you or worse."

"What if we went together? Then he could see how much we love each other?" There had to be something we could try.

If we were going to make our relationship work, we needed to get rid of the obstacles.

Pops sipped deep red liquid from his fancy pewter goblet.

I knew it was blood.

"It's a very kind offer, Cindy, but that isn't a good idea. With angels, there isn't any gray area. It's only good and bad," the old vampire said.

"And you and I are considered bad," I replied, meeting Gabe's eyes.

The food I'd eaten started to turn in my stomach.

I wanted to wallow in my disgust and walk away, but that wouldn't solve anything.

"To most chayot? Basically, yes," Pops said. "They've given me leeway since I raised Gabe when his father didn't want him, but they barely tolerate me."

Gabe sat back, obviously feeling the same way I was.

Since there was nothing I could do about his boss at the moment, I decided to change the subject. "Last night, I went back to Polonias."

They both relaxed, though I saw Gabe was upset I hadn't asked him to go with me.

I told them about Sera, that I strongly suspected she was raising Lawson from the dead, and what Mizrabel said.

Professor Pops stood. "I may have a copy of the spell she's using. It's incredibly dark. When I find it, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," I said as he walked away.

"What are you going to do about Jesse?" I asked when I believed Pops was far enough away that he wouldn't overhear our conversation.

Gabe pushed his leftover hash browns around his plate. "There is nothing to do. If he finds out, he'll be angry, but like I said before and was telling Pops, I can step down as leader. I'm sick of it anyway. I've been doing it for years and I can't have a life when I'm constantly worried about humanity."

I remembered well the many times while still in high school he left to go save someone or take a meeting with the human governments or the chayot or the other angelic beings he answered to.

Everyone else came first.

"If that's what you want, I'll support you. I like having you here," I said.

Gabe held out his hand and I took it. "I like being here." He laced his fingers with mine. "So about this dance? I hear the theme is Hocus Pocus. Does that mean I get to go around shouting, 'Amok, amok, amok'?" His lips turned up in a teasing grin.

I snort-laughed. This long-buried playful side of Gabe had my insides doing cartwheels. "If you did, that would be great."

"Amok, amok, amok." He winked before stabbing a piece of fruit and shoving it in his mouth.

I watched him chew, thinking he could chew on me anytime.

And more. Much, much more.

I bit my bottom lip.

"Why Miss Croswell, are you having dirty thoughts about me?" He wiggled his eyebrows before raising them in question.

"Wouldn't you like to know." I sipped my coffee, watching him and

hoping this Gabe stayed with me forever.

Because I loved this Gabe.

Hell, I loved every part of Gabe, but there were parts of him that didn't love me.

And that effing hurt.

He couldn't just show up and make promises and expect me to be willing to believe him. Not after all he'd done.

It had to do with trust, and trust took time to build. A small, scared part of me wondered if he was using me for an undercover covert operation meant to extinguish all supernaturals.

I shook that away, stabbing a piece of egg and choking it down.

"Hey," he said.

I swallowed and cleared my throat. "Yeah?"

The way he looked at me let me see he worried about what I was thinking, but he didn't voice those concerns.

Switching gears, he said, "I know we need to stop Sera, and we need to do it tonight. So, what's your plan?"

OceanofPDF.com

IS HE AN ANGEL

My plan wasn't elaborate.

Find Sera.

Talk to her.

Make her see what a foolish idea it was to bring someone back from the dead.

According to Gabe that wasn't a plan at all.

Stuffing back several very rude comments revolving around him being the leader of an army of angels, I asked him what he would do.

Turned out his plan was basically the same as mine, just more elegant.

I thought it over as I put on my Sarah Sanderson costume.

Since I was blond, she seemed the easiest Sanderson sister for me to imitate, though she was a bit too bubbly for me.

Still, she was twisted enough and dressing as her would be fun.

I found the costume online and had my mom purchase it for me in the human realm then I brought it back to Sharra for tonight's party.

The bodice was lavender and laced up the back, so it fit tight against my body.

The skirt came to mid-calf.

At the hips, the material was dark purple and the panel in the center was fuchsia.

I wore black lace-up ankle boots with black tights and matching long, lacy sleeves.

My hair was easy. I parted it on the side and put natural waves in it.

To copy the character, I did my eye makeup dark - much darker

than I normally wore it.

The diamond star dangling from my choker went with the outfit well enough that I left it on and I chose matching small diamond studs for my ears.

Gabe was meeting me at the dance since I was going early to make sure the music and haunted house were ready to go.

When I arrived, I couldn't help but smile, impressed by the decorating committee's hard work.

The ballroom was transformed.

Between the real and magical decorations, the whole area looked like a scene straight out of the movie.

"What do you think, Miss Croswell?" Jaxon asked, his smile filling his whole face.

He was dressed like one of the townspeople in brown pants and a matching brown vest with a white pullover shirt underneath. His blond hair was disheveled and there was a smudge on one of his cheeks.

Even in costume, he had that all-American boy look about him.

On his arm was his date, Melinda.

She was a vampire and tonight she looked the part.

Her short red dress was cut low and her dark hair was straight and slick.

She wore black eyeliner to enhance her eyes and blood red lipstick.

Her outfit came as a bit of a shock.

The girl was usually more reserved.

I smiled at them both. "You and your committee did a wonderful job. I'm impressed with how it all turned out."

"You helped," Melinda said, smiling and flashing her pearly white fangs.

We'd been lucky none of the vampire kids had tried to eat the

other students.

It helped that Sharra's food was enchanted to taste like whatever the one eating it craved, so the vampires had a few extra dietary options here.

"I hardly did anything," I said, my gaze turning toward the entrance of the haunted house. "Have you been inside?" I asked, a knot forming in my stomach.

Melinda shuddered. "It's scary," she said, clinging a little more tightly to Jaxon.

He smiled dotingly at his date. "It isn't too bad, but that girl, Sera had a lot of, um, curious opinions."

Spoken like a born politician. This kid could run for president someday.

"Great," I said just as non-committedly. "I'll check it out in a bit." I did a quick perusal of the food and drink tables.

Chips, cookies, and other assorted treats were on one table while a cauldron of smoking drinks and plastic cups were on the other.

"Is there anything else that needs to be handled before the dance starts?" I asked Jaxon.

A large clock in a magically created clock tower showed the dance would start in ten minutes.

Jaxon shook his head. "Nope, it's ready."

"I'm going to make sure the DJ has everything he needs. Have fun tonight, you two," I said before heading over to the DJ's table.

The student handling the music tonight was Bale.

His costume consisted of a black tee shirt with the word SCARY printed across the chest in red along with jeans slung low on his hips.

His black hair was back in a man-bun.

"Evening, Bale. You have everything?"

"Oh, hey, Miss Croswell." He darted a look at me before sticking the end of a chord into the back of a record player. "I just need to

hook this in and turn this on - " He paused, flipping a switch, and static crackled through the speakers. "Done." He smiled triumphantly.

"Great. Thanks for doing this. Have a fun night."

"I will," he said, already focusing of the music.

I turned, facing the front door, and saw Gabe standing near the entrance.

The angelic man took my breath away.

Definitely movie star material.

But it wasn't his beyond gorgeous looks or the way his blue jeans hung low on his hips.

It wasn't even the way his white shirt clung to his, torso showing off all of his muscles. It was the giant white wings on his back. They were fully extended, showing off like a peacock hoping to attract his mate.

It was working.

I thought he said he didn't have wings.

Had he lied?

Or was this a new development?

Were they fake? I didn't know which answer I hoped for the most.

Gabe saw me and smiled, though I sensed slight hesitation in him as he caught hold of my gaze.

His wings retracted and he raised an eyebrow, questioning.

Before I could say or do anything, Kaylan and Kimberly came in, walking past him, unable to keep from ogling.

"Damn, he's fine," Kimberly said, fanning her face.

"Yeah, he is. Shit, I wish he wasn't going to teach here. That probably means he's off limits," Kaylan added.

"He isn't that much older than us. Only like - " Kimberly began.

She paused as I came up behind them, putting a hand on each other their shoulders and leaning between them.

"Too many years, girls. Gross. He's old." I made a face and they laughed.

"Well, right, that's what I was going to say," Kimberly said, but she kept her eyes on Gabe. "Is he, like, an angel?" she asked, inquisitive.

"I know he's your man, Miss Croswell, but he is fine," Kaylan added.

"I totally agree," I responded, my body warming all over.

The man was definitely fine.

"Where's Heather?" I asked, changing the subject.

They looked around, surprised.

"She was right behind us," Kaylan said.

"Yeah, she's dressed like Winifred. Her costume is awesome!" Kimberly put her hands on her hips. "What happened to her?"

"Sera, probably," Kaylan said, her features turning angry. "Sera came up behind us when we were walking and she kept making snide comments,"

"It's alright," I lied, my intuition going into overdrive, worried Sera intended to use Heather in some way to bring Lawson back to life.

I needed to find them immediately.

Saying goodbye, I headed over to Gabe.

"Whoa, you look amazing. It's been a while since I've seen the movie, but you look just like the blond sister," Gabe said, taking me in.

He wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me against him.

He smelled like heaven - a little spicy and warm with a hint of fresh air.

Unable to resist, I touched his large, white wings.

"Thanks," I said, though not with enthusiasm.

I was too worried about Heather and Sera.

"I thought you didn't have wings," I said, thinking they felt alive, as

though they contained part of Gabe's soul.

But I remembered a dream Snow had about him a long time ago, and thought they looked exactly as she imagined.

"Tell me now," I said, stepping back and crossing my arms.

"They are real," he began, holding up his hands.

My mouth dropped open in outrage. He had lied.

"But I didn't lie," he went on quickly. "They only appeared a few days ago. Jesse said that sometimes happens with half angels, especially when they do as much for the humans as I have." His eyes bore into mine as he took hold of my arms gently. "I swear."

I sensed he was telling the truth.

Relief washed over me and I nodded.

"You always did like attention," I said, letting myself trust him further.

"True." He chuckled, kissing my cheek.

"So you can just make them go away?" I asked, studying them more closely. They were beautiful, like him, and seemed to fit him perfectly. If I were to design wings for Gabe, they would look just like these.

"I can," he said, watching me. "I guess that's one benefit of being only half chayot." He seemed to be waiting for a response and I tried to smile, but my mind kept going back to Sera and Heather. Where were they?

He moved in closer. "What's wrong?"

"Heather is missing, and Sera isn't around. We need to find them both before something bad happens."

Understanding washed over his features. "I'm with you," he said, grimly. "What can I do to help?"

"Did you see either of them before you came in?" I stepped from his grasp, walking over to Snow to ask if she'd seen either of them recently.

Coco was heading over to the stage but waved.

I waved back.

"Hi," Snow said, hugging me. "You look fabulous."

"Thanks," I said. She definitely looked like the queen of the vampires, in a deep red dress covered in black lace.

"Where's Dorian?" I asked, thinking the more supernaturals we had looking for the girls, the faster we would find them.

"He's with Jasmine. She wanted to come to the party and when we told her she wasn't old enough, she had a serious meltdown. He's reading her favorite stories. Also, there was talk of a dance-off before bed." She smiled wryly, though I sensed she was nervous too. I

couldn't imagine having a toddler at our age.

It happened, of course, but I certainly wasn't ready.

"Hey, Gabe," Snow said, taking in his amazing white wings. "Where did these come from?"

He quickly told her as I scanned the room for Sera.

"What can I do?" Snow asked when Gabe finished.

"Stay here and if you see her, let me know. I'm worried she's going through with her plan now, and that somehow she involved Heather." I wanted Snow to come with me, but there were many other students here at the dance who needed her protection if we couldn't get to Sera in time to stop her.

Snow nodded. "Go after her. I'll make sure everyone here stays safe."

"Thanks." I hugged her again.

Gabe waved before following me out of the ballroom and into the hall.

OceanofPDF.com

HAUNTED HOUSE

"CAN'T YOU DO A LOCATOR SPELL?" Gabe asked.

"I can try." Locator spells could sometimes get wonky in Sharra because of all the enchantments surrounding the land and especially the academy.

Gabe continued to scan our surroundings. "At this point it's better than nothing."

"True. Let's get to the basement." I needed an item from there.

Passing more groups of kids in costumes, none of whom were Heather or Sera, we exited the hall and hurried down several flights of stairs and hallways until we reached my classroom.

There, I went to a shelf, searching for a map of Sharra.

When I pulled it from its spot, I knocked another paper onto the floor.

Frustrated, I picked it up and was about to put it back, but there was a word scrawled along one corner in old-timey writing.

I knew the word because I'd seen it before in The Eye of Abernathy.

The word was resuante and it meant resurrection.

"Do we have time for this?" Gabe asked when I handed him the map.

"I think we should make time. I'm quite certain this is the spell Sera is using to bring Lawson back to life."

While Gabe unfolded the map, I unfolded the paper in my hand.

My pulse quickened as I read the title at the top. Resuante da Morente, which translated to Resurrection of the Dead.

Moving an old skull out of the way, Gabe spread the map of Sharra

on the table. "Wouldn't she have the paper with her?"

"Not if Mizrabel is guiding her." I studied incantation as well as the materials and actions needed, doing my best to translate for Gabe.

At the bottom of the page, in small letters, it said that only someone with the power to heal could perform the spell.

My heart rate sped up.

Like a puzzle, the pieces locked into place and I finally understood.

Mizrabel must've known Sera had unicorn magic.

But that wasn't Sera's only magical strength.

I remembered how the obsidian orb had glowed gold during the opening ceremony. There weren't a lot of dragons in the world - the only one I'd ever met was Abernathy, but Snow told me there was another living in the Mediterranean Sea.

Since Sera's magic was also part dragon, it looked like there was about a fifty percent chance she and I were related.

"Need anything else?" Gabe asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"I got it." I went to a drawer and retrieved a letter opener with an especially sharp tip.

With it I pricked my finger, dripping blood onto the map - which was enchanted, so my blood couldn't ruin it.

Then I spoke the words that would initiate the locator spell.

If my blood and Sera's were the same, it would find her.

Gabe's eyebrows raised in surprise but he didn't comment.

He'd seen me perform magic enough to recognize this wasn't how a locator spell usually worked.

The blood began to swirl and move until only a tiny dot remained. I pointed at it triumphantly. "It's got her."

Gabe bent his head in closer. "It looks like she's in the ballroom," he said, giving me a bewildered look.

We were just there, and no one had seen her.

I shook my head. She wasn't in the ballroom, but beside it, in the haunted house.

I knew from Jaxson's description that the whole thing was set up as a maze full of just about every magical pitfall the students could dream up.

Tracking her down in there would be especially difficult.

Sera and I were related somehow, so the fastest way to find her was by following the trail left by our shared blood.

I didn't mention any of this to Gabe.

There wasn't time to go into details now and I couldn't dwell on it without becoming distracted.

I focused on finding Sera and shoving any other questions to the back of my mind.

We could figure things out once everyone was safe.

"Fereneth arivia," I said. The glowing red dot lifted off the page and grew as it floated toward the door.

"We're following it?" Gabe asked.

"Unless you have a better idea." As leader of the chayot, he had assembled and carried out countless plans and tracked down and captured many supernaturals.

He could see things I didn't even know to look for.

"In Sharra, I'll defer to you." He winked, taking my hand, letting me lead.

I squeezed his fingers gently. Glad he was with me.

When we reached the ballroom, we walked along the edges to the entrance of the haunted house.

There was a line to get in.

"How long have you been waiting?" I asked the couple last in line.

"Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty," Beckham said.

The girl on his arm giggled. "I'm not really sure."

"Alright." I pushed my way up to the front, going straight to the students guarding the door.

"Hey, Sienna, Mr. Henry and I need to get in. Step aside, please."

She glanced nervously at me and then at Marcus. "We can't, Miss Croswell." Her eyes were wide with fear. "It's too full," she added.

I wasn't buying her lies for a second, knowing Sera had put her and Marcus up to keeping everyone else out.

What did she have over them?

"Either the two of you move out of the way, or you will both be expelled from the school and sent back to the human realm tonight. Am I clear?" It was harsh, because most of these students couldn't survive there alone, but I needed them to understand how serious I was.

She gulped and nodded before she and Marcus stood back, parting the red curtain.

The red dot glowed in the darkness, leading us forward.

Creepy music played softly in the background as we stepped into a room where two big-eyed aliens were pulling intestines from a corpse.

One of them held a wand and was looking at it in surprise as glitter shot from the tip.

The other had a witch's hat and what looked like fangs.

Blood covered the aliens' long fingers as well as the hat and wand, as if they had removed the items from inside the body.

"Twisted," I said.

"Ingenious," Gabe corrected.

He looked like a kid in a candy store and I remembered how he and his brothers, and Snow and I all used to watch horror films together in high school.

Nostalgia washed over me like a warm hug.

I'd wanted to be an adult so badly back then.

Now all I wanted was to return to those carefree days when all I had to worry about was which ring to wear in my belly button and how much skin I could show in school without getting into trouble.

Gabe released my arm, his body going on high alert. "Your red dot is leaving us behind," he said, pulling me back to the present.

We followed the dot into the maze.

"Keep your eyes open. I don't know what Sera has planned, but I know Mizrabel is involved."

He squeezed my hand and then released it. "We'll get through this together. I have your back. Promise."

"And I have yours," I said.

The maze looked like it was made of thick, green bushes covered in fake cobwebs. Enchanted spiders appeared, clicking their mandibles as they studied us with their beady eyes before skittering out of sight.

Overhead, twinkling lights cast an eerie light that didn't really allow us to see. Bats flapped just above our heads, their weird noises making me nervous.

The students had really outdone themselves.

If I hadn't been concerned about Sera and Mizrabel, this would've been a blast.

After walking for what seemed like an hour, I pulled on Gabe's arm, directing him to stop. Not too far off were the sounds of sniffling and crying.

"We're getting close," I said.

Gabe went to reach for the double swords he usually wore at his back but hit his hand on his own wings instead. "Damn," he whispered. "I forgot."

He wasn't allowed to have weapons on him in the school, but I wasn't too worried. He could fight better than most since he and his brothers had trained with Kenmei and Pops for years.

Though with so much magic about, his bare hands might be like

bringing a knife to a gun fight.

We made our way soundlessly around several more bends. "Diminith," I whispered, calling the red dot back to me.

It lingered on my open hand for the briefest moment before entering my skin and going out.

Gabe watched in awe and I realized how much of my magic I'd hidden from him.

If we were going to be together, he needed to see and accept all of me.

"You're seriously the coolest person I know," he whispered.

Tingles crawled happily along my skin. That was exactly what I needed to hear.

"Thanks. You're pretty effing cool yourself."

"Do you want to go in magic blazing?" he asked with none of his usual disdain for my gifts.

"Let's listen first," I said.

Sera was my student.

I didn't want to hurt her, but if she was hurting Heather, then I wouldn't have a choice.

Fear rushed up my spine.

This was a lose-lose situation and I didn't like it one bit.

OceanofPDF.com

SIPHON HER POWERS

I PEEKED around the hedge and saw a plain room.

Several students were off to one side, behind bars.

Most of them were crying, though a few seemed more interested than afraid.

Maybe they thought this was all part of the fun.

Standing over a body in the center of an enormous seven-pointed star, Sera was chanting words I mostly didn't understand.

Large black candles burned a peculiar blue light at each of the tips.

On the ground nearby, wrapped up in make-shift cocoon, lay Heather.

Her eyes were shut, and there was a large splotch of red on her chest.

I covered my mouth to keep from screaming, praying she wasn't dead.

Gabe noticed her too.

He looked ready to attack.

But where was Mizrabel?

I didn't want him to rush in there until we knew what we were up against.

Thankfully, he was still letting me take the lead.

Sera held a wooden bowl in one hand and knelt down, placing the bowl on the ground beside Heather though she was clearly talking to someone else.

"Your life ended abruptly. Let the blood of this witch bring you back that you may live as you were meant to." As Sera spoke, smoke rose from the bowl and swirled above her before moving over to

Heather's slack body.

"We need to do something now, Cin," Gabe hissed.

"I know," I said.

But what? What could we do to stop this?

It dawned on me why Sera had selected Heather as her victim.

It was because while Heather considered herself a girl, she still had boy parts.

And Lawson was going to come back to life using Heather's body.

I could not let that happen.

"Sera, stop this!" I shouted, coming around the corner and into plain sight.

Gabe stood beside me, exuding confidence and strength.

Even though I didn't know what I would do next, I was grateful to have him nearby.

Sera was smiling, but it faltered when she saw Gabe.

"He has wings?" she asked. Then shook her head as though trying not to be distracted. "I wondered when you would show," she said to me as she stepped out of the circle.

Beyond her, I saw the smoke had completely enveloped Heather.

With lightning speed, Sera sent a surge of magic at Gabe. It was so fast, I didn't have time to react and the magic hit him square in the chest.

He sailed backward, landing in the bushes.

At once, a thousand spiders were on him.

I went to help, except Mizrabel appeared in front of me.

"Hello, daughter," she said, her eyes glimmering with hatred.

"I see you figured it out," she said, glancing at Sera.

"Can you believe your father? He's a whore, that's for sure. There are more like Sera too, Cinderella. You aren't special. You and Sera are just two of his many children." She smirked. "And I intend to make

you all suffer."

"What do you mean?" Sera asked.

I glanced back and saw confusion in her eyes.

"You told me I was special," she went on, pleading. "I did everything you asked. Now give me my reward."

From what I knew of Mizrabel, the only thing she intended to give Sera was a short life.

"Oh, you were special enough," Mizrabel said. "I wouldn't have been able to bring Lawson back without the unicorn in you." Mizrabel sent an eruption of magic at the girl, causing her to drop to the ground like a sack of onions. "But I don't need you anymore."

I didn't know who to help first.

Gabe? Heather?

Sera was closest, so I ran to her.

From the corner of my vision, I saw Mizrabel getting ready to send a blast of magic my way.

From deep within my mind came a spell I hadn't used before.

I mumbled the words in my head, and a nearly invisible barrier blocked the assault just before it struck me.

As Mizrabel's magic surged over it, the outline of the barrier looked like a shield.

I snatched it from the air and shouted the spell I used to stop Mizrabel the first time.

She cackled and side-stepped it.

"Come now, Cinderella. You are the daughter of a dragon and a sorceress. You can do better than that." She sent another surge of magic at me, and I blocked it again, holding the shield over my head.

Before I had the chance to counter, she sent another blast at me.

And another and another, until I felt the shield weakening as well as my strength.

I fell to my knees, fighting the tears springing into my eyes.

Now wasn't the time to cry.

"Help me," I whispered.

Sera moaned beside me and tried to sit up.

"Sera," I said, but didn't have time to say more as Mizrabel sent several more attacks at me.

A quick glance at Heather revealed an aura of Lawson's body forming above hers. I needed to stop it, but I had no idea how.

"Once I've ended you and Sera, I'll return to Polonias and kill Polly and her child. There's also a boy named Troy roaming around the human realm somewhere. I'll take care of him as well." She sent another, stronger force of magic into me as she spoke, the stream of purple forcing me back and into Sera.

"Are we sisters?" the girl whispered, trying to understand.

I nodded once as I tried to stand.

"I didn't know," Sera said.

"Neither did I." Putting my head down, I used my thighs to get to my feet.

With all my might, I shoved Mizrabel's magic away.

Abruptly it stopped, causing me to fall forward and hit my face on the floor.

I groaned, and scrambled to my feet in time to see Gabe had his arms around Mizrabel's, trapping them beneath his.

She shook and screamed in frustration.

"Let me go. Release me!"

"Gabe," I cried.

Mizrabel would do stop at nothing to hurt me, and I didn't want to lose him.

He looked at me, his bright green eyes overflowing with love.

In that moment, I knew he would do anything for me.

"I love you," he said as his wings came forward and closed around Mizrabel, a bright light shining around them both.

It was so bright, I had to look away.

And then it was gone.

So were Mizrabel and Gabe.

"Gabe," I shouted, standing and tripping over my costume.

Where was he?

How could I get him back?

"Miss Croswell, help me," Sera said, sounding frantic.

I turned and saw she was trying to move the bowl away from Heather, but it wouldn't budge.

Lawson's form hovered above her, looking sinister.

"You cannot stop what you've already started," he said with a sneer.

Fury boiled in my veins, like liquid gold, and it surged through me until it reached my brain.

Every page of The Eye of Abernathy flipped through my mind, each spell searing itself on my bones.

With each spell, the power within me grew until I felt ten feet tall and covered in magical armor.

Sera gasped and covered her mouth. "You're glowing."

I closed my eyes, holding back a scream.

The burning consumed me until I thought I would explode.

Then it was gone.

A ragged breath left me as my eyes opened and I saw smoke.

I studied my fingers.

They looked the same, but I felt wholly different.

And I knew what I needed to do to stop Lawson and save Heather.

Walking over to his smoky outline, I wrapped my arms around

Lawson, like I was giving him a hug, and spoke the words that chanted in my brain.

Lawson howled in fury. "Stop this. You cannot do this. I deserve to live!"

I didn't respond, just hung onto him until he was gone and my arms collapsed around air.

"You did it," Sera said, her hands still covering her mouth. "He's gone."

But I wasn't done yet. "I need your help," I called to her.

I knew a spell that would heal Heather, but it required Sera's unicorn magic to work.

She came over, and I pulled her down so we were both kneeling beside Heather.

"Place your hands on her wound," I said, with a voice I didn't recognize.

Once her hands were over the blood leaking out of Heather, Sera looked at me.

"Repeat after me." The spell would siphon away Sera's healing powers, but it was the least Sera could do after nearly killing Heather.

When she finished speaking, the wonder on Sera's face turned to pain. "It hurts," she said, about to remove her hands.

"I'm sorry, Sera, but you must keep your hands where they are or Heather will die." I placed my hands over hers, holding them in place.

"I don't want to," she said, wincing and trying to pull her hands away.

"You must." I wrapped my magic around her, refusing to let her break contact with Heather's chest.

After a few more seconds, Sera moaned, "I think I'm dying."

I ground my teeth together, trying to keep my cool.

Heather was on the brink of death at Sera's hands and Sera was whining that helping Heather hurt.

"No, Sera. The unicorn magic within you is restoring Heather's health. But doing so requires a sacrifice. You aren't going to die, but you are losing the part of your magic that is unicorn." I didn't add that it was for the best.

Unicorn was powerful magic, and she'd proven more than once that she couldn't be trusted with it.

I didn't remove my hands until Heather opened her eyes.

"Miss Croswell," she said, her words gravelly and her expression confused.

A smile crept over my face and I sat back, relieved.

"Hi, Heather."

She saw Sera and shied away.

"It's alright," I said gently. "Sera healed you."

Tears fell onto Sera's cheeks. "I'm really sorry, Heather. So, so sorry."

She sounded like she meant it.

That was a good start, but it would be a long while before I could trust her.

"You can remove your hands now," I told Sera.

She did, staring at them like she didn't recognize them.

"Where am I?" Heather asked. "I thought I was dead."

I used a spell to dissolve the cocoon covering her. "You're in the school and it's over," I said, not wanted to scare her by giving her all of the gory details.

"Can you stand?" I stood and held out a hand for her.

Beside us Sera stood as well.

After I hugged Heather and verified the girl seemed physically fine, I glared at Sera.

"Get those other students out of the cage. Now," I said.

Sera scurried over and undid the lock. "Sorry," she said as each

student passed her.

No one responded.

No one said anything as they ran from the room, desperate to get out of there as soon as possible.

I didn't blame them.

"Let's get you to Heathcliff," I said, putting one arm around Heather's waist.

"Thank you," she said as we started from the room.

I glanced over at Sera.

She looked lost and I realized that was her problem from the beginning.

She was a lost little girl in need of guidance.

Heather followed my gaze. "I can get to Heathcliff on my own if you need to speak with Sera."

I nodded. "Thank you. I'll check in on you in a little while."

She hobbled over to the hedge and stopped. "I forgive you, Sera," she said quietly and left the room.

My hands went to my hips and I faced Sera.

She might be my half-sister, but she was also a menace. Arrogant, cold hearted, and she cared little for anyone but herself.

Sera wrapped her arms around herself. "I know," she said. "I don't know what came over me and I really am sorry."

"I appreciate the apology. But words aren't enough this time. There will be consequences."

"I understand." She looked at me. Her eyes filled with tears. "Whatever the consequences, I'll accept them if you promise we can get to know one another. I've never had a real family."

I took hold of one of her arms and opened a portal to the basement. Then with the flick of my wrist I opened the door to the cell. "Inside," I said softly.

Her head hanging down, she went in.

As I closed the door and sealed it with magic, I breathed a sigh of relief. For now, she couldn't hurt anyone else. "I promise to visit soon."

Sera sat on the bed, her hands in her lap. "My real father is a dragon?"

"It would seem so." I went to the door, opening it. "Get some rest. I'll be back."

She swallowed as she shook her head.

Before I shut the door, I heard her call, "Cindy?"

I poked my head back in, about to remind her to call me Miss Croswell, but since she was my sister, it didn't seem appropriate. "Yes?"

"I'm glad Heather isn't dead." She came to the bars, her face looking so sad, so lost.

"Had Heather died - " I shook my head. "It's good she's alive."

"That guy who was with you - Was he an angel? What happened to him and Mizrabel?"

I snapped my mouth shut, afraid I might scream.

I didn't know what happened to Gabe or even where to start looking for him.

Finally, I answered.

"I don't know. Goodnight." With that, I closed the door, locking it behind me.

OceanofPDF.com

WHAT HAPPENED TO GABE

BY THE TIME I arrived in the ballroom, all the students had been sent to bed.

Snow sat at the head of a long table where the teachers were discussing the situation.

"Is she locked up?" Snow asked me, her face concerned.

"She is," I said, falling into an empty chair.

For the next two hours we discussed what transpired and what needed to happen next.

I explained what I knew, which wasn't a lot.

I didn't know what happened to Gabe and Mizrabel, but I would find out.

Professor Pops agreed to help.

Coco would call a special gathering in the ballroom the following morning and have the therapist on hand for those who needed to talk.

For many of the students, the academy was all they had and if they couldn't feel safe here, then where could they go?

Classes would resume like normal on Monday and Tori agreed to teach my charms and spells classes until I returned.

We were short staffed already, but I was of no use to anyone until I knew what happened to Gabe.

The meeting over, I agreed to meet Pops at his house in the morning. But first I wanted to speak with Snow in private.

Neither of us said anything until we knew we could speak freely.

Seated in her living room, I explained how I forced Sera to give up her unicorn gift in order to heal Heather.

Guilt riddled my heart. "Was there a better choice?"

"You did the right thing," Snow said, shaking her head. "Heather would've died otherwise."

She sipped her drink before setting it down and leaning over to pat my knee. "There was no other call to make. I would've done the same thing."

I appreciated her saying so, but it didn't lessen the shame I felt, and I was about to tell her so when Jasmine came into the room.

"Mommy," she said, flying over, her wings carrying her right into Snow's outstretched arms.

"Jasmine, what are you doing out of bed?" Snow snuggled against the tiny vampire girl before giving her a playfully stern look.

"It was all the commotion." Jasmine wriggled out of her mom's arms and came over to me. "Cinderella," she whispered softly, her strange violet eyes watching me while her wings fluttered behind her.

"Call her Cindy," Snow said.

Jasmine didn't answer as she stroked my cheek and hair. With each caress of her little hand, I felt myself relax.

"It's going to be okay. Gabe is alive. He's just in the place where angels go when they aren't on Earth."

"Oh?" I said, my heart beginning to race. "How do you know this?"

She gave me a bright smile. "I know things."

The little girl seemed to have more wisdom than all of us combined.

"What do you think I should do about her?" I asked Jasmine, even though the little vampire had no idea who I was talking about.

Jasmine placed a hand on my cheek. "Sera shouldn't remain in Sharra. She is dangerous because she is like a wounded animal. She cannot be healed here, and she cannot be put down. There is a place in the human realm where she should go."

My mouth fell open and I looked at Snow. How did Jasmine know so much?

"Are you talking about the prison Gabe helped the humans to build? Isn't it more dangerous to send her there?"

Jasmine shrugged. "Perhaps, but unless you plan on killing her, there isn't a safer place."

Awed beyond belief, I glanced at Snow again as a magical thought formed. "What if we created a realm specifically for prisoners? They wouldn't be able to leave. We could keep it protected and secret. Then we could rehabilitate them at our whim."

"That is a great idea," Snow said, sitting beside me.

"That is a great idea," Jasmine repeated. Her eyes bore into mine. "Your magic is almost as strong as Abernathy's. I can feel your power."

I gulped as I remembered how I felt before sending Lawson away.

"You can help Mommy create a realm the way Abernathy and Mizrabel created Polonias."

Even Snow looked shocked at her words. "You know of Polonias."

"I see all things," Jasmine responded.

"Well, isn't that wonderful," Snow said, though she looked more scared than happy.

To me, Snow went on, "Let's get right on that." She stood and held out her hand for Jasmine. "But first, you need to get back to bed."

"I don't want to, Mommy. Let me help." The little girl put her hands on her hips and flew beside her mom, her face at level with Snow's.

"What about Mizrabel?" I asked, thinking Jasmine might know since she knew about Gabe.

Jasmine turned back to me, her eyes looking down at her hands before she considered me. "Your mother is no more, Cinderella. I am sorry," she finally whispered.

I gasped, thinking this girl was way to powerful for her own good. It was almost unsettling.

Snow lifted Jasmine into her arms. "Tell Cindy goodnight," she

said, and I sensed the worry in my best friend as well.

"Goodnight, Cinderella."

"Night," Snow said, squeezing my outstretched hand.

When they reached the door leading to their bedchambers, Jasmine called out. "Don't worry. Everything with Gabe will work out."

I didn't use magic to get back to my room, needing the time to reflect as I walked.

When I reached my room, I removed my costume and took hold of my diamond star necklace. I didn't know where he was or how I would get there but I needed to see him.

Closing my eyes, I thought of Gabe and how much I loved him.

I imagined his face and his green eyes and his newly acquired white wings.

I thought of kissing him and the way he'd looked at me tonight. I thought about how much I loved him.

And suddenly I was travelling.

But to where?

When I stopped I opened my eyes.

I was in a completely white or silver room. It was so bright, my eyes couldn't focus on anything.

"Where am I?"

A man appeared. His clothes were the same silvery-white as the room, a stark contrast to his black hair, dark skin, and ebony wings.

He seemed to be glowing.

"You are in the angel realm. My name is Jesse and you are Cinderella." It wasn't a question. He knew exactly who I was.

I wanted to correct him but decided prudence might be the safest option. "You're Gabe's boss, the archangel over the chayot," I said, studying him.

"So he has mentioned me." He gave a mirthless smile. "Did he also tell you it is against policy for a chayot to be in a relationship with a supernatural?"

"He did mention that, yes," I said reluctantly, crossing my arms, feeling the need to protect myself.

"Well that's something." His grim smile got bigger. "Have a seat. Let's chat." A chair appeared behind me as did one behind him, though his had an opening in the back for his wings. He sat and I followed. "Why don't you tell me why you're here?" He crossed one leg over the other and clasped his hands together.

"I came to make sure Gabe is okay," I said, trying to sound confident.

"I can assure you he is. He saved you as well as a bunch of supernaturals from a woman called Mizrabel, who's also your mother. Have I got that right?"

"Yep," I said, clenching my teeth together.

"He isn't supposed to use his power to save your kind. He was created specifically to protect the humans. You can imagine how surprised I was when I learned what he'd done." His smile grew and now I could see all of his straight, white teeth.

"He rescued a bunch of innocent children and stopped an evil witch from using another child to bring a second evil being back from the dead. How was that wrong? He did it to save me, but also because it was the right thing to do." I looked down, tugging at one of the zippers on my camo pants. "He loves me," I added.

"I know and that's a problem," Jesse said, all but beaming now.

I wanted to smack the smile right off his face. "Why?"

"The simple answer is that we don't want chayot mixing with other supernaturals. The results can get messy. What kind of child would the two of you make together?"

"One that is loved," I said without thinking.

"Yes, but with a mother who is a witch with the combined power of a dragon and a sorceress and a father who is both human and angel? The child would be an abomination." He shook his head in disgust.

I wanted to punch him.

"So why don't you use your little magic charm and go back to Polonias and stay there where you belong?"

OceanofPDF.com

ANGEL FIGHT

MY MOUTH FELL open in shock. "Are you serious?"

"I'm dead serious." His smile vanished and he glared.

Somehow, I found that less intimidating.

"You've already befouled our realm with your presence. I will not allow you to corrupt the greatest chayot we've seen in centuries." Jesse uncrossed his legs and leaned forward.

"And if I don't agree?" I asked, unfazed.

I didn't care what he said, I wasn't leaving here without Gabe.

"You don't want me to cross that proverbial bridge, princess." Malice glinted in his eyes.

His threats were only making me angry.

"I want to see Gabe," I said. "Right now."

"Sure." He waved his hand and an image of Gabe and a beautiful angel with downy brown wings appeared.

They were in a kitchen.

She was baking and Gabe was seated at an island watching her, a soft smile on his lips.

"You see?" Jesse asked. "He belongs with his own kind. He's happy. Content."

I knew at once that this had to be Delphina. She wasn't old and wrinkly like I imagined, but beautiful and glorious.

My heart stopped and I hesitated.

Things would be so much easier if he was with Delphina instead of me.

"She's lovely," I said softly.

Gabe turned as though he heard me and seemed to stare right at

me.

His eyes went wide and he pushed out of the chair. "Cindy?"

Jesse waved the image away and got to his feet. "Well that's unfortunate."

I heard the slapping of feet as someone ran toward us and knew it was Gabe.

He was coming for me and my heart soared.

Delphina or not, he loved me.

I stood as well, clenching my hands into fists.

I had more power, more magic than I knew what to do with and I wasn't afraid to use it on Jesse or any other angel of this realm, if necessary.

Gabe burst through the doorway, looking beyond gorgeous in angel attire. "Cindy. How did you get here?" he asked, ignoring his boss and heading straight for me.

"I'm actually not quite sure," I responded, unable to disregard the angel the way Gabe was. Probably because Jesse was glaring at me like I'd just killed his puppy.

"Well I'm glad you're here." Gabe finally acknowledged Jesse, taking my hand and pulling me behind him slightly.

"I am stepping down as leader of the chayot. I no longer want to lead. Nor do I want to be in charge of keeping the humans safe. I've already spoken to Anna. She is capable and will handle the job well, probably even better than me." He stepped in front of me, blocking me fully.

My heart thumped in overtime.

While the chayot were very powerful against humans and even most supernaturals, their power was nothing compared to an archangel's.

Thankfully for mere mortals, archangels cared little for humans or supernaturals and were more than happy to let the chayot take care of

us.

It made me wonder what the other angels did with their time.

Jesse shot me an oily grin. "I see."

He turned on his heel and walked toward the door, closing and locking it with a click.

When he turned, his expression was scary.

"You think you can just walk away? Decide you no longer want to do the job you were born for?" The room shook at each of his thundering words.

I seemed to feel them in my soul and it quivered in fear.

"That's right." Gabe lifted his chin and for the first time I understood what Gabe was going up against to be with me.

I hadn't realized just how big a deal his job was.

No wonder he tried to break up with me.

No wonder he refused to marry me when I asked.

Jesse's grim smile returned to his face. "If that is your wish." His black wings spread out behind him a moment before he came at us.

Alarm shot through me.

His wings were bigger than Gabe's and I bet he had a whole lot more practice using them.

Desperate, I tried to think of a spell to stop him, but it was like my head was empty of any kind of enchantment.

Now was not the best time to realize that in the angel realm, supernatural power was no good.

Gabe pushed me out of the way before his wings spread and he leaped after Jesse.

The two angels impacted in midair.

It was like watching lightning fighting lightning as they grappled and punched, twisted and spun in a gravity-defying display of grace and power.

Jesse threw Gabe against the high ceiling, which exploded as he went tumbling up into the white sky.

A second later, Gabe managed to recover, then bulleted toward Jesse so fast he blurred.

Jesse dodged and caught hold of one of Gabe's wings.

"You will bow to me or you will die," he snarled, punching Gabe in the face.

Gabe's head snapped to the side and he fell, slamming into the floor in front of me.

"Gabe!" I shouted, going to him.

There was blood coming from his nose and his mouth, but he was already trying to move.

Jesse came through the hole, landing on Gabe's back and throwing another punch that sent Gabe flying against the far wall.

The smile never left Jesse's face.

It was like he was invincible.

He followed after Gabe, ramming a knee into his chest and slamming him to the ground. Then he was on him, fists flying as he hit Gabe over and over.

Blood was everywhere.

All of it Gabe's.

I'd never seen him bleed like he was at that moment and I knew Jesse intended to kill the love of my life and then kill me for defying him.

I had to do something to stop it.

"I'll leave," I said, trying to push Jesse off Gabe.

Jesse paused, his fist still cocked.

He looked at me.

There was a drop of Gabe's blood on his face and he wiped it away, rubbing it between his fingers.

There wasn't even a scratch on the archangel.

"Did I hear you correctly? You said you'll leave?" Jesse asked.

"That's right," I said, clasping my hands together as though in prayer. "I will leave and never come back and I will never go near Gabe again. Just please stop. He doesn't deserve any of this. He's served and helped and done all that was asked of him. That he loves me is my fault. I'm sure once I'm gone, he'll easily be able to forget about me and fall for Delphina." I was rambling, but without my magic, it was all I had.

"Cindy, no," Gabe muttered.

His eyes were purple and bloody and nearly sealed shut.

It was difficult to look at him, his face was so broken, but I met his eyes and nodded.

"It's all I can give," I said, before letting out a sob. "It'll be better this way."

"It won't. You and I - " His voice trailed off and his head fell to the side.

"But it's only a deal if Gabe lives," I added, lifting my chin.

Jesse laughed, the sound reverberating all around me. "If he dies, you have nothing to bargain with and I can kill you where you stand."

I didn't want to live without Gabe, but I didn't want to die either.

My hand went to my star necklace, but before I could touch it, Jesse was on me, his hands pinning my arms to my side and he walked us back until I was against the wall.

"Shall I just kill you now?" As he spoke, his hands went to my neck and he squeezed until dark spots clouded my vision.

"Please," I gasped, grabbing at his hands.

Suddenly he was flung away from me, his body smacking against another wall.

Gabe was on his feet somehow, his breathing heavy, his wings spread out behind him in their full glory.

It shocked me he'd only had his wings three days.

The way he used them, it was like he was born with them on his back.

Jesse laughed, using his wings to get himself upright.

"That was a mistake, boy." He flew at Gabe, his hands balled into fists.

A dark cloud appeared from above and Jesse's fists never connected with Gabe.

The darkness turned into two entities and they held Jesse where he was.

Fear slackened the anger on Jesse's face.

It looked like he wanted to talk but couldn't.

Features appeared in the twin mists as they became shapes.

Snow had told me about these two when she was with Silindra.

They were the Unknowns. They had created the vampires and dragons and probably the angels, which meant they were Jesse's bosses.

I wanted to gloat, but instead dropped to my knees.

Gabe was trying to get to me, but his body was wrecked, and he fell, cracking his head against the floor.

The Unknown with a certain feminine quality went over to Gabe. "You truly are one of the greatest chayot to ever live. That's saying something since you're only half." She gave him a kindly smile.

"The law keeping the chayot apart from other supernaturals is acceptable to us, but you and the witch are different. Certainly soulmates. As the creators of this world and everything in it, we can make changes to suit our purposes, especially when one such as yourself is willing to sacrifice everything, including your life, for the one you love." She touched his forehead and a blinding light shot from her body and into Gabe's.

He cried out, arching his back as though he were in agony before

going still.

Somehow, he stayed on his feet.

"Gabe," I sobbed, still trying desperately to reach him, but unable to do so.

My eyes flicked to Jesse. The male Unknown held him fast and looked to be speaking to him, but I couldn't hear what was being said.

The female moved back over to the male Unknown as Gabe stood, his wings extending behind him.

They were still white, but the tips had turned black and gold.

What had she done to him?

"I understand," Jesse said, interrupting my thoughts.

The Unknowns merged together and no longer looked human in nature, but resembled a storm cloud.

It moved up and into a corner of the room, like a bat waiting for its prey.

Gabe eyed them before turning to Jesse. "I don't want to fight you, Jesse. Our quarrel is over. I am no longer a chayot and you are no longer my boss." Gabe held his arms at his sides loosely, as though waiting for Jesse to come at him again.

I blinked in confusion, trying to understand what just happened. If he was no longer a chayot, what was he? An archangel?

Jesse's shoulders relaxed and he moved to stand in front of Gabe. "Brother," he said, resting a hand on Gabe's shoulder. "I am sorry for the trouble I caused."

Gabe flinched, but relaxed immediately, resting an arm on Jesse's opposite shoulder. "All is forgiven, brother."

Jesse nodded and left the room.

"Gabe," I whispered, my eyes growing heavy. I couldn't keep them open.

Gabe ran to me and scooped me into his arms.

But before he could say anything the Unknowns were on us and my mind went dark.

OceanofPDF.com

A PROPOSAL

I TOSSED and turned and struggled to fight free of the haze. In my dream there had been an archangel and he and Gabe battled.

I sat up, looking around the room frantically.

It hadn't been a dream, but real.

Jesse had beaten Gabe to shreds, but the Unknowns appeared before Jesse could kill him, and they'd put me to sleep and -

My room in Sharra was just as I left it.

My costume still hung over my closet door, but my spelled calendar revealed it was Tuesday.

I'd been asleep nearly three days!

I went to my bedroom door, desperate to find Gabe, and noticed I was in pajamas.

"How the hell?" I ripped them off and threw on jeans and the first shirt I found before pulling on boots and rushing to the door.

Before I could open it, someone pounded from the outside. "Cindy! Open up, it's me."

I yanked the door open and threw myself into his arms.

"Gabe," I said, burying my face in his neck.

He growled, wrapping his arms around me as I clung to his hips with my legs.

"How are you here? What happened?" Tears streamed down my face as I touched him, checking for scratches or at least scars, but there wasn't anything new, almost like his fight with Jesse hadn't happened.

His face was still just as masculine and gorgeous as ever.

I wanted answers, but more than anything, I wanted him.

"Kiss me," I said.

His lips were on mine in an instant and together we stumbled to the bed, where he fell on top of me, his lips never leaving mine.

I didn't let him up for air, not that he wanted any.

He pushed open my mouth, deepening our kiss while his hands explored my face, my hair, my body.

I did the same, so happy to have him here with me.

Someone cleared their throat and we both looked over to see Snow standing next to the open door.

"I'd say sorry for interrupting, but you kind of deserve it," she said, trying to hold back a smile.

I burst into laughter.

How many times had I interrupted her and Dorian?

Gabe looked confused, but that was okay.

I would explain later.

He helped me stand. "Hey, Snow," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"What's up?" I asked, putting my hand in Gabe's. It might be a long time before I could be away from him.

"You are, for starters," she said and then cleared her throat. "It's about time, but I just came down to check on you. We were worried."

"Sorry about that." I looked at Gabe. "It wasn't a dream, was it?" I studied his eyes and knew the truth. "Are you an archangel now?"

He gave a brisk nod before a radiant smile overtook his face.

The brilliant joy radiating off him all but sparkled.

Now that I was paying attention, I noticed distinct differences in his body, but that smile told me the same Gabe rested within.

"Does Snow know?" I asked, knowing I would need all the details as soon as possible.

Gabe nodded. "Everyone does. And now we are free to be together

forever and longer, my love." With those words, he got down on one knee.

"Wait, we are?" I knew the Unknowns had said something about Gabe and me being soulmates, but I still couldn't believe it was real.

"We are. Jesse and the others like him are no longer a problem, especially since I am no longer a chayot." He reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out a ring.

It was then I noticed he was on his knee. "What are you doing? What's happening?" My hands went to my cheeks as they grew warm.

He smiled as Dorian, Coco, and the rest of the teachers, including Kenmei - my dragon father - pushed their way into my little room.

Old Cindy would've been devastated that her hair wasn't perfect and that she wasn't wearing the perfect outfit. New Cindy - the new me - was just thrilled to be here.

"Cindy Croswell, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Is that a proposal?" I asked. It was the same question he asked me in Pops' kitchen and Gabe smiled.

"Yes, it most certainly is." He winked and held out the ring, an enormous oval diamond solitaire surrounded by light blue gemstones.

It was beautiful.

I held out my hand.

It was shaking, not with nerves, but joy beyond anything I'd ever experienced before.

"Yes," I said, as he slid the ring on my finger.

He stood, pulling me into his arms and kissed me.

And kissed me. And kissed me.

Someone cleared their throat, but we didn't stop.

"I suggest we leave," Kenmei said, and I wasn't even embarrassed that my dad was watching me make out with the love of my life.

MUCH LATER, Gabe and I left my bedroom hand in hand and made our way to the cafeteria.

We were both starving.

After we got our food and sat down, Heather came over.

"Can I talk to you?" she asked.

The girl looked amazing, but I still felt guilty because I never checked on her like I promised.

"Sure," I said, glancing at Gabe, who nodded.

Heather and I went out into the hallway.

"You look good. How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Thank you. I'm alright. Heathcliff fixed me right up." She studied my face. "You look good too. Happy."

"I am." I looked down at my hands, not sure where to begin. "How's everything else?" I asked, knowing there was never a right time to have a hard conversation.

But I needed to do better with Heather.

She'd been through so much already and come out strong. I didn't want to fail her.

"Nothing's changed, except my attitude," she said, tucking her hands behind her back.

"Oh?" I met her eyes.

"Yep. See, I know there isn't magic right now that will permanently change me into the person I'm supposed to be, but if anyone can create the magic necessary, it's me." She lifted her chin and met my gaze and I sensed the newfound confidence in her.

"I believe that," I said. "And I'm so proud of you."

She shrugged. "Well, it's like you said. I need to be the change. I shouldn't wait around and hope someone else will come up with the solution. I need to educate myself and find a way."

I took her hands. "You are more mature than a lot of adults I know

and I believe in you."

"Thank you, Miss Croswell." She hugged me tight. "And not just for saying that, but for everything."

I hugged her back. "Of course."

OceanofPDF.com

A WEDDING

"Are you ready?"

I glanced at my mom in the mirror's reflection.

"More than ready," I said, getting off the chair and adjusting my wedding dress.

White with a straight collar that went off my shoulders, it was glorious in its simplicity. The bodice hugged my curves and an enormous train trailed gracefully behind me.

My veil hung long from a small tiara Polly had placed around my head.

My mom cleared her throat, pushing me away. "You don't want to wrinkle your dress and I don't want to have you redo my makeup," she said, her eyes misty.

"Right." I glanced over her shoulder at Snow.

It wasn't that long ago that we'd been preparing her for her wedding.

Snow winked.

"Alright, well, I'll meet you out there. If we're not careful, your grandma will make a fuss over something and use her magic to get in a fight with one of the vampires. We don't need a blood-sucking war on your wedding day." Mom made a face before closing the door, leaving Snow and me alone.

"Can you believe it?" Snow fluffed my veil before taking my hand.

"It took a lot to get here. And there was a time when I didn't think it would ever happen." I couldn't stop the bliss bubbling up inside me.

"Can you believe I'm marrying an archangel?" It was weird to say and even weirder to think about.

Thankfully Gabe was much more relaxed after his transformation.

Archangels were supernaturals just as I was, and they could procreate, which was amazing since I wanted to have a little Gabe running around in the future.

Snow shook her head. "It blows my mind, but if anyone can handle an archangel, it's you." She laughed.

"It's time," the wedding planner said, knocking on the door as Jasmine flew in.

She moved past her mom and came right to me. "Thank you for letting me be your flower girl," she said, looking adorable in a blue dress cut specifically so as not to hinder her wings. She held a braided wood basket with blue and white rose petals.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I said as she hovered, so we were eye level.

She brushed her fingers over my eyebrows and smiled like she knew all kinds of secrets but wasn't willing to share, then went to her mom.

The two of them spoke quietly before Jasmine winged her way to the door.

The light scent of the roses filled the room as a flurry of pixilettes, all dressed in blue, picked up my long train as well as my veil and fluttered behind me.

"We're ready," one of them said, and together with Jasmine leading the way, we went out and down the hall until we came to the opening that would lead into the outdoor chantry.

Snow kissed my cheek. "Thanks for letting me walk you down the aisle."

"There isn't another person in all the realms I would rather have." My dad was out of town, of course.

His job was a joke, but I still had plenty of family here.

Snow had asked if I wanted Abernathy to walk me down the aisle, but I didn't know whether he'd be healed enough to show.

He came though, and I was glad.

Currently, he appeared to be asleep on the grassy knoll to the left of the wedding party. His scales had nearly returned to their bright golden color as had his eyes.

My scars were gone as well.

When I looked in the mirror now, it was like the previous year never happened, but I still dreamed about it.

Sometimes I had nightmares.

At the thought I shuddered before pushing it away.

Today would be the best day of my life.

Leo sat next to my mom, holding my niece.

Beside her and filling out the rest of the row were all of my aunts and my grandmother. They beamed with excitement, especially my mom, and I thought maybe my mom would be a better grandmother than she was mother, though I couldn't complain.

Not after the way Mizrabel behaved.

I was grateful for one thing though.

Mizrabel showed me that while my mom wasn't perfect, she was the perfect mom for me.

She was all I'd needed.

As Snow and I walked down the aisle, I tried to take it all in.

The thousands of blue and white flowers, that were actually pixies and pixilettes, surrounding the arch where the elven minister stood. The white peonies and magical material draped over everything. As well as all of the floating candles.

To my left stood my sister Polly, looking beautiful and happy beside Quilla, who'd toned down her usual ensembles to a sky blue bridesmaid dress, though she still wore a matching blue painter's hat on her head, and under her pointy black shoes were blue and white striped stockings.

I had to smile as my gaze moved to Anna.

She was stunning in her blue dress, her wings fluttering lightly behind her and her hair done up and covered in matching flowers.

Last was Violet.

She also wore a blue bridesmaid dress that clashed only a little with her spots as her tail flicked back and forth behind her.

On her nose were her reading glasses, which I still swore must be held on by magic.

Seeing her eyes were wet with tears, I blinked, telling myself I wouldn't cry.

For the briefest moment I thought of Sera, wishing she could be here, but knowing it was far better for her in the prison realm.

There she couldn't hurt anyone and that was for the best.

She had accepted her fate, especially when I promised to return to visit as often as possible. Maybe, with time, she would be rehabilitated enough to leave the prison realm.

My eyes locked in on my husband-to-be.

Gabe was stunning in a black tux with a white shirt. His dark hair was cut short, letting his gorgeous face shine.

On his back were his enormous white wings, the tips glimmering in black and gold. He looked better than a superstar or even like he could be his own star.

Next to him was Dorian as well as the rest of the brothers.

All of them were handsome in their own way, but none could compare with the man of my dreams.

When Snow held out my hand and Gabe took it, I knew I was going to be the happiest witch in the world.

I had wanted a love like Snow and Dorian's, but as the minister spoke, and Gabe and I recited our vows, I realized it never would be.

Because Gabe and I weren't them.

We were us, and Gabe and I would make an incredible life

together.

I knew that as surely as I knew my own name.

"Mr. and Mrs. Henry, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

There were cheers in the crowd as Gabe and I sealed our happily ever after with true love's kiss.

OceanofPDF.com

SOME TIME LATER

I SLOWLY CIRCLED the dance floor, looking for trouble. It was the annual Spring Fling at the Seven Magics Academy, and I was one of the chaperones.

It still blew me away that I was older than the kids dancing. Somehow, I'd gone from a teenager to an adult. If asked, I would swear I was a high school student yesterday.

Someone squealed and I turned that direction.

Snow White's daughter, Jasmine stomped on her date's foot and moved toward the exit.

I debated going after her but knew the teen could take care of herself. She was a vampire created by the originals. She was unique in many ways. And her power?

I shuddered as memories of her as a child coursed through me. Her magic was stronger than anyone I'd ever encountered, including Kenmei or Abernathy.

A wave of guilt rushed over me.

"Hi Cindy," Professor Pops said.

"Hey, Pops." I swallowed, working to forget what I'd done to Jasmine.

He patted me on the back. "How's Gabe treating you?"

"Really good. He's around here somewhere."

Pops nodded. "I'll look for him. There's something he and I need to discuss."

I smiled. It probably had to do with their fantasy football teams. The two of them had gotten into watching professional football a couple seasons ago. They seemed to have fun talking about the players. Plus, it was an excuse for them to be together. "See you

Sunday night for the game?" I asked.

"Yes, you will." He squeezed me lightly and continued in the opposite direction.

I returned my gaze to where Jasmine and her date had been, but they were both gone.

The guilt returned with a vengeance.

When Jasmine found out what I'd done, would she ever forgive me?

OceanofPDF.com

VAMPIRE LIES

OceanofPDF.com

SPRING FLING DANCE

"YOU'RE MINE," I whispered, tracking the hottest guy in all the realms with my eyes.

He didn't attend the Seven Magics Academy. I knew that for sure because I knew everyone.

Maybe he was new?

"Say what, Jasmine?" Jennifer Flora had been giving me a play-by-play on how she turned rock into stardust during spells class when I saw him.

"Nothing. Sorry." I cleared my throat, tucking some hair behind my ear as I clutched my hands together. "Why don't you go back to the dance? I'll meet you inside later," I said, taking off after the guy.

"Sure," she responded but I was already heading down the hall, hoping to catch sight of him again.

As an original vampire, stalking was as easy as breathing, especially since the Seven Magics Academy was my home and had been from the beginning.

Even when it was still just an expansive castle and not a school for the supernatural.

I peered around the corner and he came into view.

Thick blond hair, dazzling eyes, lean muscle for days and tall.

Over six feet.

I wanted to know everything about him and I tuned in, using my vampire hearing. He spoke with someone about recruiting supernaturals for the Seven Magics Academy.

"Jasmine," Jonathon called.

My effing date was still a ways back.

"Gross," I hissed, and used my vampire speed to run away from him, momentarily losing sight of Hot Guy.

The annual Spring Fling dance was supposed to be fun. I'd agreed to go with Jonathon Mayfield, a recent addition to the school because he was good looking.

That had been a mistake. He was half troll and totally handsy.

When he'd grabbed my butt during a slow song, I stomped on his foot, leaving him standing in the middle of the dance floor.

Now, as I hurried away from Jonathon, I ran smack into someone.

It was Hot Guy.

"Whoa, where's the fire, Jasmine?" He took me in swiftly, surprised admiration on his face.

"How the hell did you do that?" I gauged my bearings as tingles raced along my arms. "And how do you know my name?"

He chuckled and it was damn sexy. "There aren't a lot of vampires with wings in the world. It was an easy deduction."

"And the speedy travel - "

"Jasmine. Babe. There you are," Jonathon said. Sweat had his dark hair sticking to his forehead. He sauntered over like he owned the castle and me.

My shoulders tensed. Jon may be a boorish troll, but I was a vampire and would beat his ass if he didn't lay off.

"I am not your babe, idiot." I scowled, extending my fangs. "If you don't get the hell away from me, I'll make you my late night snack."

Sure there would be consequences if I drank from the guy, but I was a princess.

The king and queen's only child.

There wasn't much I couldn't get away with under the right circumstances.

"Come on, babe. I just wanted to have a little fun." He licked his lips like I hadn't just threatened him.

Yeah, the dude was egotistical.

"I didn't give you permission to grab my ass. So, it seems your idea of fun and mine are completely different."

Hot Guy rested a hand on my shoulder as he came to stand directly behind me. "What's your name?" His breath warmed my neck and I shivered.

"Jon. What's it to you?" Jon had the audacity to cross his bulky arms.

"Well, Jon, you must be new. Because Jasmine here isn't just any vampire, she's an original. Not only that. She's the queen's daughter. And I would be well within my rights to end you this very moment and not think twice about it." Hot Guy wasn't as big as Jonathon, but I had no doubt he could do what he said.

"That isn't how you treat your date." I heard his teeth grind together.

Jonathon straightened to his full six feet five inches. "Is that right?" he blustered.

A low growl ruptured from the back of Hot Guy's throat.

There was about to be a fight. Unless I stepped in.

"Goodnight Jon."

I shrugged off Hot Guy's hand and even though I wanted to stay and learn more about him, I moved away down the hall, hoping to defuse the situation.

After a few steps, I turned back. "Thank you for taking me to the dance, Jon." My mom would be proud I remembered my manners.

As I spoke, I lifted the material of my aqua floor length dress and curtsied while making a face, before glancing at Hot Guy who watched us both with slight amusement.

Jon laughed. "It was not my pleasure, princess. You're an uptight and whiney bitch." He stomped away like a bull in a pen, knocking into the wall a few times as he went.

When Jon was out of earshot, I dared to look at Hot Guy. "That was fun," I said, not wanting to go now that Jon was gone.

In fact I wondered if I should ask this guy if he wanted to return to the dance with me.

Hot Guy tucked his hands in his pockets, flashing his muscles. "I have no doubt you could've taken him." He gave me a wry smile.

At the twinkle in his eyes, there came a glimmer of recognition. "Have we met before?" I asked.

"No, but your grandfather, my adoptive father told me all about you." He waited for me to catch on.

"Pops told you about me?" My grandfather used to adopt young men who were human and supernatural but struggling to make it in the human realm.

That was before the Seven Magics Academy came into being.

He adopted my dad a long time ago.

With Hot Guy in front of me, it seemed Pops started taking in new sons again.

Not that my grandfather couldn't handle himself.

He was also a vampire and had even been a hunter at one point.

My grandfather knew how to fight.

It was upsetting my parents didn't see fit to tell me about the Hot Guy though.

But I shouldn't be surprised.

My parents kept most things about the human realm from me. Everything thing I knew, I learned from Aunt Cindy or one of my dad's brothers.

"The one and only," he said, his smile growing. "He took me in a few years ago." There was gratitude and even love in his expression.

No surprise there either. Pops was the dearest man.

"Are you going to school here?" I asked, hopeful.

"I already did. Graduated three years ago." He used air quotes as he spoke.

"Oh." I tried to hide my disappointment, but it didn't work. That was probably why he looked familiar. "I don't remember seeing you."

He shrugged. "I only went for the last semester of one year after graduating early from my high school." He paused and then continued. "In the human realm."

"I know," I said, though I really didn't.

He continued, "Pops thought it would do me good to be around other supernaturals for a few months before I started recruiting them for the school." He shrugged again. "The Academy was fine, but I kept to myself."

"That makes - " I began but was interrupted by my mom.

"There you are. Come on. The meeting is this way." She wore her long dark hair up in a braided bun, her crown situated atop her head perfectly.

She wore a burgundy dress that perfectly matched her lips.

I faced her as she spoke, swallowing. "Hey, Mom. We were just talking." I don't know why I always felt like I was doing something wrong when she was around.

Maybe it was her serious face.

"It's fine, Jasmine. But why don't you go back to the dance." She studied my dress. "Or better yet, go to bed. It's late and you will be in attendance at the meetings tomorrow." She gave me a pointed look.

I curtsied again even though I wanted to stomp my foot and through a tantrum. I hated meetings. "Very well."

She waited a moment before heading back the way she came.

When we were alone in the hall once again, he flashed his white teeth. "Maybe I'll see you around," Hot Guy said.

"Yep." I watched him go, wishing I would've asked his name. By the time I decided I would, he was gone.

OceanofPDF.com

HEAVY CATERPILLAR

MONDAY MORNING, I woke, climbed out of bed and stretched my wings, showered, dressed, and then flew out my window to explore Sharra with my best friend, Abrea.

It was our usual ritual and my favorite time of day, like life stretched itself awake.

All was peaceful and filled with possibilities.

Abrea and I helped a fairy lift a particularly heavy caterpillar onto the branch it intended to use as a home for its chrysalis.

We also assisted an elderly troll in his desperate quest to reach some juicy berries at the top of a rather large tree.

Now we were seated on the stone ledge at the top of the turret closest to my room watching the sun finish its rise.

"Jasmine. Come inside. We have a lot to do today." My mom stuck her head and shoulders out my window near the top of the castle, searching for me. I stifled a laugh as I watched her head turn from side to side. She wouldn't find me though, because I sat directly above her.

I sighed heavily. "Fine."

My mom gasped and cracked her head on the top of the window. "You scared the light right out of me." She clutched a hand to her head and went back inside.

"Sorry." I tried to sound genuine as I rolled my eyes. "But really, you should get your vampire powers checked out. That you didn't sense me is surely a sign of old age." Of course she was older than me but by how much, I didn't know. She still looked the same age as me.

Abrea covered her mouth, trying not to laugh.

"Uh-huh. Inside, please." She was good at placating the situation

without rising to my taunts.

But instead of obeying, I spread my large black wings and shot into the sky, enjoying the sweet flower scented air.

"Young lady." The words were sharp, but I ignored them. My mom always called me that when I frustrated her.

Still, I turned to see the emotion on her face in order to gauge just how upset she was, but she no longer stood in the window. "One more flight around the castle?" I stretched my wings wide, allowing the morning sun to warm them.

"Your mom seems pretty serious," Abrea said.

"Whose side are you on?" I asked, slowing down so she could catch up.

"Yours, of course." She stuck out her tongue. Her voice was barely above that of a tingling bell, but while my mom's vampire powers might be on the fritz, mine weren't.

"Good." We went higher, circling the enormous castle and the gardens beyond. Part of the landscape was immersed in shadow.

When we neared the forest behind the castle, I studied the pixilettes busying themselves. They were in charge of the seasons. Soon it would be autumn and they needed to gather seedlings to store until the following spring.

"Will you drink unicorn blood today?" Abrea asked, her little pixilette wings fluttering near my ear. She was dressed from head to toe in different tones of purple. Her dress was the color of lilacs and her tiny shoes were the shade of ripened plums. Lavender wings beat and fluttered at her back.

If Abrea weren't my best friend, I would've told her it was none of her business whose blood I drank. But she and I were close for more than ten years. We did everything together. Without her, I'd go crazy.

"I don't know." I spun in a circle, enjoying the gentle breeze on my face. Unicorn blood was my favorite, but I took what I was given

based on offerings from the different magics within Sharra.

Abrea shook. It freaked her out that I was a blood drinker.

"Don't worry. I'm sure your blood is much too sweet for my tastes." I winked to let her know I was teasing.

She giggled nervously, the sound like tinkling bells. "I'm not worried," she replied. I could tell it was only a little lie. She glanced away, running her tiny fingers through her violet hair that was the same color as my eyes.

I waved off my irritation. There were plenty of vampires in Sharra. They all drank blood, just like me, but only the blood of animals like deer and antelope.

Plus, the vampires never killed them.

It was one of the first laws my mom, the new Vampire Queen decreed when she became ruler.

As the only original vampire, I required more than the others. In order to grow and thrive, I required the blood of magical creatures.

It powered my magic and kept me healthy.

Early morning sunlight broke through the clouds, basking the land in orange and pink hues. Warmth tickled my skin and I lifted my face toward the light.

"Can you hang out today after school?" Abrea asked, interrupting my thoughts. She went to the Academy too, but we didn't have any classes together.

"I'm sure I can." I held out my hand. Abrea flew forward, landing on my palm. "I'll find you - "

"Jasmine!" Her shout reached all the way on the side of the castle. Vampire hearing. It was a thing.

I jerked back at the sharpness in my mom's voice, knocking over Abrea. She tumbled through the air for the briefest moment until she righted herself.

"What the cherries, Jasmine?" she said, adjusting her dress.

"Sorry, my mom is in a mood. I better get back."

Abrea gulped. She had every reason to fear my mom.

"Coming, Snow," I retorted with sarcasm, rolling my eyes again.

"If she heard that, you're going to be in big trouble for that, princess." Abrea tried to smile, but it didn't quite happen.

I tried to be brave. "Nah." I lifted my chin. "But I better go."

"Yeah, you should." She waved and then took off toward the forest.

I watched her until she nearly reached the other pixilettes. Then I beat my wings hard against the air to hurry back to my window. Once I was back, I landed, folding my wings and jumping inside.

Mom had her hands on her hips. "Hey, mom." I rushed past her toward the bathroom.

She fluffed a pillow, a scowl on her ferociously beautiful face.

Her sleek black hair was the exact color of mine.

This morning it was pulled back in a tight bun.

I called it her work hair. She wore a bright yellow gown trimmed in red and blue. On her head was her crown and it twinkled in the light.

"How many times have I asked you not to call me Snow?" She followed after me, her skirt swishing with each step.

Crap, she heard.

I looked to Ciana, the vampire who helped raise me, but she sat in her rocking chair, knitting something.

She looked to be in her early twenties, but from stories she told me of when she was human, she was probably three hundred, give or take a decade.

Ciana wore her long blonde hair in a bun on the crown of her head. Her dress was long and looked confining.

She owned the same dress in three colors, brown, gray, and navy blue. The dress accentuated her tiny waist.

When I was younger, she was so full of life. We always had fun together doing little things like chasing butterflies, planting seeds, and digging up worms.

Of course I never ate the food, but my dad did, and I enjoyed doing things for him with Ciana.

In the last few years, Ciana's demeanor changed. She grew despondent.

At first, I tried to make her happy, but nothing helped, so I stopped.

Still, Ciana was loyal, a great find in Sharra, and I wouldn't dismiss her.

"Jasmine, did you hear me? I don't like it when you call me Snow." Mom's words brought me up short and my wings fluttered spastically.

I glanced back at her. "It's your name, isn't it? You're Snow White, the Vampire Queen." I forced myself not to make a face and sat at the chair in front of my vanity.

OceanofPDF.com

MY MOM'S stern expression softened as I watched her reflection. "Most importantly, I'm your mother." She leaned down, our heads side by side and she squeezed my shoulders. Her eyes sparkled with love. I studied the two of us together, once again astonished by our similarities.

We both had black hair, though mine had a streak of teal in it

The shape of our faces were the same as well as our high cheekbones.

Our lips had the same sort of thickness and we were the same height.

There were differences too.

Her eyes were an unusual color, reflecting the various hues within the spectrum of the seven magics while mine were always violet.

My skin was naturally tanner than hers.

And then, of course, there was the huge difference between us. I had wings, obnoxiously large wings that protruded from my back like those of a giant black bird.

The worst part was they never went away. Like fairies' wings did. I had them on my back at all times - no matter what.

Sometimes I longed to sleep on my back, but I couldn't without pain. Clothing was an issue too. My wings needed to go. If I didn't have them, I knew I would be happy.

Mom tilted her head and I knew she was wondering what I was thinking.

I relaxed my features hoping to make it unreadable.

Although she and my dad weren't my parents in the traditional sense that I didn't come from my mother's womb, they were my mom

and dad.

I was born from a gem created by their blood and the combination of the seven magics. My parents told me it was their love for each other that brought me from the gem.

Sometimes, especially when I assisted my mom with the birth of an animal, it made me sad to realize I wasn't born the same way, that I was different from every other known creature.

My mom and dad always tried their best to make me feel wanted and loved, and most of the time I did.

But sometimes I felt like the freak that I was.

I knew Silindra and Sharra's story.

I would never admit it, but I could relate with Sharra.

"There are several meetings you must attend today after school so hurry, please. I want to make sure you've fed before we start." Mom left the bathroom and went back into my room.

"Okay." I dabbed some perfume my uncle Heathcliff brought for me from the human world. The smell was warm and sweet, and I loved it. Almost as much as I loved getting the magazines and music that Uncle Sebastian gave me. It was always my favorite day when one of my uncles or Professor Pops visited.

"Jasmine," my mom snapped, her patience wearing thin.

I put the lid back on the perfume and glanced at my mom. It was her fault I was like this. If she would let me go into the human realm - even on Halloween. But she didn't trust me. I wanted to ask her why. Why she thought I would pounce on the first warm-blooded creature I encountered. Sure, it was a problem when I was little. My hunger would take over and more than once I sank my fangs into something or someone I shouldn't. But that was years ago. Couldn't she see I was no longer a child but a grown woman. In a few weeks I would turn eighteen. Could I use some blood? Yes. Was I at the point where I would kill for it? Not even close. I squeezed some lotion on my hands and rubbed it into my arms. My mom seemed to be getting more and

more irritated.

Zenny appeared in the mirror and clapped his hands together. "My two most favorite vampires."

"Zenny. Good morning." Mom bobbed a hello. "Jasmine is going to be late for school. Can you make it quick?"

"Hey Zen," I said, ignoring my mom. "Way to rock plaid and polka-dots."

He crossed his arms and popped a hip. "You know it." Then he said to my mom, "Your highness, I will be super-fast."

I covered the smile trying to wriggle its way from my lips with my hand.

Zenny lived in the castle's mirrors and assisted me with my hair and makeup. He always wore crazy outfits that somehow totally worked on him. Today he had on navy blue and orange plaid pants. They were tight and stopped just above his ankles. His shoes were orange as was his button down shirt, which was covered in small navy polka dots. The collar was up, and he had a white t-shirt underneath. His hair was cropped short and just as bright orange as his shoes.

"Never mind, Zenny. I've already picked out her uniform combination and her makeup - "

I frowned, unhappy my mom thought it was okay to choose what I wore. "I want him here. Why don't you go? I'll meet you in the dining hall in a few minutes."

Her face fell. "If you wish."

Guilt tore through my insides. I knew my mom meant well. And while it wasn't her intention to be annoying and bossy, she kind of was. All the time.

She walked to the bathroom doorway and paused. "Please wear what I chose. It's put together and waiting in your closet."

I bit back a retort. "I guess," I said.

My mom looked at me, her eyes sad and filled with frustration. My

heart lurched. I knew I was letting her down somehow. Again. Like always.

She came back and gently touched my wings. "Why don't you have Zenny help you fluff and clean these?" She ran her fingers through the dark feathers, her touch soothing.

"Okay," I said, catching her gaze in the mirror and trying to smile. I didn't like it when we fought. But for the last several months we were at such odds over everything. It seemed no matter how I tried we didn't click like we used to. Lately she focused more on what I was required to do as the princess of Sharra and less on what I needed as a teenage girl still attending school.

If it weren't for my uncles bringing me the latest news in the form of entertainment magazines from the human world, I would be miserable. It just felt like my mom didn't understand. I had needs, desires, goals - I wanted a life outside the castle. Outside of Sharra. And my wings? Ugh. Why did I have to be the only vampire in the entire world to have them? My life was difficult, and my mom just didn't get it.

When I got to school, I had to contend with gossip of the worst kind. Jon tried to start a rumor saying he and I went a lot further than we did. Because ewwww. We didn't go anywhere, and we wouldn't be. Abrea told me she heard some students talking about it. During lunch, I determined to shut his crap down immediately. While I sat with my friends, I waited for Jon. He came in laughing and joking with a couple of guys. They weren't my favorite. Leave it to jerks to be drawn to jerks. One was a vampire. The other a fairy.

OceanofPDF.com

FIGHT MY BATTLES

As I watched them, I thought about how things changed since my mom became the vampire queen. Originally, male vampires were all hunters or drones who travelled into the human realm to mark possible future bodies for the vampire queen. Sharra gave them a portion of her magic so they could walk in the sunlight. They could only be killed by removing the heart. With female vampires or workers, they could be killed more easily by either the sun or a stake through the heart.

But since my mom came into power, she gave every vampire some of her blood. Now a portion of her magic flowed through each of them. Male and female. There were no more hunters, except Christopher. There haven't been for a long while. With that magic came some additional changes. Like the fact that killing a vampire now required their heart be ripped from their chest. It was gruesome, but fact.

As an original, no one knows how to kill me or even if I can be killed. Like the old originals, I came right from the seven magics. No diluted DNA or blood. That knowledge always gave me a bit of a rush, but so far, I hadn't tested any theories.

The guys travelled along the outer wall of the lunchroom toward me. As they went, the room became quiet and all eyes rested of me. Like they expected me to do something. The guys looked around, seemingly bewildered. When they saw me, they stopped, letting Jon continue on his own. Real courageous friends.

Jon's eyes found mine and they widened. I'm sure he saw murder reflected back at him because that was what I felt. I held his gaze as I flew over, hands on my hips. I probably looked like my mother, but I was too mad to care. It was all I could do to keep my fangs in check.

When I was close enough, I slapped his face so hard to swung to the right. My hand imprinted on his face and turned bright red. "Don't you ever lie about me again."

"Or what, pretty princess?" He rubbed his fingers over the cheek I slapped as fury spread across his features. "You going to run and tell your mommy?" He looked around the room.

A few people snickered. Mostly though, the room remained deathly still.

"You're new so I'll make this clear. My mom may be the queen, but I don't need her to fight my battles," I said, balling my hands into fists as my fangs pressed against the inside of my mouth. An image or a memory sparked across my mind. I was much younger and speaking with Aunt Cindy. Then I was alone on a road and talking to Christopher. That one shocked me more than the one with my aunt. She and I spoke many times, though I didn't remember that moment. Christopher on the other hand? He was off limits. The memory of him and I on the road and talking wasn't familiar. Clearing my throat, I shook the oddity away.

"You're a big talker for such a little thing. Must be those enormously awkward wings." His words lanced my heart. He saw it and leered. "I was doing you a favor by asking you out. Obviously, no one else wants to date a freak."

The blow hit me to my core. No one ever spoke to me like that.

Maybe there were whispers behind my back, but as the king and queen's daughter, I was naturally popular and never had a want of friends.

"You don't know what you're talking about," I said, but the fire escaped me, and I deflated.

He rose up to his full height and came in close, taking my arm.

In a quiet voice, he went on. "I've dealt with entitled brats like you my whole life. You may have fangs and stupid wings, but you're nothing except a puppet who can't do anything for herself." Then he

stepped back and walked away.

I rocked on my heels, ashamed.

Was that how everyone saw me?

Was that the real reason I wanted to be ordinary?

More than ever, I wanted to leave Sharra and all of the supernatural behind. I wanted to know what ordinary felt like. Probably way better than this hot mess.

Without my wings and my fangs I wouldn't be a freak. I could just be me. Swallowing down my embarrassment, I went back to my table.

My friends kept their eyes down.

Except Abrea.

"Don't even worry about that brute," she hissed in my ear. "When he wakes in the morning, he's going to be in for a big surprise. And it will be coming out of his nose."

"Thanks, Abrea, but don't do anything that will get you into trouble. He means nothing to me." I tried to smile and act like everything was fine, but it was impossible. Jon got to me big time and I hated to admit it.

After school, I went to meetings. My mom made me because she said someday I might be queen. They were boring. Listening to the magical creatures of Sharra complain about how so-and-so stole a piece of fruit off their land and asking my mom what she was going to do about it was beyond tedious. I wanted to see a movie. I wanted to go to regular high school. I wanted to attend football games, and maybe kiss a boy or two. That didn't seem like too much to ask. I was almost eighteen and my life was passing me by.

It wasn't fair.

Both my parents attended regular high school. They lived an ordinary life for years before coming to Sharra. Why couldn't I be given the same consideration?

After meetings, I went up to my room and did homework on

Physics of Plasma. As I got ready for bed, my dad knocked. "Hang on." I pulled my pajamas over my head and ran to the door. "Hi," I said opening it before going back over to my desk.

"Hey, sweetie. How's my girl?" He kissed my cheek.

"I'm too old for that," I said with pretend haughtiness, trying to act sullen. My dad didn't have to attend meetings. I really didn't know what he did all day.

He tapped the end of my nose with his finger. "Never."

My mom bustled in as well.

"Sheesh, I guess everyone is invited." I tucked my book away and faced them just in time to watch my dad take my mom into his arms and kiss her deeply a moment.

I knew my mouth hung open, though it shouldn't. They were pros at public displays of affection. When he lifted her, she gave him a secret smile.

"Gross," I said, turning away to hide my smile. It was actually sweet, but I wouldn't give them the pleasure of knowing that was how I felt. "Goodnight," I said, shutting off the light. "I'm going to bed."

"Night," Mom said.

"Night sweetie," Dad added before closing the door.

I heard them talking as they went down the hall to their bedroom.

Lying there on my stomach, I knew it was a moment just like theirs from a moment ago that I craved. I wanted to love and be loved by someone the way they so obviously loved each other. That wasn't going to happen in Sharra. According to Jon, no one wanted me. I was a freak.

The word echoed over and over in my mind as I tried to sleep. It was the word I secretly called myself. Like Jon saw into my soul and ripped out the part of me that was the most sensitive.

I punched my pillow, wishing I could have what I wanted and drifted off to sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

DESTROY ALL

"BREAKFAST. FIVE MINUTES," my dad said as he knocked on my door.

"Huh?" I forgot to set my alarm, but usually didn't need it. Pushing myself out of bed, I stumbled over to the window. I was late. Abrea probably wondered what happened to me.

"Jasmine?" My dad knocked again.

"I'm up. Thanks!" I needed to hurry but pushed open the window instead. As I stared aimlessly out at the landscape, I thought of the dream.

Two entities had been speaking and their words filled my mind like they were within. Or, maybe I'd somehow traveled into their minds.

"THE VAMPIRE CHILD is not performing as expected. She doesn't care about her destiny or the fate of her kind. She's a total disappointment." He slithered his body around the vast darkness that was everywhere and nowhere. The inkiness seemed to expand and contract, like breathing, around them.

"There is always our first inclination." She glided beside him, producing an orb of light, just big enough so they could see each other. Not that it was necessary, but she liked the way it shimmered.

"Destroy all magical creatures and start over?" he asked.

She came up beside him. Their eyes locked for several seconds or days. Time meant nothing. "They are ours to do with as we please. Why not?" she finally added.

He sighed. "I'm tired."

She bobbed in agreement. "Perhaps we should sleep for a few thousand years. The way these creatures are, we won't miss anything."

"I like the sound of that. But first - " He trailed off.

"You want to watch her fail." It was a statement and I heard the joyous anticipation in her voice.

"Yes. It shouldn't take too long."

"Right." She blinked slowly. "Especially if we help her along and I have the perfect solution. Let's make her lose everything."

His mouth curved into a cruel smile. "I like the sound of that."

AS I CAME BACK to myself, I shuddered.

What did they mean? And what or who were they? If they were talking about me, then what was the point of the conversation? Why let me see it?

Unless, for some reason, I wasn't supposed to.

Still reeling, I went into the bathroom to get ready.

In my chair, I applied some black eyeliner.

It was a little too heavy for my mom's tastes, but then she rarely wore makeup. It was Aunt Cindy who showed me how to apply it the way humans did.

Mom came in to check on me. "Jasmine, you aren't ready yet?"

"I just woke up," I said, trying to keep my voice even.

My mom grimaced at my reflection.

"What?" I asked, holding the liner like a pencil in my right hand.

She leaned over and kissed the top of my head. "I love you, darling."

"I know, mom."

And I did. I knew she and my dad both did.

Regardless of our uncomfortable conversations or lack thereof.

There was no doubt they loved me very much.

Dad appeared and I gritted my teeth.

"Hey sweet daughter, you ready to conquer your day?" He gave me

a loving smile and I couldn't help but return it.

"As ready as rainbows," I responded.

He'd been asking the same question since I was five and I'd been responding the same since then too.

I was probably too old now, but I didn't mind.

"Do you think after the meetings today, I could go with Uncle Heathcliff to his lab. He said I could help him and then he'd take me to a movie. He promised he could hide my wings easily and that - "

My dad came over and squeezed my shoulders. "Honey, you know that's a bad idea. If anyone were to find out about your wings, about what you are, all sorts of bad things could happen. It's against the law for supernaturals to live in the human realm."

My shoulders sagged. They gave me the same lame excuses many times before.

"Whatever." I shrugged off his hands and bushed on some blush.

"Love you, Jasmine," he said and they both left.

After they were gone, I let my head smack against the counter before gazing at my reflection. My enormous wings hovered above my head. Freak, I thought.

Zenny cleared his throat. "Those two. Such a love story."

His hands were clasped together at his chest. It looked like he had tears in his eyes.

"So you gonna fluff my wings or what?" I asked, standing and turning around.

"Oooh, snappy." He clapped his hands twice and a machine like a blow dryer popped from the wall and worked on my wings.

When they were finished, I put my hair in a low side ponytail and placed my crown on my head.

"Perfect," Zenny said. "Use the rose colored lip-gloss, it'll really make your lips pop.

I applied it, rubbed my lips together, and ran a powder brush over

my nose.

"So very beautiful." Zenny exhaled.

"Thanks." I walked to my closet and shimmied into my uniform. Instead of wearing the shoes I was supposed to, I chose the black combat boots Uncle Gabe got me for my last birthday. Finished, I turned in the mirror. The skirt was too long, and I rolled it once at the waist. I had nice legs. Might as well show them off. Then I stretched my wings wide to make sure they wouldn't catch on anything.

"You're magnificent," Zenny said, appearing in the full-length mirror.

I couldn't help but blush. "They are annoying," I said, referring to my wings.

"They. Are. Amazing," Zenny argued good-naturedly.

"Fine. Keep saying that. But you aren't the one that has to deal with them. Sleep with them. Shower with them - They are a nuisance." Which wasn't entirely true. I did love flying. There was no better feeling. At least not one I experienced yet. But that was the only good thing about my wings.

"It's worth it. You're unique and glorious. Never forget that."

I huffed. "Easy for you to say."

Freak!

The word flashed through my mind and I ground my teeth.

Zenny waved his hand. "Yes, it is."

I chewed on the inside of my lip, trying to ignore my annoyance. It was hard though. No one understood what I went through. No one got it, which was why I wanted more than anything to be normal - even if that meant being just an ordinary vampire - one without wings.

"You sure you want to wear those boots?" Zenny asked, interrupting my internal grumblings.

I studied them in the mirror. "Yep!" In Sharra, our clothes were created with magic. Not my boots. They were magic free.

Zenny sighed heavily. "If you say so."

I winked, studying myself one more time. I had to admit aside from my wings, I looked good.

"Jasmine?" Zenny asked. He wasn't a fan of my boots any more than my mom.

"Gotta go. Thanks for your help." I blew him a kiss and walked from the closet into my room.

Ciana had come in and sat in her usual place, kitting. "Why don't you do something fun today." I came to stand in front of her.

"Is that an order?" The words were harsh, but she asked calmly enough.

"No, of course not." I sighed, leaned in and kissed her cheek. "See ya."

OceanofPDF.com

WANT MORE LAND

SCHOOL WAS MORE of the same.

Except Jon seemed to have grown an overabundance of nose hair during the night.

I secretly high-fived my best friend.

"Good one," I said, remembering Abrea promised to do something to him.

After classes were done, I went to my rooms and changed into a teal gown with Zenny's help.

Rushing as quickly as a princess was allowed, I made it to the meeting just in time, sliding into the seat next to my mom.

She looked over disapprovingly since I was supposed to be early, but whatever.

At the moment, I was doing my best not to fall asleep. The troll leader, Geth had a rather monotone voice.

"We will continue to supply blood for the princess as you ordered, but we want more land," Geth growled.

We were all seated around a large round table in the Great Hall. A glittering chandelier hung above giving off an ambient glow. The room was lined in gilded wood and pictures of previous royalty from the seven magics hung precisely along the walls. I admired the newest. The soul of the fairy realm. Her name was Aurora. We met a couple of times. She was nice.

Someone cleared their throat and I searched the faces at the table. A representative from each of the seven magics was there, as well as several sub species. Christopher was even there. My parents had a history with the last remaining hunter, I knew that. He betrayed my mom at one point when she was eighteen, but over the years they

came to an understanding. They weren't friendly with one another, and I could tell my dad barely tolerated him. When I was twelve, Christopher was brought before the council to discuss his place among the species. Most wanted him dead, but it was my mom who explained it was imperative all seven magics be represented in order for Sharra to survive. That included Christopher.

He gave off a certain arrogance. Occasionally I caught him watching me. A few years ago Mom decided to put him in charge of vampires. If one of them stepped out of line, that vampire was punished, but so was Christopher. I didn't know how, but I did know it was a rule. My mom and dad discussed it more than once over the years.

He also submitted the blood offerings required. Same as the others. But my mom wouldn't allow me to drink it. I didn't know what she did with it. Maybe it was still in the coolers beneath the castle. More likely she threw it out. Seemed like a waste, but I didn't know all the details.

As though he realized I was thinking about him, Christopher gave a half smile.

I returned it.

Mom noticed and narrowed her eyes before she responded to Geth. "If we give you more land, others will expect the same kind of provision. Then we would run out of room."

Geth slammed his fist on the table. "It's bad enough my family is required to live in Sharra, but now we're beyond crowded. Something must be done. We have no room!"

I jumped at the fury in his voice, my wings twitching nervously. As far as my taste buds were concerned, I would be fine if the trolls stopped supplying me with blood. It tasted disgusting. I drank it though because it increased my strength and agility.

It certainly made sense they wanted more land. The trolls were large creatures. They built on as well as below the earth, but they

could always use more. After Sharra died, my mom created many realms for the creatures of the seven magics, though there were already dozens that existed outside Sharra's knowledge. Like the fairy realm.

All the creatures of the seven magics had at least one realm now. Many went to the human realm, too - at first. After a few years, humans no longer wanted them around. The government worked with the chayot to expel them all or imprison them or even kill them. Now it was against the law for supernatural creatures to live in the human realm, though some broke the rules - like my grandfather.

Edinia, the elven leader, spoke up. "We could all use more space, Geth. We elves live longer, and our procreation process is much easier than your kind. Our family is also becoming overwhelmed."

"We don't have the luxury of going below the earth," Kerra, the unicorn leader added. "Trolls have twice the land we do already." She whinnied, though she was in her human form, and stomped her foot to enhance her words.

"What do you suggest?" my dad asked. He rarely spoke up during these meetings, but when he did everyone listened.

"That our Queen take some of the pixilette land and gives it to us." Geth stood, but one look from my mom and the troll immediately sat back down.

I knew she would never agree to that. But I had an idea. "What if we let you live in your own realms instead of requiring you to stay?"

"I would agree to that," Geth muttered.

My mom patted my hand as though trying to appease a stupid child.

I pulled away, irritated.

"I appreciate Jasmine's interest in this important matter," my mom began. "But you must remain as the blood offering from each of the seven is required and was agreed upon. You chose this, agreed to this, and you will need to get by with what you have here in Sharra." Her

features remained clear, but she was stoic and refused to break.

I felt bad for them. They had to remain in Sharra because of me. I required their blood offerings.

"What if we made sure an offering was contributed each week?" Geth still sounded like he might spit nails.

My mom tilted her head. "I don't know if that would work, Geth, though it is something to consider." There was a glimmer in her eyes as though she were thinking through all scenarios, her eyes still locked on Geth. She appeared to be in good spirits, but I'd seen the look before. Geth was close to crossing the line and my mom wouldn't have it.

Geth glowered. It was obvious he found me annoying. "Any other brilliant ideas?" he asked, his gave flicking to me.

I lifted my chin, forcing the nervous flutter of my wings to stop. I wouldn't cower to the troll. Or to anyone. "You'll be the first to know when I do."

"Do not belittle my daughter, Geth," my dad said. "Unless you wish to deal with me directly."

The troll huffed but backed down. "No, your highness. I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it," Geth said.

No one messed with my dad. His power was less understood than my mom's, but I had a feeling if he used the power of the seven magics within him, he could destroy realms.

When I was three, I drank poisoned fairy blood. It made me sick. For a while my mom and dad thought I would die. But as my dad rocked me, I bit into his hand and drank from him. Usually he and my mom discouraged that. They didn't want me biting anyone. It was better if I drank my blood from a glass like a civilized vampire. They believed it would help the magical creatures fear me less. But this time my dad didn't make me stop. His blood vaporized the poison from my body, and I was healed.

"Let's table this discussion for now." My mom looked directly at

Geth. "Your concern has been heard."

Geth acted as though he wanted interrupt and say more, but my mom raised her hand and he clamped his mouth shut. "Since we don't have an answer at the moment, let's move on. Is that acceptable?" My mom asked the question, but the tone of her voice said the subject was closed.

Geth adjusted in his seat. "I'll wait. For now."

"And I too," Edinia said. "But I agree returning to our realm and our people would be nice."

"Excellent. I appreciate your input. Thank you." Mom smiled at the elf. "Now, what's next?"

I stifled a yawn. This was the first of several meetings and I was bored. After the meetings, I still had to sit with a private tutor, attend combat training, and speak with the pixilettes about a new grass seedling they were trying to create.

"Might as well settle in, this is going to take a while," Edinia said, crossing her legs.

I had no idea what more still needed to be discussed, but I didn't want to be in the room a second longer. My patience disintegrated. "This is ridiculous," I said without thinking.

My mom glared. "Jasmine. Mind your manners."

Dad squeezed my mom's hand. "Let her go. There's a lot she still needs to do today."

"Yes, but she needs to learn to be - "

My dad gave my mom a look and I knew they were having a conversation without using words.

"Fine," my mom said, obvious disappointment in her voice.

But I didn't care. Her disappointment in me was becoming more and more frequent. I could deal with that. What I couldn't deal with was listening to another second of this meeting. "Thank you," I said and stood.

As I walked away, I heard the troll mumble, "Why does she bother to come?"

I wanted to fall apart. Shout at him. Grab him around his meaty neck and drink directly from his foul vein. He was big and oafish, but I was at least twice as strong. Instead I rolled my shoulders and left.

OceanofPDF.com

SECRET CAVE

As fast as possible, I ran out of the castle. Immediately, I took off my shoes, making my way into the woods.

The wind against my toes tickled, but I didn't mind. Relaxing, I opened my mind, allowing my senses to feel, sense, touch, and hear the surrounding countryside.

There was a family of deer at the stream to my left.

On my right was a group of pixilettes collecting seeds from orange peonia plants.

I listened extra carefully for a moment to see if Abrea happened to be with them, but she wasn't.

The pixilettes were talking about creating a new flower color by mixing two seedlings together. It would be called tealender, which was teal and lavender together.

They wanted to create it in my honor since I had a streak of teal along the front of my hair and my eyes were lavender.

I beamed at their thoughtfulness and the intensity of their conversation.

They continued their light discussion.

Some believed my eyes were more violet than lavender and therefore the name should be tealiot. I thought that sounded too much like toilet, so I hoped they didn't go with that one. However they could use violeal. That wasn't bad.

"Silly," I snorted.

At the moment there was one place I wanted to be, one place I wanted to go.

That was the secret cave Abrea and I found four years ago. It was a total accident and it was our secret hideout.

We were flying together one day when a sudden rainstorm hit. As the water beat down, Abrea flew under me so I could keep the rain from hitting her wings, but unexpectedly the rain started going sideways, making it even more difficult for her. We needed shelter, and the opening to the cave appeared on the side of the mountain like it knew we were in need.

We flew in and stayed there until the rain subsided. It felt alive. Filled with the gems of the seven magics. The walls sparkled with rubies, emeralds, topaz, and sapphires. They lit up when I was near and whispered compliments telling me how beautiful my eyes were, how lovely the wings at my back had become, and so on.

But when I realized Abrea couldn't hear the whisperings I did my best to ignore them.

Freak! I thought again.

As I came upon the entrance point, I closed my eyes, focusing on my surroundings to make sure no one was around. When I was sure I was alone, I touched a charred looking rock. It shuddered and then the cave entrance appeared.

I flew inside. Immediately the whispering started. Happiness coated my heart. At least someone - or something thought I was amazing. In the cave I wasn't a disappointment. Here I wasn't expected to do something or be something other than who I was. It was refreshing.

"This place rocks. Like literally." It wasn't my voice but that of a guy. Deep. Earthy.

I swung around surprised someone snuck up on me. That never happened before. I might be losing my touch, same as my mom.

There was a guy near the entrance to the cave. He was gorgeous. A dark-haired, total-movie-star hottie. Like one of the actors or singers I read about in the entertainment magazines from the human world. He was tall, tan and muscled. He wore a short sleeve white shirt with an open collar and the sleeves rolled up. Each of his wrists were

decorated with intricate black tattoos, like cuffs, but his were tribal with what looked like an eye in the center.

My first instinct was to kill him. But he was too pretty to hurt. "Who are you?"

He clasped his hands behind his back and took a step forward. "I'm Laeddin." Another two steps closer.

I swallowed. "How did you sneak up on me, Laeddin?"

He chuckled. Two more steps. We were toe to toe. I had to look up to see his face. His eyes, twin pools of glorious aquamarine, studied my face, my body, and my hair. He was amused. "This - is my home."

"Your home?" I answered. "You live in a cave?" I shook my head, trying to make sense of it. "I've been coming here for years. I've never seen you before." I took a step back. "You haven't been stalking me, have you?"

Laeddin copied my step so we were still close. "I thought you were stalking me." His eyes crinkled with mischief.

"Where do you sleep?" I looked around. It was empty except for the gems and a dirt floor. "On the floor? It's dirty. But you don't look dirty. You look gorgeous." I clamped a hand over my mouth, shocked I said that aloud.

My other hand touched his arm, felt the delicious shape of his bulging bicep.

"And perfectly clean. I mean look at your shirt, the way it clings to your chest and shows off the shape of your - " I pressed my lips between my thumb and first finger.

I was rambling, saying things I shouldn't be saying. It was a problem, talking too much when I was nervous, but I couldn't help it.

"I-I'm terribly sorry," I muttered.

He pulled my hand from my mouth. "It's okay." His gaze kept slipping from my eyes to my mouth. It was very disconcerting and sexy.

I licked my lips. "What are you?" I asked, and then blushed. Humiliated.

"Sorry." I turned away.

"I'm a genie," he supplied.

I felt him come up behind me.

He placed his hands on my bare shoulders.

I shivered at the warmth radiating from his palms. My wings fluttered of their own will and my face turned redder.

"Your wings are magnificent." With the tips of his fingers he stroked them.

I wasn't sure whether to be okay with him touching my wings or not.

No one except my parents was allowed. "Uh, thanks." I faced him. "So you're a genie?" I blinked, working to get control over my emotions. "What's a genie?"

He took my hand. "I'll show you."

The dirt floor and gem encrusted walls disappeared.

In its place was a room befitting any palace.

A giant chandelier hung from the ceiling and twelve billowing curtains all in different pastels were strung from the center to the edges of the walls and then hung down the walls.

The floor was covered in a thick white carpet.

I was barefoot and rubbed my feet across its surface.

"It's so soft." I gave Laeddin an incredulous look. "Is this real?"

"Of course it is, Jasmine." He brushed a piece of hair from my eyes.

"You even know my name?" Whatever a genie was, he had great magic.

In one corner of the cave, there was a gigantic four-poster bed.

Gauzy white curtains hung from it.

The bedding was also white and encrusted with what looked like

white and black diamonds. At the foot of the bed was a sleek black trunk.

I walked over and touched it; sure it would vanish between my fingers. It didn't. The surface was solid, shiny, and sleek.

"This is where I sleep," he said, his voice seductive.

OceanofPDF.com

MASTER REQUESTS IT

I STEPPED AWAY, crossing my arms. "I've been coming here for years. Why didn't you reveal yourself before?"

He looked away. "I enjoyed listening to you and the pixilette, Abrea, talk. Sometimes I get a little lonely."

The idea that Laeddin, a strong and handsome man, felt the way I did immediately softened my heart. "Don't you have any friends?"

He looked at me, his eyes sad. "I'm not allowed to leave until such time as my master requests it."

"Oh, and who's your master?" My heart began to beat rapidly.

"You are, Jasmine." He came over and took both of my hands in his. "I am yours to command."

"You are?" For some reason that made my heart speed up and my face get hot. I tried to pull away, but he held me fast.

"Yes. And I can grant you three wishes." His eyes flickered to my lips. "Nearly anything you want."

"Really?" My mind whirled out of control at the possibilities. Most of my wishes were selfish. "I can ask for anything?"

"Well, sure. Anything within reason."

I wanted to snort. "What does that mean?" I walked over to the bookshelf and scanned the titles. There were titles I'd never seen before and several I had, like Wuthering Heights, The Great Gatsby, and To Kill a Mockingbird.

He came over, pulled Wuthering Heights from its place and started flipping through the pages. "I can't bring anyone back from the dead. I can't kill anybody." He turned and touched my cheek. "And I can't make someone fall in love." He caressed my jawline with him thumb.

I shivered and tried to cover it up with a smirk. "What can you

do?" He smelled delicious, like exotic spices and oranges.

"Why don't you tell me what you want, and I'll let you know if it's possible." His thumb touched my bottom lip.

I inhaled and fell back. He caught hold of my arms and pulled me close. My body touched his and I turned into a gooey mess. He was the kindling and I was the match. I couldn't think and that was irritating. Well, okay, it was delicious, but kind of irritating too. It was important I be able to think.

He led me over to the bed. My heart raced faster. I sat, internally admiring how soft yet firm the mattress felt. When Laeddin moved to sit as well, I flinched and quickly stood. If he had salacious intentions, I wasn't ready. He was gorgeous, but I didn't know him and wouldn't be doing anything with him on his bed.

"So what is it you want?" Laeddin asked, disappointed.

Great, now I've upset him, too. He'd better get in line, I thought.

"Jasmine? I'm serious. I must grant you three wishes. Please?" He came over to me.

My breathing just started to calm down but the closer he got, the faster it went. "You seem anxious about it. Why do you have to grant me three wishes? Will you explode or something if you don't?"

Laeddin chuckled. "Maybe not explode." He crossed his arms, and I noticed the tattoos on his wrists. "But as I said before, you've been my master a long time already and there is an urgency that builds within my body the longer you go without wishing for something." He closed his eyes a moment. "It's painful almost beyond comprehension. But I wanted to wait until you were ready." His bright aqua eyes seemed to shine with the pain he'd been hiding. "That's why I showed myself today."

"Because I'm ready."

He acted guilty, like he was sorry he hadn't resisted longer. For some reason seeing him like this made me feel guilty, too.

"I planned to wait until you turned eighteen, but - Please." He gritted his teeth.

"Okay. All right." I tugged at my left wing, working to calm myself, one of my silly habits.

Laeddin noticed but didn't say anything.

I wanted my wings gone. "How about these wings? Can you get rid of them?" I asked, hopeful.

Surprise lanced across Laeddin's face. "Why would you want that?" He touched the same spot on my wings as I had only moments before. "They're stunning."

"I don't think so." I stomped over to the bench at the end of his bed, sitting furiously. "They might look pretty, and they are fun to use when I'm flying but - there's no one else like me." That was the part that hurt the most. Sure there were plenty of other vampires. But I was the only one with wings. "Because of these," I stretched out my wings to their fullest. "I'm not allowed go into the human realm at all. No movies. No high school. No - ugh! Living."

Laeddin's eyes beamed as understanding flashed through them. "So you want to go into the human realm then? Live like a human girl?"

"Yes." I clapped. "Is that a wish you can grant?"

He took my hands. "Yes, it is."

I jumped up, excited. "Okay. I like it." An image of my mom and what she would do when she found out flashed across my mind. "But what about my parents? Can they stop my wish? Can they make it so I have to come back?"

Laeddin paused thoughtful. "It's possible."

All the joy left my body.

Laeddin noticed and took my hands. "If you're specific, you'll be fine."

I thought about what I believed living in the human realm meant. There should be parties, trips to the local mall, good times at the

movies, and hanging out at a friend's house. "How should I word it?" I asked, coming to stand near him. His scent was consuming, scrumptiously intense.

"I can't tell you exactly what to say."

My face fell. "Give me a suggestion, then. Sheesh!"

"My suggestion," he paused and chuckled. "Would be to word it like: 'I wish to be a normal girl and live in the human realm where I can go to high school without my wings and do so without my parents being able to bring me back to Sharra.' Or something like that." Laeddin stepped away and went over to a small table where a bowl of fresh fruit appeared. He took a purple grape and tossed it in his mouth.

I started to pace, thinking about exactly how to word my wish. When I felt like I knew, I said, "I'm ready."

Laeddin swallowed the food in his mouth and cleared his throat. "Then I am too."

I grinned. "Laeddin, I wish to go to high school in the human world and live like a regular teenage girl without my wings and without my parents being mad or being able to stop me." I paused. "Is that good?"

He thought it over a moment. "That works."

"Yay! So what happens now?"

"Now comes the magic." He clapped his hands together once. The black tattoos circling his wrists abruptly glistened the color of sunny gold. When they stopped my wings vanished.

"Oh, wow. That was fast." There was a quick pang of loss. They were a part of me almost eighteen years. But I shook off any regret. Life would be better without them. I moved closer and stood on my tiptoes. "What about school and living like a regular, normal human?"

He clapped his hands twice and we were no longer in the cave that was his home.

OceanofPDF.com

MY MOM'S HOUSE

"WHERE ARE WE?" I asked when the mist cleared. The room was dark, but I was able to make out empty shelves and pictures hanging on creamy walls. Lamps and furniture were covered in white sheets. Several inches of dust coated the room.

"This is the house your mom grew up in." He pulled the sheet off the couch and rolled it into a dusty ball. Thick dust puffed in the air. Laeddin coughed and tossed the sheet on the floor.

"Really?" I sneezed as I studied the room. I always wanted to see my mom's house, but she never let me. "And my dad grew up in the next house over, right?" My uncles teased that their house was a sprawling mansion while my mom had lived in a shack. She laughed but it was obvious there were some painful memories. For that reason I hadn't pushed her to come. Occasionally she would share a good memory, but it wasn't often.

The room Laeddin and I stood in was definitely small though. Smaller even than my bedroom in the castle.

"That's right." His words brought me out of my thoughts. "I believe a couple of Dorian's brothers and Professor Pops still live there, including some of your cousins."

"You know they aren't really my cousins?" I thought about Hot Guy. We weren't genetically related.

"No?" His eyes danced with joy. I wondered if he was as excited to be free of his cave as I was to have escaped Sharra.

"Professor Pops adopted the seven brothers."

Laeddin pulled a sheet off the TV. "Yes, I knew that."

I wanted to ask him how, but figured it had to do with his genie powers and so didn't bother. I was too excited. "I can't wait to see

Pops." But then I hesitated. What would Pops think about my choice?

"Yeah, about that." Laeddin pulled a sheet off a high back chair. He wadded the sheet and tossed it, averting his gaze.

"What?"

He moved over to the couch and patted a pillow. Dust erupted in the air like a puff of smoke.

"No one can know who you are." His eyes connected with mine. They radiated sympathy, but also finality.

I felt my mouth drop. "But why?" That totally sucked.

"Because if they know who you are, they could tell your mom and dad, which would ruin your wish."

I sank into the overstuffed chair. That made sense. I wanted to live like a typical teenager, but if my uncles or Professor Pops knew who I was they would have to tell my mom and dad. Of course they would, because their loyalties were to them first and foremost. My uncles shared enough stories - sleeping out on something called a trampoline, hanging out until all hours. I knew what the brothers, Pops, and my mom and dad meant to each other.

"You get it, right?" Laeddin rested a hand on my shoulder, filling the air around me with his scent.

"I guess so." I took a small breath. "At least you'll be here with me."

Laeddin cleared his throat.

"Wait, you won't?"

He knelt beside the chair. "Think about it. How would it look if a teenaged girl and an unmarried guy lived together? People might get the wrong idea."

I jumped up and started to pace. "I'll be all alone. Where are you going? I don't know what to do. I need help. I can't do this without you. Besides what if I want another wish?"

He stood. "What do you suggest?"

I tried to pull on my wing like I usually did in stressful situations

and then remembered they were gone. For some reason it made me sad. "I don't know. But you can't leave. You can't," I cried, full of desperation.

Laeddin snapped his fingers. The tattoos around his wrists lit up momentarily and suddenly the entire room was dust free and totally clean. "That's better." He snapped his fingers again and a figurine appeared in his hand. He set it on the empty glass shelf. "Look, it's your twin."

When I was young, my mom told me about a movie in the human world called Aladdin and that they chose my name from that movie. She said I looked a lot like the animated character. Cindy, my mom's best friend, snuck me a book about the movie. For weeks I read it at night after my parents tucked me in. I knew the characters' names by heart.

Another snap of Laeddin's fingers and the tiger, the genie, the monkey and the boy from the market appeared on the shelf next to Jasmine.

I came up beside him and touched the ceramic figurine. "My mom told me her stepmother had dozens of these when she lived here. She also said that her stepmother was kind of a coocoo crazy collector."

Laeddin laughed, bringing me out of my thoughts, and I joined in. It eased my stress. Now slightly more relaxed, I reached past my namesake to pick up the figurine of the tiger, Raja. "What if you became my tiger?"

"I might scare the neighbors or get shot. Tigers aren't exactly indigenous to the area." His bright eyes glittered with humorous sarcasm.

"Fine," I huffed. "You're right." Behind the Jasmine figurine and the tiger was Aladdin and his monkey, Abu. "A monkey?"

"Again, I'd be shot or taken to the nearest zoo." He faced me. "Why an animal? How about your twin?" Suddenly looking at him was like looking in the mirror. He changed into my exact duplicate right down

to the aqua dress and the hair.

"Whoa. That's cool." I touched his face. "Okay, more freaky than cool. I don't know if I could deal with this."

He switched back to himself. "Well, I look too old to go to school. I guess I could play your father?"

"Gross," I said, trying to contain the strong attraction I held for him. It wouldn't do for him to play my dad when I responded to him the way I did.

"Why gross?" He reached out and grabbed my waist, pulling my body against his. He already knew why.

I stopped breathing. My mind stopped thinking. Everything froze and all that was left was Laeddin, his lips, and his very sexy body touching mine.

"Jasmine? What's wrong?"

I pushed him away. He was toying with my emotions. He obviously knew what he was doing. "Nothing. Just no to the parental idea." I meandered into the kitchen and opened a cupboard. It was bare, as were the rest. I flipped a switch, but the light didn't turn on. I tried to call upon my power to turn on the light, but nothing happened.

"No wings. No magic, remember?" Laeddin walked into the kitchen.

"Right, a regular teenager with a craving for blood."

"Correct," Laeddin smirked.

I pulled open the refrigerator. A pungent odor wafted out. "I'm going to need electricity and groceries and - " I spun in a circle. "I'm going to need a lot of stuff."

"Nasty." Laeddin wrinkled his nose at the smell. He snapped his fingers. The smell instantly vanished. Fruits and vegetables appeared on the refrigerator shelves, as did the light.

"Nice," I said, taking an apple and pressing it to my lips. Before I

bit, I asked him, "So I'm regular, right? I don't need blood to sustain me anymore?"

Laeddin looked away.

"Come on. What kind of genie are you?"

Laeddin chuckled. "It has to do with your wish. What you asked for." He took the apple and bit into it. "Delicious."

I crossed my arms. "So what? Do I need to wish that I'm no longer a vampire?"

He threw the apple's core in the trash. "You could, but I don't think you should." He looked away. "I mean it isn't my place to tell you how to wish or what to wish for." Laeddin bowed low at the waist. "I am simply your humble servant."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't bow to me." Laeddin's scrutiny seemed to tear into my soul. "You aren't my servant. We're going to be friends." I patted his cheek, ignoring my pangs of desire. I wanted us to be more than friends.

Laeddin took my hand. "I appreciate that's what you might think, but the truth is, until your three wishes are granted, I am your servant."

OceanofPDF.com

RUB A LAMP

I GAVE AN EXASPERATED SIGH.

"I like you too. But if you knew anything about genies, you'd know we can't consider ourselves equal when one does the wishing." He pointed at me. "And the other," he smacked a hand against his chest, "must grant it."

I went to the bar stool and slumped over, resting my head in my hands. "Why should you be my servant - " I shrugged. "Or whatever, if I didn't call upon you - or something." It was confusing. "Wasn't I supposed to rub a lamp? Where is your lamp?"

Laeddin sat beside me. "The cave you and Abrea often visited. That was the inside of my lamp. Basically from the moment you found it, I've been your servant. I was just worried about showing myself to you too soon.

"Why me and not Abrea?"

"Simple. You brought Abrea into the cave. You found the cave. It's been you for a long time."

"Oh," I said, lifting my head and looking at him. "And I shouldn't wish to no longer be a vampire?"

He shook his head, a strange emotion flitting across his face. "No, please don't do that."

I bit my bottom lip. "Okay. So, I guess I'm wingless and I can't do any magic, but I still have to drink blood?" That was upsetting. There was nothing ordinary about a girl with the need for a liquid diet. Especially not in the human realm. But I could pull it off. Without wings, I was sure to look completely normal, at least.

"Now you get it."

"I guess," I said, straightening up. I had my wish. I'd figure out the

blood situation later. "So what are the fruits and veggies for? Just part of the typical teenager show?" I asked, giggling not unlike a little girl.

"Well that." He paused and patted his stomach. "And I'm a vegetarian. You'll need to feed your servant, don't you think?" He bowed low again.

I giggled. "How very manly of you." Then I got serious. "So you're going to stay around? You won't leave me in this house alone?"

Laeddin picked up my hands. "Correct."

My fingers found the tattoos and I traced them. That seemed to make him nervous. He gently pulled away, taking another bite of apple. "But you're only allowed to boss me around when you have friends over. And then only within reason." Laeddin smirked. "Treat me like family."

"Fine," I said. That reminded me. "Do you know where my mom's dad and stepmother are? They won't come back to the house while we're here, will they?" Part of me was excited by the prospect of seeing my grandfather. My mom hadn't told me much about him, but I still wanted to meet him.

Laeddin's face fell. "Didn't you know? Your grandfather died a couple of years ago. It was very sudden. The doctors couldn't figure out what happened."

"Oh." Sadness ripped at my heart over the loss of a family member I would never meet. "My mom didn't tell me. I wonder if she knows."

"She does. She arranged for his funeral and took care of the other necessities required. She kept the house but recently put in on the market. We've officially purchased it. So it now belongs to you." He went to the front room and touched a green and white For Sale sign leaning near the door.

"Okay," I said, feeling bad my mom never mentioned such a sad moment in her life. She must've felt something at the loss of her father. I knew it would break my heart to lose my dad. "And my grandfather's wife?"

"Soon after your grandfather's death, Vivianne disappeared. No one has seen or heard from her for a very long time."

I got off the stool and went to the stairs. "You know where she is though, right?"

He shook his head. "I can't see her. I'm not sure what happened to her. It's as though she vanished."

"That's weird." I started climbing the steps to see what was on the second floor. Laeddin followed.

The house smelled of Laeddin, like warm spices and zesty orange. I inhaled deeply. When I reached the top, I looked over the railing, down into the living room.

"It is very weird," he agreed.

I looked at him confused, until I figured he was talking about why he couldn't see my step grandmother. Not that I wanted to meet her. Mom told plenty of horrible stories. "Should I be worried?" I asked, tracing his features with my eyes.

"I don't think so. She never really liked your mom or this place, so it's highly unlikely, if she is still alive, that she'll return."

"You're probably right." A mixture of emotions swirled through me at being here.

"Of course I am. Besides we own the property now. She'd be trespassing." He moved to the first closed door and pushed it open.

"Exactly right," I said, perking up as I stepped around him and into the bedroom. It was big. I guessed it was my grandfather's and his wife's room. It was nice.

"I want to see my mom's old room," I said, continuing down the hall. When I came to the only other bedroom door, I froze. The door was closed, but I knew it had to be my mom's. Suddenly it felt like I was spying. She hadn't shared a lot about living in the house or living in the human realm. It reminded me I didn't even know her favorite color.

"You going in?" Laeddin asked.

I turned the handle and pushed open the door. Purple. Every inch of the room was covered in purple. "I never would've guessed," I said, stepping inside.

"Me either," Laeddin agreed walking over to the dresser.

I followed him and leaned in, checking out the pictures pinned to the corkboard above. There were photos of all seven of Professor Pops' adopted sons, including my father, Dorian, as well as my aunt Cindy and my mom. Even though my mom still looked the same, she seemed younger in the pictures. She dressed like a tomboy. Her hair was short, and she wore no makeup. "Wow." I took down a picture of Cindy and my mom.

"Yeah," Laeddin added.

"My mom looks so young." I glanced at Laeddin. His closeness took my breath away.

"She's lovely."

For some reason his comment made me jealous. "I guess." I put the picture back and pulled open the top drawer. It was empty, as was the next. I went to the closet and pulled it open. It was empty too. "What am I going to do about clothes?"

Laeddin tapped his chin as though he were thinking about the question before he smiled. "Well," he walked into the bathroom. I followed. "I could just snap my fingers and you'd have more clothes than you knew what to do with." He caught and held my eyes in the mirror.

"Yes, I suppose," I said, thinking that might be the easiest.

"Or," he turned and leaned down so that his cheek touched mine, his lips next to my ear. "We could go shopping." His breath tickled my neck.

A shiver ran down my spine at the prospect. Yes, I wanted to shop! I was sure my face lit up like lightning during a thunderstorm.

"So shopping?" he asked his face so near mine. He already knew the answer.

"Yes," I said turning slightly so I could see his eyes. My bottom lip brushed against his and a bolt of electricity shot through my body. "Oh," I gasped.

He touched my lip with his fingers. "Let's go then." He seemed to be affected by me as well, though he was doing a better job at hiding it.

Heat touched every part of my body. I couldn't speak. So I nodded. "I'm ready." And I was. Normal life, here I come, I thought.

OceanofPDF.com

SHOPPING

LAEDDIN TOOK us to a place in New York City called Bloomingdales. We had a salesperson help us. It was fun buying clothes after the small freak out I had when I turned to study my reflection in the mirror and saw no actual wings.

Okay, a big freak out.

"What's wrong?" Laeddin asked, popping into the dressing room with me. I screamed again, quickly covering myself with the shirt I was about to try on.

His eyes roamed over my body quickly before focusing on my face.

"Look at my back," I said, turning it toward him, my teeth chattering.

His eyes got dark, like emeralds, and he licked his lips. I was mesmerized by the action.

When he didn't say anything, I continued on. "There are tattoos of wings on my back." "I tore my gaze from his face and focused on the reflection of my back in the mirror. The wings were outlined in black and filled in along the edges. I knew tattoos were a thing in the human realm, but I never thought about having one, let alone one that covered my whole back.

"May I?" Laeddin asked, reaching out.

My heart raced so hard and so fast; it was hard to hear anything. "Sure." I bit my bottom lip.

His touch was gentle as he traced one of the wings. I closed my eyes, sinking into the incredible feeling racing through my body, remembering this was a good thing. Normal. No wings equaled ordinary. That was what I wanted.

"They are trapped within," he said, interrupting my thoughts.

I opened my eyes. "Will they stay away?" I moved so I was inches from him. He grasped my shoulders and tipped his head.

We were going to kiss. I sensed it, knew it the way I knew which way was up. I lifted my face to meet him halfway. My first kiss, I thought.

I knew I should close my eyes. I'd seen pictures of couples kissing, but I was too fascinated with the way Laeddin moved. The length of his dark lashes and how they cast shadows on his cheeks, the slight dimple in his chin, his mysterious scent, and his warm breath.

Millimeters away. He was so close. I wondered how it would feel, if it would change me.

Someone knocked on the door. "How's it going, Jasmine?"

I squealed and jumped out of Laeddin's grasp. "Fine," I said, but my voice sounded strange.

"Did you need a different size?"

Laeddin smirked.

My face turned bright red, like rich blood. "I'm not sure yet. Hang on."

I heard her step closer to the door.

Laeddin moved so he could whisper in my ear. "I'm going."

He kissed my cheek and vanished.

I checked my cheek in the mirror. I expected to see a mark where his lips touched. The spot burned, but there was nothing.

"Jasmine?" the clerk said again, knocking with more urgency on the door. I peeked my head out and handed her one of the dresses I'd taken in. "I'd like to try this one in a different color."

She took it, happy to have something to do. "I'll see what I can find."

"Thank you."

When she was gone, I tried on a tan mini skirt that came to the middle of my thighs and a powder blue button up shirt. I turned back

and forth, liking the look. Then I tried on a couple of different pairs of jeans, more shirts, some sweaters, and a couple of different dresses. They all looked great.

By the time the salesgirl came back, I was ready for more. "What do you think?" she asked, showing me the dress. "It'll match your beautiful eyes."

The dress was a bright orchid in color. "I like it." I took it from her.

"And what about the others? Anything you like?" She watched me with curiosity.

"I love all of it."

"Good. If you want to give them to me, I'll begin wrapping them up."

"Sure." I took the clothes and handed them to her.

"Anything you don't want?" she asked.

I shook my head. From the corner of my eye, I caught Laeddin watching our exchange. He had his hands in his pockets and was smiling. "Nope."

"Very good." Her quizzical expression changed to complete and utter excitement. The girl was going to get a huge commission.

"Also," I added, before she left. "I'm going to need shoes. And underthings. And socks, and tights - and coats, and jackets too."

She followed my gaze and saw Laeddin. "You're very lucky. He's gorgeous and generous."

"I know," I admitted and then blushed.

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Laeddin took on the role of tour guide. He showed me around Salem. He took me into Boston, where we walked the streets, until he surprised me with a movie. It was a romance called Across the Ages about a girl who travelled through time and ended up falling in love. There were several cringe-worthy moments. Like when the main character kissed the male lead. It was soft and

passionate and romantic, and my cheeks went hot.

When the movie ended, I could tell Laeddin was relieved, but I wanted to see it again. So we did. He was very thoughtful. I had so much fun spending time with him. He didn't talk much about himself though. Mostly we talked about me, and my life.

Laeddin also magicked the documents needed for school. It was mainly just him snapping his fingers, but since Salem Academy could call and check on the information listed in the transcripts, he had to make sure certain things I didn't care to understand were in order.

Sunday night, he took me to a symphony. It was our last night together before I was to start school. All he did was snap his finger and he went from wearing jeans and a t-shirt to a black tux with a white shirt.

"You look so handsome," I whispered. It took me an hour to do my makeup and my hair just right and then to get dressed, but that was fine by me.

I chose a black dress with loose ruffles in the skirt. What I loved most was that the under part of the ruffles were teal, so when I moved, a pop of color would show. The bodice was tight and sleeveless. A small teal flower was pinned on the right side of my waist. On my feet were black pumps with a red bottom, but Laeddin changed them to teal. My hair was curled and pinned back on one side, leaving it long and flowing.

"Well you look beautiful." Laeddin rested his hands on my waist. His skin radiated his scent.

In that moment, I realized why he smelled so delicious to me. Because I was smelling his blood. My fangs pressed against my lips as I longed to taste him. "Thank you," I forced out.

I needed to get a handle on myself. It wouldn't do to drain my hot genie. But it had been a while since eating and I was starting to feel the ill effects of going without.

"If everything alright?" Laeddin kissed my cheek.

My throat felt parched, but I resisted. "Fine. Let's go."

With the snap of his fingers, we left my house and were seated in the theater. No one even noticed when we just popped in. It was as though we were there all along.

When everyone was seated, the conductor came out and spoke to us about the program. Then the orchestra began to play - and for the next hour I was lost in the beautiful sounds of the music.

OceanofPDF.com

HUMAN SCHOOL

ON MONDAY MORNING, I woke with a mixture of excitement and apprehension swirling in my belly. The sun was just starting to rise, and my first inclination was to fly because Abrea would be waiting at my window.

Except she wouldn't be this morning.

My emotions floated to the surface.

I needed Abrea. She was my friend.

Before I got out of bed, I took a moment to really enjoy laying on my back. It was heavenly.

Finally, I jumped out of bed and ran to the window, pushing it open. Birds chirped their song. Small animals rummaged in the trees that lined the back yard. A deer lifted its head and bounded away.

My throat burned at the sight of the doe. I needed blood. At this point, it was beyond bad. More than a week since my last breakfast, I couldn't ignore my hunger any longer.

"Where's a unicorn when you need one?" I whispered fiercely, turning from the window, surprised by how sad I felt. I missed my best friend. Having Laeddin was great, but I had to be careful of my attraction to him. Or his blood, my mind whispered. Whatever the reason, I couldn't totally relax. Hiding out in the human realm would be so much more fun if Abrea was with me.

Laeddin and I discussed bringing her. We talked and talked about it. But it wouldn't work. Abrea was small. If her presence were noticed, the full wrath of the laws would fall upon us and we would be imprisoned or killed.

I took a deep breath. I chose this life. Might as well get used to it. Normal. High school. It would get better once I found some human

friends and started doing typical stuff.

"Focus, Jasmine." I went into the bathroom. Laeddin had changed the color scheme in there as well as my bedroom from purple to my favorite colors, which were teal and black.

The style was contemporary. A fresh jasmine flower sat in a pot on the counter near the sink and I leaned in to smell it. After my shower, I fixed my hair. The teal streak that had been in my hair for as long as I could remember was no longer there. I kept turning back and forth in the mirror trying to decide whether I liked myself better with or without it.

I decided it didn't matter. I left my hair down, curling the ends that hung to my waist with a hot iron. It took me a while to figure it out and I ended up burning two of my fingers. At least I was still a vampire. Then I could heal quickly. I kept my makeup simple, using neutral colors that enhanced my violet eyes, and applied neutral lip-gloss.

I picked out my outfit the night before, a tan skirt with five-inch heels in the same color and a powder blue button down shirt. I put on a matching lacy blue bra and undies. The bathroom seemed lonely without Zenny. Usually he was around to give me compliments and help me choose makeup colors, hairstyles, and the clothes I would wear. I missed him too.

But I reminded myself he wasn't part of my normal life.

I focused on my shoes. They were the favorite part of my outfit. The shoes had a peekaboo toe and a bow at the ankle. Completely adorable.

When I finished, I went down to the kitchen and Laeddin.

He leaned against the counter, eating an orange. He was dressed in dark jeans and a green t-shirt. His feet were bare, and his black hair was still wet.

I wasn't sure whether it was the orange or him that I craved more. But he made the orange look so delicious, especially with the juice

dripping off his lips. I wanted regular food. I thought about wishing for it, but he already told me he didn't want to change who I was, and I didn't want to waste a wish.

"Morning," he said, pushing off the counter.

I unexpectedly felt shy. "Hi," I replied.

"Ready for school?" He opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water, twisted off the lid, and took a long drink. I was mesmerized by his movements. He smelled like ecstasy. It could've been his skin or his blood. I wanted to lick at the vein pulsing at his neck, sink my teeth in, and find out. I had a feeling his blood would be as spicy as his scent.

He saw me watching and stopped drinking, placing the lid back on the bottle. I licked my lips. Thirsty.

"You need to feed," he suggested as comprehension dawned on him.

"Yes." I took a step in his direction.

He faced me, spreading his legs shoulder's width apart. It looked like he was preparing for my attack. "You want to taste me, don't you, Princess?" His voice was low, deep and sensual.

"I do," I responded, moving closer. I was almost in a frenzy, and the need for blood made his smell so heady.

Laeddin tilted his neck as though giving me access. I was on him before I realized what I was doing. My tongue tasted his neck and my fangs released. I pressed against his warmth.

He cleared his throat. "Is this what you wish?" Laeddin asked.

That made me pause. "You mean I have to use a wish to drink your blood?"

"That's right," he said, clearing his throat and resting his hands on my hips.

That took the heat right out of me. I untangled myself, pushing out of his arms. "Never mind." I picked up my pink and light green polka

dot backpack and walked to the front door. "I'd better get to school."

Laeddin was immediately wearing shoes. "Here." He pulled open the refrigerator and grabbed a glass. It was filled with something red. "It's blood. Drink. You're going to need it."

I grabbed and sniffed. "What kind?" I took a sip. It tasted a little sweet and salty with a hint of copper. It tasted different than any blood I tried before. Only the tiniest hint of magic laced within the blood. "Is it an animal?" If so, I knew it would keep me in control for a short time but wouldn't satisfy for long. I took another, bigger drink. It was delicious in a way I never imagined. Even better than unicorn blood. Had my mom lied about my not being able to drink animal blood? Would it keep me strong and healthy just like magical blood?

Laeddin smirked. "Something like that." A set of keys appeared in his hands.

I chugged the remaining blood until it was gone. Usually I drank it warm, but cold wasn't bad. I wanted more, but a quick check inside the refrigerator revealed there wasn't any left. "You're driving?" I asked, giving him a sideways glare. "Wouldn't it be faster to do your magical disappearing and reappearing thing? You know, poof."

"Of course it would be faster, but it might alarm the humans." He opened the door.

"Oh, right." I'd forgotten that in the human realm magic was outlawed. "I wish you were going with me. It'd be nice to know one person in the school."

Laeddin chuckled. "Is that an actual wish? Because it would be awkward, but your wish is my command."

I covered my mouth and swallowed down my worry. "Oh my gosh. No. You're right. That wasn't an actual wish."

He seemed relieved. "Good."

We walked outside. Sitting directly in front of us on the circular driveway was a gleaming white Mercedes.

"Cool," I said climbing in the passenger seat.

After he got in and the engine roared to life, I turned and looked at him. "You called me Princess? What's up with that?"

He glanced at me as he pulled forward. "It suits you - Princess."

"I don't like it," I told him, leaning back in the leather chair.

Laeddin turned, his face alight with mischief. "All the more reason I'll continue to call you Princess, Princess."

"Ugh."

Laeddin smirked. He did something with the shifter and the car lurched forward, down the driveway. Laeddin flipped a knob on the left of the steering thing as we came to a stop. A large silver truck flew past us. It honked and roared down the street.

"I'm guessing one of your uncle's kids." He looked like he had a bad taste in his mouth. Laeddin turned left and we followed the truck all the way to the high school.

OceanofPDF.com

FIRST DAY JITTERS

THE SCHOOL WAS BIG, bigger than the castle. Laeddin dropped me off at the front of the school. "I'll be back to pick you up at two forty."

I climbed out of the car. "Thanks. See you later." I watched him drive away. All my senses were heightened. New smells - weird smells - assaulted my nose. And there was so much noise. At the Seven Magics Academy, there were less that seventy-five students. Here it sounded like a flock of sea birds calling to each other. Hundreds of humans swarmed past. They went up the stairs and through the front door. I turned, trying not to wobble in my heels, and followed the brunt of them.

Inside the school, the air became denser, probably from all the bodies. Straight ahead was an open area with hallways breaking off to both sides. Ahead there were two sets of double doors, with a staircase to the right of the doors.

"Are you lost, honey?" A guy with short black hair and skin much darker than mine bounced in front of me. His face was friendly. Dark eyes sparkled and his smile took up a large portion of his face. He was wearing a hot pink button up shirt. It wasn't tucked in but hung loose. His shoes were blue with a hot pink streak. Both of his ears were pierced, and diamond studs covered the holes.

I couldn't stop staring. He reminded me a little of Zenny.

"Hey," he snapped his fingers. "New girl."

"Where is the office? I-I, uh am new."

He popped a hip and gave me a look that said duh. "Yeah, I figured." He took my hand. "Come on. I'll get you there."

I halted, surprised by his friendliness and shocked by the smell coming off him. It was like a bouquet of copper, rust, and sweet thick

- I smelled his blood. Laeddin gave me human blood for breakfast. I didn't know whether that was a good thing or not. I guessed it was his way of showing me I could get blood without drinking from animals. But I had to go to school with the people. I didn't want them to be my food. At least not if I wanted to be normal.

My fingers had a death grip on the guy's hand.

"Hey." He gave me a strange look.

"Sorry. Thanks." I relaxed and followed him.

"It's alright. Don't be scared. Most of the kids here won't bite." He glanced back while walking, his face alight with amusement.

I returned his with one of my own. But couldn't help thinking the humans might not bite, but I would. At the thought of his blood hitting the back of my throat, my mouth watered. When I saw Laeddin again I was going to give him a serious piece of my mind.

"My name is Cameron, but you can call me Cam. What's yours?"

"Jasmine," I responded before I really thought about it. The name on my transcripts said Jackie Ryder, which was the name Laeddin game me. They were fake, of course. But I couldn't come out and say I'd been going to school in a fairytale land called Sharra where my teachers were vampires and trolls and fairies. And oh, yeah, I drank blood for sustenance. Nope that wouldn't go well with my wish to be a normal teenager.

So I was from Las Vegas. I went to public school for a while and then I was homeschooled and taught by tutors. It was kind of true. Also, my mom and dad worked in the entertainment industry and liked their privacy.

"Well, it's actually Jackie but I like the name Jasmine." I tried not to blush, fiddling with my backpack straps, and readjusting my skirt.

Cam smiled bigger. "I like it, but I might have to call you Jack."

"Jack. Why?"

Cam's eyes shone with happiness. "You look like a Jack."

"I do?" I thought Jack was a boy name. I shrugged. "I guess that's fine."

"Best friends already." Cam squeezed my hand and pulled me along as he turned right. He walked me over to a door. Above it was a sign that said: OFFICE.

Cam dragged me over to the tall counter. A gorgeous girl with blonde hair and bright blue eyes sat behind the desk. "What's up, Cam?"

"Hey Sydney."

Cam turned to me. "This is Sydney. She's the student aide during first period."

"Hi," I said and waved.

Cam went on, "This new girl," he pointed to me, "has been caught in our web of evil and is here to attend our scary school." He did a faux laugh, like a villain.

Sydney snickered. "What's your name?" She gave me a once over.

This time I was prepared with the correct name. "Jackie Ryder." I glanced at Cam.

He slapped his palm on the counter. "We're going to call her Jack though, because it suits her."

"Okay." Sydney pressed some letters on a machine and then stood. "Be right back. You need to speak with the counselor, Mr. Butters."

Cam gave me a horrified look.

"What?" I asked after Sydney walked away.

"Mr. Butters is crazy, and he looks even crazier."

I giggled nervously and pulled at my hair. "Really?"

"He's looks like Einstein."

"Ohhhh," I said, even though I had no idea who Einstein was. And that had me worried.

"You'll be okay though. Just don't look at him for too long or you

might turn to stone." He patted my hand.

When I gasped, he laughed. "I'm totally kidding." Then his face grew serious. "Don't test the theory though."

"Right." I couldn't tell when Cam was serious or joking. He kept bouncing back and forth.

Sydney came out of the office behind the desk with a man wearing a green bow tie, a blue, green, and white plaid shirt, and tan pants. His hair was thick and white like the driven snow. He had bushy salt and pepper eyebrows and a matching mustache.

"See?" Cam whispered.

"Adorable." If that was what Einstein looked like, he must've been a character.

Mr. Butters came around the desk. "Hello, Jackie." His voice was crackly and had an accent.

I took his hand and shook, knowing that was a human custom. "Hello."

Mr. Butters wrinkled his nose, which made his thick mustache move like a caterpillar. "Let's go into my office and we can discuss which classes will work best." He motioned for me to follow him.

I cast a glance at Cam, who shrugged. "Have fun, Jack. I'll look for you at lunch." He turned and walked out.

My shoulders folded in. I kind of already felt ready to quit. Why had I thought I would like living in the human realm?

"Jackie." Mr. Butters waved me inside his office. "Have a seat." He shut the door as I sat in one of the cloth-covered chairs in front of his desk. When he was seated, he asked, "Do you prefer to go by Jack? I heard Cameron call you Jack."

"Sure."

"Okay, then, Jack. Give me a second to pull up your file."

While he tapped some keys, I perused his desk. The top was a mess, with an assortment of papers, books, a screen and a telephone,

which I 'd never actually seen in real life before but had heard about. He opened his drawer and took out a tin. Then he opened it, pulled out something round and white and popped it in his mouth. "Want one?" he asked, holding the tin out for me.

It smelled like peppermint. I did want one but wasn't sure how I would react to it. Best not to puke on my first day. "I'm good." One thing I did notice was the strong peppermint scent blocked out a lot of the smell of blood. I'd have to remember that. Maybe I could wear a peppermint necklace to block the scent of blood.

Mr. Butters shrugged, closed the tin, and put it back in his drawer. "Now." He scooted his chair forward and started clicking keys. "Jackie Ryder. Let's see." He pulled a pair of glasses from his pocket and put them on. "It says you've completed two years of English. Good." He glanced over, checking for verification.

"Yes," I said, allowing my backpack to fall into the chair beside me.

"Looks like you've taken one year of history and a semester of Spanish." He continued to look at the screen. "De donde Jackie?"

I had no idea what he said. "Uh?"

"Where are you from? That was Spanish." He shook his head. "You still need a semester of PE and a three semesters of Spanish." He eyed me seriously.

"That sounds right." I had no idea what PE was, but was sure I could figure it out.

"Since you're coming in halfway through the first semester, there is limited availability. You understand?" He tapped some more keys.

"Yeah, I get it." My heart was pounding rapidly. I had a feeling at any moment Mr. Butters would see I wasn't human and have me arrested. Hopefully he remained oblivious.

"Let's do this." He spoke while he tapped on his keys. I realized he was talking for his benefit not mine and used the opportunity to glance around the room. On the wall behind him were a few different certificates. I guessed they had to do with his schooling. On the wall

next to the door was a metal cabinet. Books were stacked almost to the ceiling on top of it. To my right was a window and underneath it was a machine. I glanced outside. It was a bright October morning. The sky was a crisp blue. The office overlooked a grassy area. There was a couple kissing heavily, their arms roaming all over each other.

A bell rang and they broke apart, running in opposite directions.

I turned my attention back to Mr. Butters. He was watching me, a strange look on his face. "So," he began. "I think I've got it figured out." A noise came from the machine under the window. A paper came out the bottom. "That's your schedule."

I took the paper and read over it.

"I gave you the same lunch as Mr. Anderson, so you'll know one person at least." He flashed his crooked teeth. Somehow, they worked on his face.

"Um, okay?" I had no idea who Mr. Anderson was.

"Cameron. The young man who brought you into the office." Mr. Butters clasped his hands together.

"Oh. Thank you." That was considerate.

"Of course." He began typing again. "Your locker will be on the second floor, which is near several of your classes." He wrote something on a yellow piece of paper, pulled it off and held it out. "Here's your locker number and the combination."

I took it, studying the numbers though I had no idea what a locker or a combination was.

Mr. Butters went on, "Tell no one your combination. Memorize it and then throw the paper away. Got it?"

"Yes." I clung to the edge of my skirt.

He stood and opened his door. "Sydney, would you mind giving Jack a tour of the school and help her find her first class?"

Sydney nodded vigorously. "Of course, Mr. Butters." She grabbed her jacket. "Come on. You're going to love it here."

I wanted to believe her. I did. But I wasn't feeling excited. Instead I felt kind of sick.

OceanofPDF.com

LOCKER TROUBLE

THE SCHOOL HAD A days and B days. On A days I was supposed to go to different classes than my B days. Each class was ninety minutes long with a thirty-five minute lunch - except Tuesdays. That was what they called a "short day," which meant school started at eight-thirty instead of seven-thirty.

It was Monday, a B day, and according to the paper schedule I clutched in my hands, that meant I had Creative Writing, PE, something called Homeroom, Calculus, and history. On A days, I had accounting, Homeroom, chemistry, English, and Spanish.

Sydney walked me around the school, taking me to the cafeteria, the auditorium, and the gymnasium. She even showed me where my locker was.

"This isn't a bad spot." Sydney flipped her hair and turned around. She wore tight jeans, a long peach shirt that was see through and had a tie around the hips. Underneath was a white tank top. On her feet were gold ballet flats. She looked cute. But I noticed she wasn't nearly as friendly once we left the office.

"I like your shoes. Where'd you get them?" she asked as I tried to open my locker. I didn't respond right away, trying to figure out Mr. Butters' chicken scratch. He'd written left 32, right 12, left 7 so I had an idea what I was supposed to do, but I couldn't seem to get the locker to open.

"Bloomingdale's," I said, spinning the knob filled with lines and numbers.

"Shopping in New York. Nice." Sydney voice bubbled with enthusiasm. She scooted me out of the way. "Let me help you." She twisted the knob the opposite direction I'd been spinning it. "What's the combo?"

I remembered that Mr. Butters said not to tell anyone, so I hedged. "Uh, um." I glanced at the yellow paper with sticky stuff on one end.

"It's okay, Jack. I won't tell anyone."

I really needed her help, so I decided it was fine. I showed her the paper.

"Didn't your school have lockers in Las Vegas?"

"Yeah, but they were different." I grabbed a piece of hair and twisted nervously.

"Okay, well this is how our lockers work." She glanced at the yellow paper again. "Left 32." She turned until it reached a line two after thirty. "Right 12." She spun the knob to the right, going all the way around once and then stopping on the line two after ten. "Left 7." She turned to the line two after five. Then she pulled up on a silver lever and the locker opened. "See, easy." Her blue eyes twinkled.

I had a feeling it wouldn't be as simple as Sydney made it look. "Thanks."

"Sure. Did you want to leave your backpack?"

The inside of the locker had two hooks and a shelf but was otherwise empty. "No. I'm going to keep it just in case I need something." I patted the nylon strap.

"Cool." She shut it and leaned into my side. "What's your first class?"

"Creative Writing." I tried to inhale a quick breath, not wanting to drool at the scent of her blood so close. Hers wasn't nearly as sweet smelling as Cam's or Mr. Butters'. It was weird. Everything about this morning was weird. Humans seemed much more touchy-feely than I thought they'd be. I wasn't used to having my personal space invaded unless it was by my parents and more recently, Laeddin.

"Who with?"

I showed Sydney my paper.

"Ah, Miss Riplinger. You'll like her. She's also the cheerleading

coach."

I had no idea what a cheerleading coach was, but I copied Sydney's word and said, "Cool."

"Her room is on the fifth floor. I think she's likes it up there because it makes her students have to work out. She's always telling us we're getting too flabby." Sydney patted her flat stomach. "You're lucky you don't have to worry about your weight."

She took in my body. I felt the urge to cover up but held still. "I do try to eat healthy." That sounds like the right response.

She snorted. "Yeah, which probably means you only have one donut instead of two?" She raised an eyebrow and slapped my butt. I yelped, surprised. "You'd be perfect on our cheerleading squad. You have a great ass. Maybe second semester you should try out."

"Try out?" I had no idea what she meant.

"Yeah. One of the girls got herself knocked up. Our coach, Miss Riplinger kicked her off the team. Safety issues or something, which means we're a cheerleader short."

I was getting frustrated. What was knocked up? I didn't want to ask Sydney though. So I just said, "Sounds fun."

"It totally is." She linked her arm with mine. "Come on. I'll walk you to your class."

We went up several more flights of stairs. Sydney asked about Bloomingdale's and chatted about all sorts of random things. I didn't pay much attention until she said my name.

"What?" I asked, snapping out of it.

A look of impatience crossed her pert face. "The cheerleaders and the sports boys sit together at lunch. You can join us if you'd like?"

It was an invitation and I wanted to accept. I had a feeling spending time with Sydney and her group would give me the exact teenager lifestyle I was looking for.

"Does Cam sit with you?" I asked, hopefully.

She shook her head. "No, Cam's all right, but he sits at a different table." She stopped walking, pulling me to a stop with her. "You'll figure out soon enough who you should spend time with if you want to have any fun at this school." Leaning in, she whispered, "I'll give you a hint though. My group is the group and I've decided you're a perfect fit."

I wondered how she could tell I'd be great for her group. She didn't know anything about me. Was it the clothes I wore? The way I did my hair? That always seemed important in the magazines. Or maybe it was because of my body. The way a person looked meant something to most creatures. I recognized that pretty easily. And I should be glad Sydney thought I fit into the human category where I had the right look. But what about Cam? Surely, he was perfect for their group too.

"Here's your class."

"Thanks."

"Where's your cell?" Sydney asked, holding out her hand. "I'll give you my number. Then we can text each other so I can find you at lunch."

I looked away, grabbing my elbow. How hadn't I remembered I needed a cell phone? My uncles all had them.

"Your parents won't give you one, huh?"

"Yeah. Jerks." I glanced at her from under my lashes.

"Well don't worry. You aren't the only one." She waved and walked away. "I'll find you."

"See ya," I returned, glad she didn't think I was too horrible for not having a cell phone. Facing the door, I placed a hand on the knob and was about to twist when it flung open and smacked me in the forehead, knocking me backward so that I fell on my butt. "Ouch." I rubbed my forehead. It smarted, but I knew there wouldn't be a mark. I healed too quickly for that.

"Hey, I'm sorry."

I glanced up at the sound of the deep voice and into the eyes of Hot Guy. "Hey, what are you doing here?" He said he graduated. I quickly stood and then remembered no one was supposed to know where I was. Double crap!

Recognition feathered over his face. "Working," he said, pulling me over to the side. "The bigger question is what are you doing here? Your parents - everyone is worried sick!"

"Don't say anything, please. I, uh - " Could I tell him about the wish?

"Where are your wings, Jasmine?" He was upset and shocked and trying to figure out what was happening. It was easy to read all of the emotion in his expressive eyes.

I couldn't believe my wish was ruined after such a short time. But who had I been kidding?

"They're gone, for now." I glanced over at two girls watching the two of us as they walked by. "I really want to try being normal. Just for a little while. Please don't tell anyone. Please." I was begging, but that was all I could do. Except - "I promise not to tell anyone you are too old to be going to this school." I scrunched my brows. "Why the heck are you attending classes and stuff?"

"Like I said, I'm working." He came in closer, and my nose was flooded with the scent of him. My fangs pressed against my mouth. "There's a supernatural attending and I'm trying to get in her good graces." He stopped, considering my request. "I won't say anything. At least not right away, but you really should let your parents know what's going on."

I appreciated his opinions and was beyond grateful for him. "I will."

He touched my forehead where the door smacked me. "You need to be careful."

"Promise."

He leaned in, peering closely at the nonexistent wound. "No wings

but still a vampire." His chuckle was sultry, and my stomach clenched. Holy moly. Between Laeddin and hot guy, my heart might not be able to take it. "There isn't any bruising at least."

"Yep," I said, trying not to concentrate too much of the heavenly scent coming off him. It was a combination of blood and sandalwood and something else. It was magical, but I hadn't smelled the scent before.

He stepped back, releasing me. I tilted a little sideways. His hands came back out to steady me. "Maybe I should walk you down to the office where you can lie down with an ice pack."

I'd just come from there. "No, really. I'm okay. You mostly just startled me." I didn't add that was okay. He could startle me anytime. That sounded sappy.

"Are you in Miss Riplinger's class?" He pointed with his thumb back toward the classroom.

"Yeah," I said, trying not to sound shy.

"Awesome. Well my name is Troy."

"Call me Jack," I said, sticking out my hand.

He stuck a finger under my chin. "Jack, huh? That's adorable." He started jogging down the hall toward the stairs. "See ya round, Jack." He waved.

"Sure thing," I responded, facing the opening to the classroom. Then took a deep breath. "Here goes nothing." Just the first great moment in my life as a normal teenager attending high school, I thought.

OceanofPDF.com

VINTAGE RULES

IT TURNED out Miss Riplinger was fun, just as Sydney said, but she was mostly flirty. She strutted around like a peacock on the prowl. The guys ate it up. The way she leaned over them, her V-neck top exposing cleavage. The girls giggled like they thought it was funny, but I got the feeling it actually irritated them.

When I first went in, Miss Riplinger introduced me and had me take the only seat available, which was in the back. Then she continued with whatever she'd been saying before I interrupted. I spent the remainder of class playing catch up. Luckily the book they were discussing was Wuthering Heights. I read the story more than once, so I had that going for me.

She asked us to pair up with a partner and answer some questions on a worksheet she passed out. The girl in front of me turned. Her hair was a honey brown and cropped short so that it curled around her ears. She had dark hazel eyes and a friendly face. "Want to do this together?"

"Sure," I replied, grateful.

"I'm Abby." Abby wore a light blue t-shirt. On the front was a blue horse with a rainbow-colored mane and tail. It said VINTAGE RULES across the front.

"Jack," I said. It was getting easier to remember my fake name.

"Your parents named you Jack?" She gave me a strange look.

"Well, no. It's Jackie, but I like Jack."

"That makes sense." She grinned. "It doesn't quite fit, but whatever floats your boat."

"Thanks."

The teacher handed me a book. "You'll need this for the final."

I took it from her. It was a paper copy of Wuthering Heights.

"Have you read it before?"

"Actually, I have. A few times." I smiled.

She sniffed. "No one likes a show-off." She lifted her chin and glanced at a group of students before heading to the front of the room.

Abby turned back and laughed.

"She's a real sweetie."

"Yeah. That's the word I'd use." Sarcasm oozed as I spoke.

"At least to her face," she added and laughed.

"Right." I thought Abby might be a friend.

"So you've read the book before?"

"At least ten times. Have you?"

That seemed to surprise her. "It's only one of my favorite books."

"Mine too," I whispered excitedly.

We spent the next fifty minutes discussing why Heathcliff was the greatest character ever written, and when Miss. Riplinger called time and told us to face forward, I felt like Abby would be a friend for life.

"Make sure your name is at the top of your page and pass your papers to the front of your row," Riplinger said.

I quickly wrote Jack Ryder at the top of my paper and handed it to Abby. When the bell rang everyone stood and filed out.

"What's your next class?" Abby asked, coming up beside me.

"PE."

"I have that next too."

A deep sense of relief settled within my stomach. "It's on the first floor. Come on or we'll be late."

We shuffled along the crowded hall, down lots of stairs, until we reached the main floor. While Abby and I walked, we talked. It was so different than the conversation with Sydney. With her I'd felt like I needed to be something I wasn't. With Abby, I could just be myself.

Well as much of myself as I could be in the human realm.

"Did your family just move here?" Her face was inquisitive. A small dusting of freckles covered her nose. She wore no makeup but didn't need any. Her skin was so smooth.

"Yeah," I hedged, unwilling to go into more details. No sense trying to explain that my mom and dad were in a different realm known as Sharra and that my mom was the Vampire Queen. That would be awkward.

She turned to face me more fully. "Did you hear about the dead guy they found in the woods last night?"

"What? No." I leaned away.

"Everybody's talking about it." She picked up her phone and then continued, "But I figured what with you being new maybe you hadn't heard. I guess there was blood everywhere, like he'd been beaten to death."

"That's awful." My mind was reeling. "Does this happen a lot?"

A guy with strawberry blond hair and the creamiest brown eyes I'd ever seen fell into step next to Abby. He seemed to know exactly what we were talking about. I was surprised Sydney hadn't mentioned it. "They're saying it's the most brutal murder Salem has ever seen. At least that's what I heard." He reached across Abby and stuck out his hand. "The name's Charlie."

"Jackie." I awkwardly took his hand and shook it. He flipped my hand over and looked at it. "Your hands are so soft. You must eat right."

I choked on a snort. "Sure." If eating right meant drinking blood.

"So why'd your family move here? Didn't they check the local news? Jonathon Mayfield disappeared a few weeks ago too."

My heart sped up. What was I supposed to say? I sighed like I was bummed I was there. "It's my mom. She has family that's from here."

"Oh," Abby said. "What's the name?"

"Uh," I started, unsure what to say.

Luckily, we reached the gym. Charlie waved good-bye and we went inside the locker room.

There was a thick stench in the air, but that wasn't what had me most worried. It was that all the girls were in various stages of undress.

"We have to change into different clothes?" I hugged the copy of Wuthering Heights Miss Riplinger gave me like it was life support.

"Yeah, silly. Your gym clothes. Didn't you do that at your other school?"

"I was homeschooled," I said, deciding to tell Abby the truth. Sort of.

"Oh. That explains a lot." She glanced down at my super high heels that were actually starting to pinch my toes.

"It does." I followed Abby over to her locker and sat on the bench while she changed.

"I couldn't quite figure out the doe-eyed look you had going on. I wondered if it was a way to get attention." She shrugged off her shirt and kicked off her shoes.

"Oh. No." I glanced down at the floor while she took off her jeans and put her shorts on. "Nope this is just me being me." I tried to smile.

Abby sat on the bench and dropped her shoes in front of her. "I thought so."

A whistle blew. "Let's go, ladies."

"That's Mrs. Hadley. She's our PE teacher. Come on."

I followed Abby, thankful for the moment I didn't have to get undressed. I was worried about what people would think if they saw my wing tattoos.

When we reached the door, a tough looking woman in polyester shorts, knee highs, tennis shoes, and a white shirt with a red collar blocked our exit.

"Who's this, Ms. Jones?" The teacher looked from me to Abby and back to me.

"This is Jack. She's new."

A tiny smile lifted the teacher's thin lips. "Nice. Now why isn't she in her gym clothes?" Her small smile vanished, and she frowned.

"I - uh - didn't know I'd be taking this class, so I didn't bring anything." They say the truth will set you free. I tried it.

She lifted her clipboard and wrote something. "Abby go into my office and find her something to wear."

"Yes, Mrs. Hadley."

"And hurry up." She walked out of the locker room.

My heart sped up. Could I change in a room by myself? Ask Abby to turn around?

Mrs. Hadley's office was cluttered. A volleyball sat on top of a bunch of papers. There were trophies all along the dusty shelves and a picture of Mrs. Hadley with some man hung on the wall behind her desk.

Next to the door was a big cardboard box. Inside was a bunch of clothes. Abby bent over and started digging through it. "I'm sure we'll find you something that isn't too horrible." She pulled out a pair of black shorts. "How about these?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

She handed them to me.

"Here's a shirt." It was also black.

"And what should I do about shoes and socks?" I asked taking the shirt.

She looked down at my shoes and shook her head. "Are you kidding me with those stilts?"

"No." I looked at them. They seemed stupid now. "They're pretty, right?"

Abby snorted. "Oh yeah, if you enjoy wearing shoes that tear down

a woman's spirit."

"Huh?" I lifted a foot, trying to understand what she meant.

"It's nothing." She laughed. "I have a clean pair of socks in my locker. What size shoe are you?" She went back to her locker and opened it. Took out a pair of white socks and a pair of tennis shoes. "These are size seven. Let's hope they fit." She glanced at my shoes. "Even if they're too small, I'm sure you won't feel a thing after wearing those."

I sat on the bench. My heart raced so fast I thought I might faint. What would Abby say when she saw my back? Maybe I could change without her seeing. I turned so I faced her. "Thanks for all your help." I took off my shoes and looked around, wondering where I should put them.

"Just toss everything in my locker," Abby said, understanding.

"Okay." I set my shoes at the bottom next to her ankle boots, keeping my back away from Abby as I unzipped my skirt and put on the black shorts. So far so good. I stood slightly and unbuttoned my shirt, pulling it off. Abby didn't look away like I had. She took in my curves and my bra.

"Cute."

"Thanks." I tried not to act embarrassed. I pulled off the shirt and was sticking it in the locker when someone gasped.

"That's a big freakin' tattoo."

My shoulders slumped. I should've known I wouldn't get away with it.

Abby glanced in the direction of the voice. I'd spent enough time with Sydney already to know the voice belonged to her.

"What tattoo?" Abby stood.

I put my back against the lockers and quickly pulled the black shirt over my head.

Sydney came over. Abby gave me a strange look.

"Are you old enough to have a tattoo?" Sydney asked.

"I'm nearly eighteen," I said, trying to sound mature and tough.

"Where is it?" Abby asked, looking surprised.

"It's on her back. A tattoo of wings." Sydney spun me toward Abby. "Check it out. The new girl is baaaaaad." As she spoke, she lifted my shirt.

Abby gasped. "Wow, it almost looks real." She lifted my shirt higher.

Blood rushed to my face. I was mortified.

"Can I touch it?" Abby asked. Her voice was a whispered awe.

My mortification gauge flew off the chart. "Sure." I swallowed.

"Me too?"

I hung my head. "Yep." No point saying no. I had a feeling if I didn't let them check it out now, they'd bug me later, and later there might be more people around.

"Whoa, the outline almost feels like real feathers." Abby traced the wings with her fingers.

"It does."

"What in tarnation is going on in here?"

The three of us jumped. Abby and Sydney helped pull my shirt down.

Mrs. Hadley had her hands on her hips. "Let's go, ladies."

I quickly put my shoes and socks on. Then went through the door Sydney and Abby had already followed the teacher through.

OceanofPDF.com

I WANT YOU

GYM CLASS WAS easy after the show and tell with Abby and Sydney. Troy was also in class.

"Small world," he said, running by with another guy.

"Yeah."

He winked and I winked back.

Mrs. Hadley blew her whistle. That meant we needed to gather around. I followed after Abby. At first, I worried she or Sydney would treat me differently. If anything, my tattoo seemed to have upped my coolness factor.

When Mrs. Hadley called Sydney and Troy up to be the captains in a game of volleyball, Sydney picked me first.

Troy seemed disappointed. "I wanted you, Jack."

I felt my cheek heat up. "No you don't. Trust me. I don't know the first thing about this game."

"What?" Sydney gave me an evil glare. "You'd better stay out of the way then."

Coolness factor back to zero, I thought.

Once teams were picked, we went to a net. The first set of people rotated in. That meant me. Troy was in the back serving. The ball went over the net and over my head and landed on the floor in front of another girl.

"That was yours, Jack!" Sydney shouted.

I thought maybe it should've been the other girl's, but I didn't know the rules to the game. "Sorry," I said.

Our team rotated so I was no longer in the middle but on the right. Troy served the ball again. This time it went right to Sydney. She put her hands together, bent her knees slightly and bumped the ball in the

air. Then the girl standing in the middle tossed the ball in the air.

"Spike it," she yelled in my direction.

The ball was coming down fast. "I don't know what that means," I said, but copied what Sydney had done and bumped it over the net.

The girl in the middle looked at Sydney. "Why'd you pick her?" She shook her head in disgust.

Sydney made a face. "Shut it, Aimee."

Coolness factor was now a negative ten.

I was glad the person on the other team didn't knock the ball over, which meant a point for us, until the other team rotated. The girl serving saw our side's weakness, aka me, and she sent the ball right at my face. I backed up a little and tossed it in the air the way I saw the other girl do it.

Aimee glared disgustedly, jumped in the air, and slammed the ball over the net. "Spike it," she yelled, walking over. She stood several inches taller than me, but I wasn't intimidated. I contended with trolls. Aimee would have to get a whole lot scarier before I showed any sort of emotion. Except amusement. I flashed my teeth, hoping it looked like a smile and not a sneer.

Her eyes widened a moment before she turned away.

At least now I understood the game, to a degree. After that, I didn't miss a ball and by the time class had ended, each team won a game.

When class was over, I followed the others toward the locker room. Abby was talking to a friend, and I didn't want to interrupt.

Troy jogged over. "You're a fast learner, Jack. You spiked that ball almost better than me." He gave me a fifty-megawatt smile.

"Thanks." I wanted to find out more about him? Obviously, he possessed one of the seven magics, but which one?

"If you ever want tips, let me know. Volleyball is my favorite summertime sport." His green eyes twinkled. "For now, I better get back to work."

"Right. Your job." I wanted to ask why summer, but he took off toward some guys.

I studied each of them, trying to determine the supernatural student. One of the guys had slightly pointy ears. Perhaps it was him.

AFTER PE WAS HOMEROOM. Abby helped me find the class. It was basically just a ninety minute block of time set aside to do homework, read, or do what most students did, which was talk or mess around on their cell phones.

I pretended to read Wuthering Heights and tried not to eavesdrop. But it was so easy with vampire hearing. And listening to them talk was interesting. Really interesting. They were so -mature and immature at the same time. They talked like they lived their own lives. Then would talk in the next breath about curfews, allowances, and family trips. It was weird. And amazing. I couldn't get enough.

When class ended, it was time for lunch.

I tried to remember how to get to the cafeteria, and on more than one occasion I got lost. The school really was enormous. After spinning in a circle and letting out a loud sigh, I was ready to give up. It wasn't like I would be eating anyway.

"Hey, are you okay?"

In front of me was a cute couple holding hands. Somehow, they looked familiar. They felt familiar. Even smelled familiar too. I gave them a closer look. "Do I know you?"

The guy shrugged. "Don't think so. We're new. Just moved into town."

"So did I."

They gave each other a quiet look.

"I'm trying to find the cafeteria." I zeroed in on the girl. Something about the eyes -

"Yeah, I think it's this way." The girl seemed kind. She had short

red hair, green eyes, and a friendly face.

They moved down the hall. I followed, trying to push away the strange feeling the two of them brought.

The guy was tall and had dark hair. I hadn't seen the color of his eyes, but he was handsome. Just as the girl was pretty. They looked like they belonged together. Which was strange. Why was I even thinking about them like that? I didn't know them.

The guy pushed one of the swinging doors open. The girl walked by, kissing him on the cheek. "Thanks, Peter."

He patted her cheek. "Anything for you, Zoe."

Peter and Zoe. I didn't know anyone in Sharra by those names. I hadn't met anyone at school with those names either.

"Thank you, Peter." I said as I went in. "I'm Jack."

"Oh?" The look on Peter's face suggested he didn't believe me.

Zoe smacked Peter in the chest and gave me a big smile. "Nice to meet you, Jack."

"Let's eat." Peter walked toward the long line of students.

I hung back. "No thanks. I'm not hungry." If I got any closer to the human food I'd puke.

A strange look, almost like approval appeared on Zoe's face. "Okay, well see you around." They walked away, hand in hand.

I stared after them, strangely unsure of the immediate connection I felt for them. I figured it was probably because they were new to the school, same as me. I knew they could relate to my apprehension. Except they didn't seem all that nervous. In fact they appeared to be right at home.

Sydney bounced over. "Hey, who are those two?"

"More new kids." I glanced at Sydney. "Their names are Peter and Zoe."

"Oh. Cool." She took me by the arm. "Come with me. I want to introduce you to everyone."

"Wait." I searched the noisy cafeteria for Abby or the guy I met earlier, Cam. I couldn't find either of them in the sea of faces.

"What? Let's go, Jack." Sydney pulled me through the tables and throngs of students carrying trays of food until we reached double glass doors. "I was a little worried when we played volleyball, but you figured it out quick."

"I'm a fast learner," I said and shrugged.

"Obviously." She took my arm, steering me along. "We like to sit outside. The smell of trashy academy food isn't so overwhelming out here."

When we exited the school, I took a cleansing breath. It was cool outside and did smell much better - like sweat mingled with blood.

Sydney led me over to a table filled with kids laughing, joking, and basically having fun.

"Hey guys. I want you to meet Jackie. She's new to the school. I had the chance to get to know her a little and she's totally cool."

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned. It was weird suddenly having a dozen sets of eyes taking in my appearance, judging me.

I lifted a hand. "Hi."

They all greeted me, some more friendly than others. Then they went back to their lunches and horsing around.

"Sit here," Sydney said, grabbing an empty chair and patting it.

"Thanks."

She sat in the chair next to me and started talking to a girl with curly brown hair. "Lynn, Jackie has the coolest set of wings tattooed on her back."

"A tattoo? Let's see it." Lynn pushed away her salad.

A couple of others stopped talking and focused their attention on me too.

I shook my head, uncomfortable. "It's - "

Sydney interrupted. "It's huge. It takes up nearly her entire back."

One of the guys pawed my shoulder. "A tattoo, huh? You must get a thrill out of pain." His eyes raked over my body. "I can do things to you that'll hurt so good."

"Shut up, Drake." Sydney glared. So did Lynn.

All I was thinking is I'd like to see him try. "Pain doesn't really bother me."

"How do you know she has a tattoo? Been hittin' that?" Drake asked.

"I take it you haven't met your asshole quota for the day?"

Lynn laughed at Sydney's joke.

"Whatever. If we're keeping score, you obviously surpassed your bitch quota. Better slow down." He let out a raunchy laugh and the other guys at the table joined in.

Sydney's face fell. "If you must know I saw it when we were getting ready for gym."

"Saucy." Lynn forked a piece of fruit and popped it in her mouth.

"Well now we all want to see it," Drake continued, squeezing my shoulder. "Take off your shirt. I dare you."

I placed my hand over his and twisted. Pained surprise swirled over Drake's features. "Stop touching me."

I let go and he rubbed his hand. "What kind of freak are you?"

My face burned. That word again.

"Did you see what she did? No girl is that strong?" Drake's eyes burned with anger, but he didn't try anything.

Lynn threw a strawberry at Drake. It smacked him in the cheek and then landed on the table.

"Skank," he said. Picking up a napkin, he wiped the juice off his face.

"Douche," Lynn fired back.

I really didn't want to show them but decided I should. So I stood, pulled my shirt from my skirt and unbuttoned it.

The guys started whistling and laughing.

"Yeah, girl. Get on the table," one of them said.

"Here's some music." As he spoke, music blared from his phone.

I held my head high and gritted my teeth. When all the buttons were undone, I pulled my hair to one side and turned around as I lowered my shirt.

"Whoa." Drake said, his hand immediately forgotten.

"That's damn cool."

Abby and Sydney had already touched it. These guys were no different. They touched my skin and commented.

"Isn't it the freshest thing you've ever seen?" Sydney stood on her chair so she could look over the crowd. I kept my head down and didn't say anything. As a princess and the only vampire with wings, I'd been the center of attention on many occasions. Over time my uniqueness wore off. I hoped the same would happen in the human realm.

"I want one." I thought that came from Lynn.

"There's a fight in the cafeteria. Some guy is fighting Troy."

"Why?" I asked, only a little afraid for him. He was a supernatural after all. On top of that, he was a supernatural recruiter. Quickly, I shrugged on my shirt and buttoned it.

"Probably defending some girl's honor," one of the guys said sarcastically. "He's been here a week and already thinks he can take our place as ruler of the school."

"I hope he gets his ass kicked," Drake said.

"Let's go," a girl added.

While they packed up, I tucked in my shirt.

"Fame is fleeting." Lynn still sat at the table, watching me.

I shrugged. "I'm glad."

Lynn rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Your two seconds are up. Time to disappear." She stood, grabbed her books, and walked away, not even bothering to throw away her food. Sydney had gone inside already, leaving me alone. It was a refreshing reprieve. Though I wanted to know whether Troy was okay, I decided to wait. Sitting in one of the cold plastic chairs, I studied the courtyard. Huge trees with long, wispy branches dotted the landscape. It reminded me of home. I could imagine pixilettes fluttering through the leaves, collecting seeds. It made me miss Abrea. Maybe I should wish for her to become human. She could be like me - normal. But I shook away the thought as quickly as it came to mind. Abrea liked who she was. She liked what she did. Probably because she was like the rest of her kind. Every other pixilette had wings.

There weren't any vampires with wings. Except me.

"Hey, I've been looking for you." Cam slid into the chair next to mine. "Didn't you want to see the fight?"

"Is he okay?" Melancholy weighed on my heart, but I tamped it.

"Fine. Not even a scratch on him. The other guy wasn't as lucky. Troy gave him a bloody nose." He shook his head. "Yeah, the first day at a new school can be a bit overwhelming." He patted my hand.

His kindness and my mood caused tears to form on my lashes.

Cam leaned in. "No. No. You never let them see you cry." He shook his finger at me. "That's a sign of weakness and trust me the vultures will pounce." By the look on his face I guessed he was talking from experience.

"Got it." I wiped my eyes and sniffled.

"Better." He squeezed my hand. "What are your last two classes?"

"Calculus and history."

"Who do you have for history? That's my last class of the day as well."

I pulled the paper schedule from the front pocket of my backpack. "Mr. Henry." His last name was the same as my grandfathers. I hoped he was as nice.

"Awesome." Cam clapped his hands. "We have the same class. The teacher is great too. He makes history seem less like a snooze-fest and more like a time that was actually interesting."

"Hey pretty-boy, what are you doing at our table?"

I felt Cam freeze a second before he recovered. "See ya," he whispered to me. He stood and turned. "Hey Drake. Still sleep with your Dora the Explorer night light?"

I turned just in time to see Drake's eyes widen. "Shut your lying mouth before I shut it for you." He pushed Cam, causing him to stumble, but he held his ground.

Still, Drake was thicker and taller than Cam. If he laid so much as a finger on my new friend, I would break it.

I stood, preparing for a fight.

Drake gave me a once over. "What do you think you're doing?"

I pretended innocence, keeping my voice calm. "Cam is my friend. If he can't sit at this table then I don't want to sit here either." I moved closer so Cam and I were touching shoulders.

"Figures."

Sydney came outside. "What's going on?"

I stepped around Drake and walked past her. Cam followed. "Drake doesn't want us sitting at his table." I shrugged.

Sydney put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot. She didn't say anything for a second. I could tell she was having an internal debate, weighing the pros and cons of standing up for the new girl. Finally she said, "I'll see you around." She flipped her hair and walked over to the table.

I heard Drake. "She's a freak, just like pretty-boy. Stay away from her."

"I guess you're right," Sydney said.

I sighed.

Cam wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Welcome to Salem Academy, home to witches, bitches, and trolls."

He wasn't all wrong. I laughed. "Good one."

OceanofPDF.com

TATTOO TROUBLE

CALCULUS WAS A JOKE. I had no idea what the teacher was talking about. He might as well have been speaking borkanese. I was beyond glad when class was over, even when the teacher had me stay after class so he could give me a syllabus and a book.

The layout of the school was beginning to make more sense and I found my history class on my own. If there was a dash and a number after the room number that was the floor the class was on. So history was 127-4. That meant it was on the fourth floor.

The bell rang as soon as I entered the room. Mr. Henry glanced up and did a double take. He stood, worry furrowing his brows. It was my grandpa. Professor Pops. But he told me he taught at Harvard. What was he doing here?

I waved slightly before sliding into the first seat I found.

"Jack. Jack. Over here."

I glanced up enough to see Cam waving me over. I got up and went over, sitting in the seat next to Cam's. In front of me was a very bulky guy. He might have troll blood flowing through his veins. He had a similar stench as well.

"You found the class. Good job." Cam gave me double thumbs up.

I returned the thumbs up but didn't have time to say anything before Mr. Henry started to speak. "Welcome. It appears we have new students."

Students plural? I searched the room for Peter and Zoe.

"Please stand, tell us your names and a little about yourself." I hunched down further in my chair.

"My name is Zoe. I moved here from Virginia with my boyfriend and his parents."

Mr. Henry gave her a strange look. "And your parents were okay with that?"

"My parents are dead. Peter's parents agreed to be my guardians since I had no other family."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." Mr. Henry wore his glasses resting on his forehead. He lowered them and glanced at a paper on his desk. "Peter, why don't you stand and tell us something about yourself."

I peered around the giant guy in front of me. Peter stood and surveyed the room before speaking. "I love football." He pumped his fist. Several guys in the room shouted in response, including the guy in front of me.

"Very good. Have a seat. There's one more. Where did she go?"

The students around me stared, waiting for me to stand.

I did so quickly. "I'm Jackie. I'm from Las Vegas. I like reading those trashy entertainment magazines."

Several students laughed, including Cam. "I knew we were meant to be friends."

Mr. Henry chuckled. "Excellent." He rested his glasses on his forehead again and clapped his hands. "Who can tell me how the second World War started?"

Over the next ninety minutes he talked about the war. Why it started. Which countries were involved. How many were killed. And so on. When class was nearly over, Mr. Henry passed out a paper. "This is your study guide for the test we'll be taking next week. Put it to good use people. I expect everyone to get an A, including you, Claude."

The large guy in front of me snickered. "Will do, Mr. Henry."

The bell rang.

"If the three new students could stay after class a few minutes, everyone else is excused."

I watched as the rest of the students filed out. Zoe and Peter sat a

couple of rows over. They kept looking at each other. My heart raced so fast I thought I might keel over. Would Mr. Henry call me out? Make me go back home?

When only Peter, Zoe and I remained, Professor Pops waved us up to his desk.

Forcing myself not to look nervous, I picked up my backpack and made my way forward. Zoe and Peter didn't seem worried, but they didn't know my grandfather.

"This will only take a few moments." He handed each of us a few different papers. "As I said there will be a test next week. The rest of the students in this class have had weeks of in-class discussion and different assignments to help prepare them." He paused, tucking his reading glasses into the pocket of his sweater. "You haven't had the luxury. Hopefully in your previous school you studied the second World War?" He gave each of us a pointed look. Zoe and Peter answered they knew, so I said I did too. It was a lie, of course, and he knew it.

But he went along. "Good. Then there shouldn't be a problem. If you feel you need a refresher, do the handouts in front of you. I'll check them and give you extra credit."

Zoe and Peter put the papers in their bags and waited expectantly.

"That's it. Except - "

"Yes?" Peter asked, glancing first and Zoe and then me.

"I don't know if you heard about the brutal death in the woods south of us, but you need to be careful."

Peter and Zoe acknowledged they had.

"It's so sad," I said.

"Have they identified the body yet?" Peter asked.

"If they have, they aren't sharing." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm only telling you about it, so you won't go exploring without proper supervision." He glanced at me and said, "Better yet, just stay

away from the woods altogether."

"Thanks, Mr. Henry," Zoe said, heading for the door. Peter waved.

"You're welcome."

They left the room.

"Yeah, thanks. I'm sure these will come in handy." I started toward the door.

"Uh, Jackie?" His face sparked with questions.

"Yes?" I turned around so that we were facing each other.

"Why are you doing this?" His eyes twinkled with genuine interest.

My shoulders sagged. Why hadn't Laeddin brought me to a school in a town where I didn't know anyone? Had he wanted me to fail? I knew wishes never turned out the way they were expected too.

"I just want to be normal for once." I forced myself not to stomp my foot in frustration.

"I understand. But where are your wings?" Worry creased his brow.

I glanced down at my shoes, unable to meet his kind eyes. "I wished them away."

He didn't speak for a long while. Finally I looked up.

"You're okay?" he asked. It was a simple question and I got the sense he wanted to ask a dozen more. I appreciated his restraint.

"I want this," I said, pleading with my eyes for him to understand.

"Very well. Be careful. Weird things have been happening around here of late. If you need help and can't get a hold of me, ask Troy."

"Got it," I said, glad we was going to let it go.

"If I sense there is a problem, I will have no choice but to tell your parents." His eyes narrowed. "But you should know your parents are smarter than most. They may already know where you are."

"Thank you, grandfather." I hugged him tightly.

He chuckled. "You're staying at your mom's old place?" He took a stack of papers and straightened them by banging one edge on the

desk.

"That's right."

"All right then. Enjoy yourself. Don't do anything that would draw people's attention to me. Vampires are still outlawed here. Got it." He tapped the tip of my nose.

"Thanks. I will." As soon as I was outside the room, I took in a big gulp of air and immediately regretted it. The scent of blood pounded in my veins. That reminded me, I needed to ask Laeddin what he was thinking, giving me human blood. And on top of that, where did he get it?

OceanofPDF.com

SECRET PARTY

LAEDDIN WAITED for me exactly where he dropped me off several hours before. If I hadn't watched him drive away, I would've wondered if he ever left.

As I started down the stairs Sydney fell into step beside me. "Hey, Jack. Sorry about Drake. He's such a jerk."

"It's okay. Thanks again for all your help. I couldn't have made it through today without you."

She waved a hand in front of her face. "Sure. Sure. So listen. A bunch of us are getting together tonight. Just a little party to start the week off right. Want to come?" She was bouncing on the tips of her toes.

I glanced at Laeddin who was watching me.

"I'd love to. Thanks for the invite." I bounced on my toes. My first party.

"Great. Here's the directions. Wear something warm." She went down the rest of the stairs. "And Jack?"

"Yeah?" I clutched the paper she gave me. "Is that your dad in the car over there?" She pointed at Laeddin.

"Gah, no. He isn't my dad. He-he works for my mom and dad. He's staying with me until they can join me."

"Oh, lucky. Well tell your hot babysitter that you need a phone." Her laugh filled the air as she took the stairs.

"I will." I followed her.

"And Jack?" Her face was serious. "Tell no one about tonight. K?"

"I won't." I said, tucking the note into my backpack.

"I'm counting on you." She turned down the sidewalk and made her way to the parking lot. Drake was leaning against a tree and when she

passed him, he pushed himself away from the trunk and fell into step with her.

"Everything set?"

"Yep. She's coming. Tonight's going to be fun."

Sometimes it sucked that I have super hearing. "What?" I whispered, a strange prickling feeling making hair on the back of my neck stand of edge.

"Jackie?" Laeddin looked at me impatiently.

"Hey Laeddin." I climbed in the car and buckled up.

"I see you made a friend. That's good." He started the car.

I turned to Laeddin and his eyes crinkled. He was happy for me.

"Yeah, I guess I did." No point telling Laeddin I was suddenly unsure if Sydney's friendship was sincere or part of something more sinister. I hoped I was wrong, but I'd never been one to back away from a challenge. If a couple of high school students thought they could hurt me, they'd be sadly mistaken.

"What's that look on your face?" Laeddin asked as he drove around the circle toward the exit.

"What look?" I raised my eyebrows, trying to settle my features as Laeddin pulled into traffic.

"The I'm-ready-for-a-fight look?" Nothing was getting past him.

He could read me already. I laughed, trying my best to make it seem like he had no idea what he was talking about. "You don't know me well enough to know my looks. It could've been my I-need-to-pee face."

"You forget I've been watching you for years. Tell me what's wrong."

I was stunned. He was right. I hadn't known he existed until just a few days ago, but he'd known about me for a lot longer. I didn't want to talk to him about it though. So I changed the subject. "Why did you give me human blood this morning?"

He gave me a bright smile. "I wondered how long it would take for you to figure it out."

"You're an idiot. What if I bit someone? Did you think about that?" I huffed. "Human blood tastes amazing, better than unicorn blood even."

He got serious. "I just wanted to make sure you could be satiated without blood from the seven magics."

"Well, I appreciate the thought. But there is no magic in human blood. It's kind of like those Pixy Stix you told me about the other night. You said they were like sugar crack, but that you couldn't survive on them. Human blood is like that for me. The taste is highly desirable, but it won't sustain me, at least not for long."

"Well you can't blame a genie for trying." He turned on the radio and we rode home without talking. When we got inside, Laeddin sat down on a stool. "Do you have any homework?"

"Yeah, I do. And I better get to it. That girl you saw me talking to?"

"What about her?" He bit into an apple.

"She invited me to a party."

"Tonight?" He chewed, swallowed and took another bite.

"Yes, tonight. I won't be gone long, but I do want to check it out. My first party invitation. I can't miss that." I grabbed hold of the banister and took the first step, still facing him.

Laeddin searched my face. "I guess." He turned and picked up a newspaper and flipped through it. "Have you heard about the dead guy?"

I was halfway up the stairs and I paused. "As a matter of fact, yes. I keep hearing about it. I promise I'll be careful."

"Stay out of the woods. Deal?" he continued as though he didn't hear me.

I took the steps two at a time and walked down the hall to the room that used to be my mom's.

"Deal?" he said louder.

"Yes, it's a deal. Sheesh!" I closed the door and fell back on my bed. Even after hours of meetings as the princess in Sharra, high school was still more challenging. I ran over the events of the day in my mind. It'd been very emotional, but I survived, even made at least two new friends - Abby and Cam. I thought again about Sydney and what she said to Drake. What did they intend to do tonight? Some kind of initiation?

I opened the piece of paper. Sydney's handwriting was neat but loopy. Some of her words were hard to decipher. She'd drawn a map though. I thought I could figure it out. It didn't look that far from my house.

OceanofPDF.com

DEMURA

I'D BEEN WALKING for ten minutes. I wasn't winded and I could see fine in the dark, but I was tired of getting around on two legs. I wanted to fly. The thought shocked me. I always believed I'd be perfectly happy without my wings. Happier even.

I shrugged the thought away. I needed to give myself more time to get used to life without them. I could do that.

At the end of the road was the forest, the one I promised Laeddin and Pops I would stay out of. A quick glance at the map verified I was to go in though.

I shouldn't be surprised.

Sometimes Abrea and I did things the grown-ups told us not to do. Nothing too serious. It was the way of children, I guess, to rebel against the wisdom of time. But I got the feeling the directions weren't telling me to go in for some harmless, rebellious fun. Instead, Sydney and Drake were planning something.

A jolt of anticipation shot through me.

Bring it on, I thought.

Stepping inside, I went stealthily forward knowing if there were really a party, I would hear it by now.

But the forest was so quiet.

The night draped still.

There wasn't even the sound of insects.

In the distance I could hear cars rushing by and the flicker of a streetlight, its hum sounding as it went off and on. Nothing more. No good would come of this.

If Sydney and her friends were waiting within, not even my vampire hearing could discern where they were.

I focused on a different sense. Breathing in, I searched for the aroma, the scent of their blood.

There was none. Not even that of animals. At least not nearby. How was that possible?

I continued on, heading over to a large boulder near what appeared to be a trail. I sat on the rock, cautious of the rough edges.

Obviously, there was no party, but it they wanted to hurt me, I would let them try.

At least until ten. If nothing happened in the next forty-nine minutes, then I would return to my new home.

The sky was lit up with so many stars. I searched for the constellations I'd seen from the night sky in Sharra.

The placement was different.

Still beautiful though.

A breeze picked up some leaves and rattled the branches. I watched them turn and sway.

Until a shadow appeared on the trail.

I hadn't heard him come up. He stood with his feet apart, his broad shoulders shrouded in a coat. I looked closer.

A red glimmer seemed to emanate from the area where his eyes should be.

"Hello?" I called.

The man took a step forward. "Come closer, little one. I cannot see your face."

His voice was low and carried along like a ghost. I was almost surprised when I heard it.

"Nah." I climbed off the boulder. "I'm going to go home."

Before I could move, he rushed over and had me by the throat.

A blade pressed against my neck.

With him so near, I could smell his sweat, the stench of his breath,

even the steel of the blade.

I realized the reason I hadn't recognized he was there was that his scent was off. Like there was oil in his veins instead of blood.

"You picked the perfect night to die," he hissed slowly, pressing the knife into my flesh.

It pricked lightly, but it didn't hurt, only angered me.

I put my hand over his. "I'm not the one doing the dying tonight." I grabbed his fingers and twisted, pulling his fingers from the blade.

He cursed and tried to grab me with his other hand. I bent from his grasp and shoved the edge of my palm upward into his chin. His head flipped back with a crack. I turned to get away, but he was on me again.

"You can't leave, little one. You're too much fun to play with."

I growled and head butted him, fighting back a grin of satisfaction as I felt the back of my head connect with his nose.

He howled in pain and then started to laugh. "You aren't a human child." It was a statement not a question.

I faced him. "Surprise." I smirked. "What the hell are you?" My fangs pressed against my lips, ready to tear his throat out if necessary.

"This body is human, but his soul is no longer of this world. I've taken it over. My name is Izu. I am a demura. And this forest is my hunting ground."

I curved low, getting into a fighting stance. I had no idea what a demura was, but he should know that I was not his prey.

Opening my mouth, I released my fangs.

The man's blood smelled rotten. No way I would drink from him, but my fangs were razor sharp and made a great weapon.

"Izu, tonight is not your night." I lunged.

As soon as I landed on his back, there was a high-pitched squeal and then dark energy emerged from the man's body.

I watched it curl and coil into a shape with horns before it wisped

upward.

"You haven't seen the last of me, vampire. Prepare yourself for suffering." The demura disappeared into the thickness of the forest.

With the ghost-like creature gone, the empty corpse dropped like a rock in a pond, taking me with it.

In seconds the body shriveled, the skin, muscle, and soft tissue disintegrated, leaving only the man's bones.

Shuddering, I untangled myself.

The dry bones clacked together like a musical instrument.

"Creepy," I whispered, standing up and brushing off my pants. I'd been studying supernatural creatures and magic and more my whole life.

That was what the Seven Magics Academy was for.

But this? I glanced over the direction the demura had gone.

The demura weren't in any books. Old or otherwise.

The sounds of the forest slowly returned. Crickets. Little animals rooting around in the dirt. An owl hooted in a tree off to my right.

Whatever the demura was, it was gone for now, leaving only the bones of the dead man.

I needed to tell someone.

Pops came to mind, but I didn't want to disappoint him.

If he knew I went into the woods, even after he asked me not to, he might send me back to Sharra. I wasn't going there.

Instead, I ran back to the house, up the stairs, and threw open Laeddin's bedroom door.

He sat up with a start. "What is it?" He blinked, bleary-eyed. "Was the party fun?"

"Well," I began, my breathing coming rapidly. "If that's how human parties really are, I don't want to go to another."

He pulled off the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. It was then

I noticed he wasn't wearing a shirt and his pajama pants were white with navy stripes.

Moonlight shone through the windows. It seemed strange to me the curtains were open instead of closed.

I wondered how he slept with all the light. But the light made his body gleam.

And his blood? Spicy sweetness with a tang of copper.

My fangs were still out, which made the smell even more delicious.

My mouth watered. It took every ounce of effort not to jump on him and sink my fangs into the pulse at his neck.

"What happened," he asked, seemingly oblivious to my thirst. He patted the spot next to him on the bed.

OceanofPDF.com

FANGS IN YOUR NECK

I RETRACTED my fangs and closed my mouth, holding my breath. Then sat.

He rubbed his jaw and I heard the scratchiness from his unshaven beard.

"Jasmine?" Laeddin really looked at me. "What is it?" He scooted closer.

Even with me holding my breath, his scent still had me drooling.

I covered my nose and my mouth, but that didn't help either.

Standing, I ran to my room, and slammed the door.

It was like I was five again and couldn't control myself. I knew I couldn't have his blood, but the fire burning in my throat didn't care.

"Jasmine?" There was a knock on the door.

"It's nothing. I'm fine." I could smell his blood through the door.

"Can I come in?" His voice took on a softer tone.

"Nooooo." I ran to my bed and flung myself on it before grabbing a pillow and jamming it over my face. There was a lingering scent of my mother. Or maybe I only imagined that.

Laeddin sighed but didn't walk away. "I'm opening the door," he said gently. He poked his head in. "Hey, tell me what's wrong."

"Everything." I rolled away, embarrassed.

The bed sank and I knew Laeddin sat down. He put a hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

"Jasmine?" There was exasperation laced within his concern.

"It's your blood," I blurted. "How am I supposed to talk to you when all I want to do is sink my fangs into your neck and drink and drink and drink." My voice was quiet and shaky.

"Ahhhh, now I understand." He pulled me so I was leaning against his chest.

"Are you trying to torture me?" I turned so that my lips nearly touched his jaw. It wouldn't take much to overpower him, grab hold of his neck and drink his blood.

"No, Jasmine. I would never do that." There was a hint of humor in his voice.

I wanted to show him he shouldn't be teasing a vampire, especially one such as me. My fangs came out again and grazed his neck. Blood came to the surface. It smelled so good I was almost in a frenzy.

Laeddin pulled away. "Hey." His face and tone were angry.

I stood, my breathing ragged. "Hey yourself, Laeddin." I licked the blood on my tooth. My eyes rolled back at the sensation and flavor. It was infused with a different type of magic than what I experienced before. Having tasted all seven of the magics, I searched to find which one his tasted most like. It was as though all seven existed inside him at once, but at the same time wholly different. I wondered what the genie's origins were, which reminded me of the demura called Iza.

Laeddin touched his neck at the place I grazed. Then flipped on the light and looked at his reflection. "How dare you?" He was angry, furious. His chest rose and fell heavily.

"I could say the same to you. You knew I wanted your blood. I just told you again how much it called to me." I covered my mouth, took a deep breath, and removed my hand. "Yet, you kept pushing. I needed you to see that I could take it if I wanted." I was angry too.

Laeddin swore. "Okay. You're right. I'll keep my distance - Unless you want to use your last two wishes?"

I swallowed and gave a rapid shake to my head. I didn't want him to leave. If anything, after tasting his blood, I wanted him to stay even more. Why couldn't he just let me have a little? I was about to ask him, but he left the room before I had the chance.

"Whatever." I slammed the door shut. Between the demura attack

and Laeddin flipping out, I was done. Sydney told me to dress warm. She set me up. Did she and Drake know what was in the woods? Or were they just hoping whatever was out there would kill me? That seemed beyond harsh especially for normal high school kids. Living in the human realm was confusing. I thought it would be so simple.

I snorted. Definitely not simple.

Tomorrow at school I would confront Sydney.

Tonight though I needed the air and the sky. I changed out of my jeans, sweater, and jacket and into a pair of black PJs with teal polka dots. I loved the feel of the silky material against my skin. Then I washed my face and brushed my hair. Finally I went to the window, threw back the curtains, and opened it. Night sounds filled the silence and I relaxed against the light breeze.

From the window I saw the house next door. It was enormous. Lights illuminated the entire edge of the roof. I wondered what my grandfather was doing and if any of my uncles were still up.

I went to my closet to decide what I would wear tomorrow. I chose a pair of skinny jeans, red heels, and a white and red ruffled tank with a small red sweater. I was kind of short, so I really liked the heels. Plus they were patent leather and shiny.

I turned around and stifled a scream. A gray cat was perched at the foot of my bed. Its front paws were crossed, and it was watching me.

"Where did you come from?" I glanced over at the window. "Did you get in through my here?" Clearly.

It licked its nose.

"Well, you need to go." I walked over and moved to pick the cat up. A rumble came from its chest. "Are you purring?" I kneeled in front of it. "Don't do that." My heart softened for the kitty. "Fine." It moved closer. I reached out and scratched it between the ears. "If you're going to stay, you need a name." The cat rubbed its head against my hand. "Let's see - How about Clifford?"

The cat yowled.

"Okay, no." The cat rolled onto its back. I scratched its belly. It purred. "How about Isabel?"

It seemed to understand because he yowled again.

"Okay. Okay." I laughed. It rolled further onto its back. "Ohhh, you're a boy cat." He flipped onto his stomach. "Fine no more girl names. How about Jasper?"

He shook his head.

"Weird. I swear you know what I'm saying."

He blinked.

"Frank? Isaac? Bill?"

He settled down more firmly on the bed and covered his eyes with his paws. I leaned back, resting my heels on the backs of my legs. "How about I just call you Cat?"

"Gatsby. For the love of all that is good. My name is Gatsby, child." The frustrated words left the cat's mouth and I understood him perfectly.

That wasn't normal in the human realm, unless he was a shifter. "You spoke?" I backed away, afraid of what else he might be able to do.

"If I hadn't said something you never would've guessed." He licked his paw.

"Probably not," I agreed. "Now that I know you can talk, why don't you tell me why you're in my room?" I climbed on the bed and under the covers. Whatever surprise I first felt quickly vanished. Yet another supernatural living in the human realm. I wondered what was the draw? But I couldn't judge. I was drawn here too.

"This was my room long before it was yours, vampire." He blinked and a whisper of familiarity blew through me.

An O formed on my lips. "You were my mom's cat. I remember now. But that was a long time ago. You must be - " I did the math in my head. "Ancient."

"Evidently I don't age like normal cats." He hopped off the bed and walked over to the window. "I know why you're here and while I don't agree with your choices, I understand them. I'll be around." He sprang onto the sill and jumped out the window. I dashed over, thinking surely he couldn't survive the fall, but Gatsby was gone.

Alone, I went to my desk, and flipped open the laptop Laeddin provided as part of normal human experience. I turned it on and pulled up the internet. I typed in the word DEMURA. The only listing that came up was about a Japanese guy who was a karate master. That told me nothing. Neither did PARANORMAL MIST and DEMON MIST. The clock on the nightstand next to my bed said school started in four hours. I needed to get some sleep.

Yawning, I turned out the light and climbed under the covers.

OceanofPDF.com

MAKE YOU MINE

I ROLLED over and opened my eyes. It was still dark outside. Wind blew the curtains like teal butterflies in the breeze. My vision became blurry and the bedroom disappeared.

"What's happening?" I was spinning and falling through different colored rings of light.

Down.

Down.

Down.

My body hit bottom with a thud. A moan escaped my lips as I rolled onto my knees and then stood. "Hello?" I turned slowly trying to let my eyes adjust to the utter darkness. As a vampire my vision was exceptional, but wherever I was, it was of no use. "Hello?" I shouted again.

From a distance I could hear something beating against the air. It seemed to be getting closer. Fear turned my stomach and made my throat dry.

"Where am I?"

The beating stopped. "Hello, Jasmine."

"Who's there?" I squinted, hoping that would help me to see better.

"The one who will steal your heart and make you mine." His voice sounded close.

I reached out to touch him, but only air passed through my fingers.

"No you aren't. I am no one's. Tell me who or what you really are?"

"It pains me to realize you don't recognize my voice."

His voice did echo of familiarity, but I couldn't place where I heard it before. "Show yourself."

A deep laugh rumbled all around me. "Of course I could, but where would be the fun in that? Why don't you take a guess?"

Fear laced with anger bubbled within my body. "Why don't you come closer first?" If I could get my hands on him, I could overpower him, and drain him dry.

"Tsk-Tsk, vampire. Those contemplations aren't very becoming."

I blinked several times, trying to see something in the inkiness. He could read my thoughts. Had I still possessed the magic of the seven I could block his tactics.

"Very true, but thanks to the genie, I can hear every thought that goes through your pretty little head."

I growled in frustration and dove forward, hoping to tackle him to the ground with the element of surprise. My arms grabbed air and I face planted.

"How very graceful. I'll remember that move. Perhaps I can put it to good use."

"You can't do anything to me or with me or for me! I don't know you and I don't want to know you!" My chest heaved with furious frustration as I got to my knees. "Now send me back to my bedroom."

"Do you mean the one in Sharra? Or the one that used to be Snow White's? Choose wisely, dear Jasmine."

For the briefest moment I thought about returning home to my mom and dad, to Abrea, and the land of Sharra. But I wasn't ready to go back.

"Send me to my room in the human realm." I crossed my arms, forcing myself to take a deep breath.

"I see. You are the most extraordinary creature in the world yet instead of embracing what makes you special, you choose to bury it, wish it away, like it means nothing. You've chosen normal, or at least as normal as a vampire can be. I think you'll find normal is an insignificant term and highly overrated."

"You don't know what you're talking about." I turned away, unwilling to listen.

"You don't have to believe. Soon enough you'll come to the realization on your own. I just hope it isn't too late."

"Oh, it won't be. I know what I'm doing." I ground my teeth together, flexing my jaw.

"Fine, but before you go back to the human realm, and your pseudo life, let me leave you with something. Arms suddenly encircled my waist and I was pulled against a taut chest. A delectable aroma came from him, like apples baked in cinnamon and nutmeg. I thought about pushing him away, but my body disagreed. His lips came down on mine, soft but firm.

Let me go, I screamed in my mind.

His laugh filled every crevice until I thought I would die at the sound.

My body began to spin and just before I closed my eyes, two red orbs appeared directly in front of me -

OceanofPDF.com

A BAD DREAM

A SCREAM RIPPED from my throat and I shot upright. There was a thump outside my bedroom. I clawed at the covers, pulling them up around my chin.

The door burst opened and Laeddin appeared.

"What's going on?" His eyes frantically searched the room for danger.

"I - "

The worry on his face was replaced by irritation.

"Sorry. I had a bad dream."

Laeddin looked like he wanted to say something. He opened his mouth, but instead of words, he snorted and left.

"Man, graze a genie with fangs one time and the world ends." I lay back down and stared at the ceiling. Shadows slithered and danced. I thought about the demura and the way it left the body of that man like a shadow. Had it come into my room and given me the dream? I jumped out of bed, closed the window and pulled the curtains shut. My stomach twisted itself in knots. Strange sounds seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. I flipped on the light and glanced around the room.

What had my mom done when she had a bad dream? Did she ever get them?

I walked over to the pictures of my mom, my dad and his brothers, and Cindy still hanging over the dresser. At first, I wanted to take them down, but when I actually started, I wasn't able to go through with it. I liked seeing my mom so carefree. A teenager. I was sure the younger version of her would agree with my choice. Staring at the smiling faces of my Uncles, Cindy, my mom and dad in photographs

gave me the courage to turn off the light and go to bed. The dream was just that, a dream. Nothing more. Definitely not my first kiss.

WHEN MY ALARM WENT OFF, I got ready for school. With each task I worked to block out the dream. I put on the outfit I chose the night before and did my hair in a loose braid. I decided on thicker eyeliner and a sparkling red lip-gloss. When I was done, I left my room and walked past Laeddin's. The door was closed. I thought about knocking but decided against it. I didn't understand why he was acting this way. I knew I could've commanded him to come out, but that wasn't the kind of person I was. So I went downstairs and opened the fridge. There was a glass of blood just as the day before. I took it and chugged it down. I also checked for peppermint. I knew it had to be in there. I could smell it. I found it in the crisper. I took a bright green sprig from the bunch, pulled my braid over my shoulder, and tucked it into the ponytail holder at the end.

School started in twenty minutes, but I didn't know how I was going to get there. I could run, but there was a possibility I might be seen moving at faster speeds than were possible for a human.

I thought about going upstairs to ask Laeddin but paused on the bottom step.

Luckily, he came out of his room just at that moment. Wearing jeans low on his hips and a white shirt that still needed to be buttoned, leaving his very well-muscled chest exposed, and me feeling breathless at the sight of him.

My hunger for his blood rose up like a wave. I swear he was torturing me. "Hi." I waved, hoping his anger was forgotten.

"Hello, Mistress." He bowed before pushing past me at the bottom of the stairs. Opening the fridge he grabbed an apple, took his car keys from the counter, and held the front door open. "If you want to get to school on time, you'd better hustle."

My body sagged with sadness. If he was going to be mad at me the

whole time we were here, my fun would be over before it began. "Wow, you hold a serious grudge. Did they teach you that in genie school?"

"Ha. Ha." Laeddin started the car, put it into gear, and roared out of the driveway.

We drove in silence until he stopped in front of the school. "I'll be here after school."

I got out. "Great. And by the way, I need a cell phone. It's part of the normal teenage experience and having one should be part of my wish."

"Very well." He snapped his fingers and an orange rectangular box appeared on the passenger seat.

"Any idea how to work it?" I asked, suddenly feeling incapable of using the technology.

"There are instructions. Turn it on. It'll work. Everything is ready to go, and a valid phone number is listed inside."

I picked up the box and tucked it into my backpack. "Thank you, Laeddin." I gave him a sunny smile, but he wasn't looking. His focus was straight ahead, the way it'd been since we left the house. "Ugh." I stomped away and up the stairs.

Before reaching the entrance, I wanted to check my schedule for class numbers. There was a concrete bench off to the side and I went to it. Sat and opened my backpack to find my schedule.

Today was an A day, which meant I had chemistry, Homeroom, accounting, lunch, English, and finally Spanish. By this school's standards I was a senior. Most of the twelfth grade classes were on the upper floors. Working to find happiness with my decision to be normal, I zipped my bag and hefted it onto my shoulder. Then went inside.

Students laughed, joked, and chatted while making their way up and down the halls and the stairs. All around me was normal, yet I couldn't grab hold. It was as though I had the word "different" on a

sign around my neck, or that I was looking at life through glass. A few times people bumped into my backpack, knocking it off my shoulder. They didn't bother to stop or apologize. It made me wonder if they knew I was there. The coppery sweet scent of their blood was strong and enticing, but I kept my braid over my shoulder so I could smell the peppermint first.

"Hey, Jack." Cam fell into step beside me. Not an easy feat considering the number of students around. "Did you hear they found a bunch of bones on one of the trails leading into the forest earlier this morning?"

"Oh?" I gripped my backpack strap like I needed to strangle it.

"Yeah, the police don't know what to make of it."

"Odd," I said and swallowed. Sweat formed on my upper lip. I was nervous he would see the truth and discover what I was.

"It really is." He gave me a reassuring look. Cam was a good guy. Between him and Abby I felt lucky to have met two such nice humans in a short amount of time.

Cam knew how to dress too. Today he wore purple jeans and a tight short-sleeved white t-shirt. It stood out against his dark skin but matched his teeth perfectly. "You look really nice."

"Thanks." He pulled at his shirt and sniffed. "Fashion is what I live for."

"Well, it shows." I laughed, enjoying the easy camaraderie between us.

"You look damn good yourself. Where do you shop?"

I blushed at the compliment. "I got this outfit at Bloomingdales. In New York?" Surely, he heard of the store. I was from a whole other realm and I heard of the store.

"Yes, Jack. I know where Bloomingdales is." He patted my arm. "So what's your first class?"

"Chemistry with Heiner." I gave him a questioning glance, asking

with my raised eyebrows if that was good or not.

He scrunched his nose and stuck out his tongue. I immediately understood it wasn't.

"Is it going to be awful?" Someone bumped into my shoulder, rocking me back.

"At least you're getting it out of the way first thing. Just hold your breath when he walks by. His stench is something kind of otherworldly." He walked me to the door. "Have fun. I'll see you at lunch."

"See you." I walked by the classroom, peeking at the teacher as I went by. He was a bigger man with thinning brown hair. The bottom half of his round face was covered in a beard. He wore a brown jacket with stains in the armpits. And his stench? Cam was right. He smelled - like a troll. His blood didn't have the same bouquet as the rest of the humans.

Mr. Heiner looked up from the book he held in his meaty fingers as I came in. Without stopping, I went over to the desks and down the first row.

The room was large. Individual desks were lined up in rows near the front of the room. Behind them was almost a whole other room. It looked like a laboratory. I took a seat in an empty chair.

The bell rang. Mr. Heiner was about to close the door when Sydney and Drake walked in.

I sat up straighter, my eyes following their every move. When they sat in two seats next to each other, I kept watch.

Mr. Heiner started to talk, but I didn't pay attention. I was too focused on burning a hole in Sydney's and Drake's backs.

They sent me into the forest in hopes I'd what? Die? I mean how could they be such jerks?

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, I moved a little more quickly than humans could, too upset to control myself. I sat on

Sydney's desk before she had a chance to stand. "Hey Sydney."

Her blue eyes grew to the size of twin pools. "Jack?"

I crossed my legs and took on my most princess-like demeanor. "That's right. Alive and well." I kept my features serene - at least I tried to.

"What are you doing?" Drake asked, grabbing my shoulder.

I took his hand and twisted, making him stand, and his upper body lean sideways.

"Stop," he whined.

I turned so I could face him fully and glared. "Don't ever touch me again."

Tears caused his eyes to shine as he pleaded for release. "I won't."

"Good." I let go and turned my attention back to Sydney.

"So, great party last night, you two. Wow. It was like so awesome. I can't believe you guys missed it, especially since you invited me."

Sydney swallowed, clutching the side of her desk. Her heart raced, the blood pumping through her veins. Drake's too. The aroma of their blood wasn't as appealing as some, but it was most definitely human.

"I ran into - " I stopped midsentence, no longer in the mood to play coy. "Why did you send me out there alone?"

Like a puma, she pounced on my honesty. Her fear forgotten, she smirked. "Don't be a baby, it was just a little prank. You weren't hurt." She stood, hooking her sparkly backpack on one shoulder. "No harm done." She patted my arm.

"Yeah, it was just a prank. Get over yourself," Drake added, still rubbing his hand.

A low growl rose up in my throat as my fangs pricked my lips. Hands clenched into fists, I forced myself to let them walk away.

OceanofPDF.com

A NEW TREND

WHEN LUNCH fiNALLY ROLLED AROUND, I was beyond ready. I also had a better idea how to find my way to the cafeteria today. Zoe and Peter were kissing at the bottom of one set of stairs as I made my way down. They stopped when I passed.

I waved, embarrassed. "Hey guys. Didn't mean to interrupt."

They pulled apart, though they took the other's hand. "Jackie. It's nice to see you. How's your second day been treating you?"

"Uh." I pulled at the end of my braid, twisting it around a finger.

"What's this?" Zoe asked, indicating the wilted leaf in my hair.

"It's peppermint." I touched it lightly.

Zoe and Peter gave each other a strange look. I had the feeling they were communicating.

Peter patted my shoulder. "What a great idea." He leaned in to smell it.

"Yes, it is," Zoe said. "I think I'll wear some in my hair tomorrow, if that's okay."

"Sure." Maybe I would start a new trend.

They each took one of my arms. We went down the remaining steps and into the cafeteria like that. As soon as we entered, the cafeteria got quiet and everyone looked over.

"What?" Peter asked, stepping in front of Zoe and me. "Do I have something in my teeth? Or, something up my nose?" He wiped the tip of his nose with a finger.

Everyone laughed and went back to whatever they were doing. Zoe turned. "If you ever need a friend, I hope you'll consider me. Other than Peter, I don't know anyone." Her voice was soft and sincere.

"I'd like that," I said and meant it.

Cam appeared at my side. "Hey guys. We eating together?"

Zoe and I looked at each other and then said, "Sure," at the same time.

"Thanks for the invite, man." Peter clapped him on the back, kind of like a father would his son.

Cam chuckled nervously and rolled Peter's hand away. "Good. Good." He clapped his hands happily. "Let's get in line. I'm starving."

Peter, Zoe and Cam moved toward the food, but I stayed behind.

Zoe turned back. "You coming?"

I shook my head. "Not hungry."

Cam studied me. "You don't have issues with food, do you?"

"Of course not," I said, defensively. "I'm just not hungry." I hoped that was an acceptable answer because there was no way I was eating human food.

"You want to find us a table then?" he asked.

"Sure."

While Zoe, Peter, and Cam stood in line, I searched the room. In one of the corners, there was a round table with a lone person sitting at it. Her nose was in a book, while an untouched sandwich and water bottle sat in front. I knew instantly it was Abby and hurried over.

"Hey Abby."

"Jack," she said, closing her book without marking it.

"Mind if me and a few friends sit with you?"

She immediately closed herself off. "Who are these friends?"

I pointed toward the line. "Cam. Zoe. And, Peter."

She visibly relaxed. "I know Cam, of course, but who are the other two?"

I slid into one of the empty chairs. "Zoe and Peter are new to the school as well. I don't know much about them, but they seem nice."

She shrugged. "As long as it isn't Sydney and her nasty friends, I'm

good with it."

"Great." I set my backpack on the ground and unzipped it. I wanted to get a handle on my new cell phone.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Abby asked, taking a bite of her food. It smelled like peanut butter.

"I'm not hungry. Probably nerves." I set the orange box on the table in front of me.

Abby got out of her chair and came to sit next to me. "Is that the new O-Phone?

"I think so," I said, her excitement fueling mine.

"Well, open it. Let's have a look."

I took off the top and placed it on the table. "Now what?" I asked, looking at her.

"Allow me." She took out a thick, light orange booklet. "These are your instructions. Don't lose this, you might need it."

"Okay," I said seriously.

Beneath that was a black screen. I guessed it was the actual phone. Abby took it out carefully. "Here it is. The best phone on the planet. It can do just about anything."

"Really?" I took it from her outstretched hand. It was light. The sides and back were orange, the same color as the box, with a silver vector image of an orange etched into the metal. "It's really pretty."

"It's more than pretty. It's awesome. The processor is faster than most computers. If another person has an O-Phone, you can talk to each other as holograms. When you search for content, if you want you can ask it to read the information for you as it shows you holographic pictures."

"Cool," I said, pretending I understood what she was talking about.

"Mind if I turn it on?" Her face was animated.

"Go for it."

She pressed a button on top and held it until an orange appeared

on the screen. Then it flashed and a screen filled with different circles popped up.

Cam, Zoe, and Peter arrived at the table.

"An O-Phone. You're so lucky," Cam said.

We spent the rest of lunch figuring out how to work my phone. I noticed Abby, Cam, and Peter ate most of their food, but Zoe only picked at hers. She seemed almost as disgusted by the sustenance as I was.

When the first bell rang, we all stood up.

"Want to hang out after school?" Abby asked.

"I'd love to." I lifted my backpack and shouldered it.

"We could go over to my house and watch TV. I have all the seasons of The Vampire Diaries." Abby clutched her book to her chest.

"The what?" She wanted to watch a show about vampires. Had she guessed what I was? My heart beat wildly.

Abby dropped her backpack on the table. "Please tell me you've heard of The Vampire Diaries. I know it's kind of old school, but it's seriously so good."

I got the feeling saying no would be social suicide. "I mean I've heard of it. Of course. But I've never watched it."

That seemed to appease her. She wrapped her arm around mine. "Well, we are going to rectify that terrible tragedy starting this afternoon."

"Okay." She reminded me a little of Abrea. Kind. Busy. Energetic.

"I'm off to chemistry. Wanna meet at the front doors right after school?" She walked backward in the opposite direction of me.

"Sure." As I walked to class, I remembered Laeddin would be waiting. I didn't want to make him even angrier.

Oh, what do I do?

During Spanish I noticed a couple of students raise their hand and ask to go to the bathroom. I thought that was strange, but it gave me

an idea.

I raised my hand.

"Si, Ms. Ryder." Mrs. Sanchez rolled the R in Ryder.

"May I go to the bathroom?"

"Si." She held up a colorful hat.

I lifted my backpack and walked to her desk. "Muchas gracias," I said taking the hat.

Out in the hall I searched for a bathroom. It was weird walking the halls without the crush of the other students, but eventually I found one down a ways and on the left. I pushed the door open and walked in.

My first experience with a public bathroom? Not great! There were three sinks and four stalls, a toilet in each stall. I chose the furthest stall in hopes that it would give me the most privacy, made my way past the mirror with a curse word scrawled on it in what I guessed was lipstick, and closed the door.

"Laeddin," I whispered. I had no idea if it would work but I hoped so. I needed to talk with him. After ten seconds he still hadn't shown, so I whisper-yelled his name again. "Laeddin."

He appeared within the stall, so close to me I could immediately smell his spicy sweet blood. "What is this place?" He crinkled his nose.

I took the end of my braid and brought it to my nose. "This is a bathroom at school."

"It's barbaric." He leaned back. "And crowded."

I took a deep breath through my nose. Peppermint. I only smell peppermint, I chanted internally. "I just wanted to tell you I'm going to a friend's house after school."

Laeddin glared. "You brought me into this smelly bathroom to tell me that?"

My insides shot with pain. Why was he acting so mean? "It's called consideration. I didn't want you to drive all the way to the school so I

could tell you that I was going home with someone else."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Jasmine." He gave me a look of complete disdain. "Just think, if you would've given me the same respect before biting me, our conversation might be less abrupt."

"You're a jerk. If you hadn't flaunted your delicious blood - " I pushed my finger into his chest. "I wouldn't have grazed your stupid neck." I flipped the collar of his shirt in irritation. "And get a cell phone so in the future I can call or text you."

"Call? Text?"

"Yes, it's all part of the human experience. Get yourself an O-phone and figure it out."

The door to the bathroom opened.

"Go," I mouthed.

His eyes flickered to the colorful hat I held in my other hand. He lifted a brow in question.

"It's nothing," I whispered.

He rolled his eyes and vanished.

I flushed the toilet and opened the stall door. A girl was applying mascara. "Hey." I turned on a sink and washed my hands.

She ignored me and continued what she was doing.

OceanofPDF.com

HOT GUYS

ABBY WAS WAITING by the front door, just as we discussed. "Jack, you ready to go?"

I bounced up and down on the balls of my feet. "Yep." I pushed open the front doors and stepped out, holding it open for Abby.

Drake rushed past, knocking Abby over.

I caught her before she landed on the ground. "Rude." I smacked him in the chest, sending him flying back. He tumbled into a group of students, knocking them over as he went, like the human version of bowling.

"Freak?" He held the back of his head. "Why'd you do that?" Drake's face was a mixture of shock and anger. Blood leaked from his eyebrow and he touched it tenderly.

The salty and coppery aroma snuck up on me. My fangs fought to break free, the sharp tips grazing my bottom lip. I wanted him, his blood. I dove onto Drake and licked the blood.

"Dude?" Drake grabbed my arms and pushed me back. He looked scared and a little fascinated. "What kind of crazy are you?' He glanced around at the other students and replaced his abhorrence with a smirk. "I can work with that," he said, his swagger returning.

I scrambled to my feet. Abby gave me a strange stare. Did she think I was crazy too? Probably.

But she stuck out her hand. "Get off the stupid teenaged boy."

I clasped her fingers but didn't need them and used my vampire power to get on my feet. "Let's get out of here." Drake was saying something, but I ignored him, and didn't bother looking back.

"Agreed." She ran down the steps and I followed.

Abby's car was a dilapidated old mustang. The body was like a

patchwork quilt of parts and when I opened the door, it sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

When she turned on the car, music from the nineteen nineties thumped from the speakers.

"Get buckled," she said as she pulled on her own.

Once the belt clicked, she carefully backed up and we were out of the parking lot without incident. I had homework. So did Abby, but we decided to ignore it. When we got to her house, she grabbed treats and we headed upstairs.

Her room was decorated in pink, white, and black, and the wall across from the bed was wallpapered in cherry blossoms. A large window with a cushioned seat under it was on one side. On the other was a built-in desk with bookshelves along the sides and across the top. Her bedspread and carpet were white and decorative pillows in pink and black covered her bed. A walk-in closet was to the left of the door and a bathroom was on the right. Against the wall with the cherry blossom paper sat a dresser with a large screened TV hanging from the wall.

"I swear you're going to love this show. It's the best." She was giddy as she opened her laptop. We laid on our stomach's side by side on her bed. The next few hours were spent watching the first four episodes of The Vampire Diaries

Between us was a bag of candy. It was long and red and had cartoonish pictures of cherries on the front. It smelled nothing like cherries.

"Want one?" Abby asked, holding one of the red ropes out.

I wrinkled my nose. "No. Thanks."

"Okay, more for me." She took a bite and returned her focus to the show.

It was weird, watching a TV show about vampires. The rules of the show were complicated and strange. In my world, there was magic, and vampires called the originals, but that was where the similarity

between truth and fiction ended. Probably the most distressing knowledge was that none of the vampires in the show had wings.

Maybe I really am a freak, I thought unhappily.

"You like this?" I gave her a sideways glance. It was obvious she did. Her body tensed and she hung on every word.

"Don't you?" She was incredulous. "It's got everything. Hot guys. Unrequited love. Vampires." She paused the show. "I mean vampires and kissing vampires and drama and angst and more drama. It's like the best show ever." She seemed serious. "Sometimes I close my eyes and pretend I'm Elena and Damon bites my neck and drinks from me." Her eyes danced with joy. "It seems so sensual, like the bond would be so powerful. I wish the government hadn't banned all supernatural creatures from our realm. Having a vampire boyfriend would be so romantic."

Who was I to disagree? "So far, it seems pretty good."

Abby searched my face, waiting for more.

"It is stupid that vampires aren't allowed in this realm. Seriously," I added, hoping I sounded like an angsty teenager myself.

"Right? I mean they could just ban the bad ones and let us keep the good ones." She got off the bed.

"Where are you going?" I hoped she wasn't upset I didn't share her passion for the show.

"I need a drink. You want one?" She walked to the door and paused, waiting for my answer.

I did want a drink. Of blood. Rich and thick and nourishing. I casually wondered what Abby would think if she found out I was a vampire, that like her favorite show, she had a friend who loved the dark and the taste of blood. Immediately I knew it would scare her. I also knew if I turned down a drink, she might get suspicious.

"Water, if you've got it."

She visibly relaxed. I hadn't realized how tense she was. "Sure. I'll

be right back."

By agreeing to a human drink I calmed her, but my anxiety began to build. I never drank water before, nor had I tasted human food. In Sharra, my dad usually ate a blueberry bagel with strawberry cream cheese, his "go to" breakfast, although sometimes he switched it up and would have pancakes or eggs and bacon. Whatever he ate, he was normally done before I ever came down for my breakfast. What if I took a drink of the water and it burned or tasted terrible or made me puke? Could I pretend to drink it? The answer worried me. I waited nervously, considering my options if something strange happened.

It seemed to be taking Abby a long time to return. Using my unique hearing, I listened. Outside I heard birds, the sounds of small animals rummaging, insects buzzing and burrowing, a spider spinning her web, and a large family of rabbits. I turned my focus inside. There was breathing, though it was erratic. Was she scared?

I quickly left the bedroom and went in search of Abby. Her home was large, but easily maneuverable. I made my way downstairs to the kitchen, figuring that was where she would've gone for a drink. She wasn't there. But the refrigerator door hung open. That sent up a warning sign.

"Abby." I closed the fridge, walked out of the kitchen and turned down a small hallway. There were three closed doors. One on the left, one straight ahead, and one on the right. I pulled the one on the left open first. The room contained a washer and dryer. There were cupboards, a counter, and a sink. An ironing board and other laundry things. But Abby wasn't inside.

I opened the door straight ahead. It was a garage. It was dark, but I could see easily enough. She wasn't there.

I went to open the door on the right, but it was locked.

"Abby," I called again.

"I'm almost done, Jack. Sheesh, you scared me."

My fears immediately subsided. She was only using the bathroom.

"Sorry." I paused. "Did you want me to grab the drinks?"

"That'd be great. I'll be right there."

"K, what do you want?"

"A soda. They're in the fridge."

That reminded me the refrigerator door had been left open. "You sure you're alright?"

She didn't answer right away. That made me nervous. "Abby."

A low growl. "Give me some privacy. Jeez," she barked.

"Sorry," I said again, feeling embarrassed. I went back to the kitchen, grabbed a soda and a bottle of water, and then walked back upstairs to her bedroom.

I decided to see what the water tasted like while Abby was out of the room. Opening the bottle, I brought the liquid to my lips and took a sip. It wasn't bad, kind of refreshing. I took another. As the liquid went down my throat, it coated and sunk into my stomach. It wasn't filling or satisfying, but at least it didn't hurt.

That was good to know. I would start drinking water at lunch. Putting the lid back on the bottle I was about to place it on the bed to wait when I heard a loud thump.

"That's it."

I ran downstairs, past the living room and dining room, and into the kitchen. "Abby," I called.

She turned the corner. Her body looked the same, but I knew immediately there was something different, an odd bend in her body. Worse though, was the smell. Abby's blood, while it hadn't been as appealing as some of the other humans, now smelled rotten.

A sick feeling consumed my body. It was the same smell as the body of the man in the forest.

"That's right, Abby is gone." A cruel smile lifted Abby's lips. It looked wrong on her kind face.

My heart broke. "Abby was a good person." An uncontrollable rage

built and filled my body. I hadn't known Abby long, but I considered her a friend. That this demura named Iza killed her and taken her body made my heart ache with fury and sadness.

"Whether she was good or not is of no value to me. I required her body, so I took it."

It seemed childish, but I asked anyway. "Why her? There are millions of humans in this world. Why choose her?" I wasn't prepared for the depth of emotion permeating my being at losing Abby. It was made worse that I had to witness the demura using her appendages and speaking with her voice.

"I promised you pain. Over the centuries I've learned it's far more effective to harm those that my victim cares for if I want them to suffer. It makes the game so much more enjoyable."

"But what am I to you? I thought the forest was your hunting ground."

"When you entered my forest you became my prey. It doesn't matter that you aren't still in the forest." Abby's body swayed back and forth as though moving to a rhythm I couldn't hear.

"Tell me what you want."

He crossed his arms and I nearly cried because he was doing it in Abby's body.

"That's easy. I want to continue doing what I've been doing for centuries. Making all creatures miserable, feeding on souls, destroying lives. Just the basics." He leaned against the doorframe, crossing one leg over the other. "So you're going to have to get out of my way."

"I can't do that." My fangs came out. I couldn't stand by and let any more people become corpses because of the demura. And although I didn't know anything about the creature, there was no way I would let it walk around using Abby's body. Just as with the man in the forest, I attacked it. This time it didn't release her body but used it to attack back. He wrapped Abby's arms around me and began to squeeze.

"You think you can't be hurt, don't you?" he asked with a hiss.

I smirked. "That's right. You can't hurt me."

In response he squeezed tighter. And shocker! I felt it. Like really felt it. The demura squeezed so tight that one of my ribs popped.

I screamed. Pain, worse than any I ever experienced cut through my body. Stars danced across my vision.

The demura didn't stop. Three more ribs broke. My body was shutting down, the pain beyond excruciating.

If the demura continued, my body would give up. I wouldn't die, but I would need time to heal. The only way to recuperate was blood and a lot of it.

"See, you aren't as invincible as you thought." Spittle landed on my cheek. I forced myself not to look away. He didn't deserve my fear.

The smell surrounding Abby's body was putrid, but if I didn't drink, I would be knocked unconscious or maybe even die. I didn't know. With those thoughts in my head, I did the unthinkable. I sunk my teeth into her flesh. Blood immediately poured into my mouth and down my throat. My body responded immediately to the blood, even though it was tainted, it also possessed magic of some sort. My ribs snapped back into place. I continued to drink, sensing Abby's body dying. It broke my heart, but there was no other way.

When her body was nearly dry, the demura let out a high-pitched squeal, and released itself from Abby, becoming mist once again. It floated upward and disappeared through the ceiling.

I disentangled myself from Abby and although I was devastated my friend was dead, I breathed a sigh of relief that the thing was no longer inside her. Sitting on the floor next to her, I placed her head in my lap. Her once warm eyes were lifeless and her body hung limp, like an empty balloon.

For the first time in my life I cried. Large tears rolled down my cheeks. They weren't like normal tears, but red with blood.

"Laeddin! Laeddin!" I shrieked his name until my throat was raw.

He appeared with apparent disgust that I bothered him again. Until he really looked at me and at my dead friend.

"I wish for you to bring her back to life. Please. I wish it. I wish it." I rocked back and forth, my hands cupping her face. Red tears fell and dripped onto Abby's cheeks, so it looked like she cried blood too.

Laeddin's contempt quickly turned to sympathy. "What's happened?" he asked, kneeling next to me.

I told him everything. About my first meeting the demura, and what happened this time, and then finished up with how I drank Abby's blood to save myself. "It's so awful," I cried, wishing I could take it back. "I'm awful."

"No, you aren't, Jasmine. I'm so sorry." His fingers stroked my hair. It felt good. I didn't deserve his sympathy and I pushed him away.

"Bring her back to life, please. I'm begging you."

He sighed. "I can't bring her back. For one thing it's against the rules an - "

"Break the rules, Laeddin! Please." I hugged her close. "Please."

He patted my shoulder. "What do you think she would be if I brought her back? Everything that made Abby, Abby is no longer in there." He pointed at her body.

I knew he was right. With every ounce of myself I knew it. But I didn't want to believe. I wasn't ready to let her go.

A noise rumbled from the garage and I realized in horror it was opening. Someone was home. The panic must've shown on my face. Laeddin gripped my arms. In the blink of an eye we were no longer in Abby's kitchen, but ours.

"My backpack," I cried. "It's still in her room."

"I'll get it." He vanished and reappeared carrying my backpack within seconds.

"Did - " I swallowed. Part of me didn't want to know, but the biggest part of me needed to hear his answer. "Did someone find her?"

Laeddin rubbed a hand over his face. "Yes," he said.

OceanofPDF.com

KISSED ME

THAT NIGHT I dreamed of the man I couldn't see again. He spoke of what it would be like to marry.

How many children he wished to have, and where we would live once we were together. He spoke of Sharra, the creatures there, and about how I drank Abby's blood.

I'd been humiliated by his words, but he kept talking anyway, explaining that what I'd done had been a survival instinct. He continued that I should be grateful I possessed such a predisposition.

Otherwise I would be dead.

I didn't want to agree, but a tiny part of my brain appreciated the support.

Most strangely, he spoke of my wings and how exquisite they were.

I hated to admit that while he talked the same part of my brain that appreciated his words also cherished them.

And just like last time, right before I woke, he took me in his arms and kissed me.

When my alarm went off, I wasn't as afraid of the man in my dream as I was the first time. I quickly got ready for school and went down to breakfast. Even though I'd drunk Abby nearly dry the day before I was famished.

There was blood in a glass just as there had been the last two days. I drank it quickly, silently wishing it was any blood but human. Even troll would be better. It was what I deserved.

Laeddin hadn't come down yet and I was grateful. Although he seemed less angry when he went to bed last night, he still wasn't the same guy I first met in the cave.

And now I was a murderer. Abby was dead because of me. If I hadn't wished away my wings and asked to be normal, I would still be in Sharra and none of this would have happened.

The wish seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Are you ready to go?" Laeddin asked, coming into the kitchen. He took an orange from the fridge. His scent swirled past my nose like the tail of a kite.

I quickly took a sprig of peppermint and put it in behind my ear. That helped a little, but not nearly enough. I didn't understand why his blood smelled so much better than any I ever encountered.

"Yes," I said, swinging my backpack onto my shoulder.

Laeddin took my hand. "If you don't want to go, it's okay."

I gave him a wary look.

"Everyone knows about Abby. I believe your friend Cam even texted you last night."

"Oh!" I took my phone from my backpack. I'd forgotten about it, too wrapped up in what happened.

He sent five different texts.

Did you hear about Abby? Call me.

Jack, I need to talk.

Abby is dead. Please text back.

They are saying her blood was drained from her body. It's vampires, I know it. Damn bloodsuckers aren't supposed to be here anymore.

OMG. Jack, you aren't dead too, are you?

"I better text back." I was new to the texting thing, but I typed my message out and sent it.

I'm so sorry, Cam. I didn't know her long, but I considered her my friend. Are you going to be at school?

He quickly texted back.

Thank God you're safe. I can't go to school. I'm too sad. Want to come over? We can be sad together.

I read Cam's text to Laeddin. "What do you think? Should I go over?"

Laeddin shrugged. He freaking shrugged. I never wanted to punch the genie so badly.

"Well, gee, thanks for your help." I dropped my backpack and shrugged onto the stool.

He leaned against the counter. "You don't need my help. You already know what to do. You just want confirmation."

My shoulders sagged. "No, I really don't. Part of me wants to go over because he needs me."

"This isn't your fault, Jasmine. The demura killed someone before you ever arrived it Salem. This isn't about you - "

Someone pounded on the door.

"Who's that?" I whispered.

Laeddin walked to the door and opened it. I lingered behind him. By the smell of blood, I knew they were human.

Two police officers stood on our porch.

"Hello, sir. Are you Jackie Ryder's father?" one of the asked.

Laeddin opened the door all the way. "No, her parents are in Las Vegas, and they've asked me to keep an eye on her until they've finished their business and can join Jackie here in Salem." He kept his voice casual and his features relaxed.

Both police officers scrutinized him. They were about the same height, but one was more muscular than the other. They both looked like they were in their early twenties. One had dark brown hair. The other officer had strawberry blond. They seemed to take their job very seriously.

"I'm officer Gand," the guy with strawberry blond hair said. Then he pointed to his partner. "This is officer Vick. Can we come in?"

"We have some questions for Jackie," officer Vick added.

"Sure," Laeddin said.

When they were inside, he directed them to the couch. "Have a seat."

I sat opposite them. "I'm Jackie." My heart raced and my lips were chapped. What did they want? Did they know I drank Jackie's blood?

"A couple of students saw you and Abby walking away from the school together yesterday. Is that true?" Officer Vick had a pad of paper and a pencil out, ready to write down whatever I said.

"Yes, that's true. I was there for a while. I'm not exactly sure how long, but we watched a show called The Vampire Diaries and then I went home."

Officer Vick nodded. "When did you leave?"

I glanced at Laeddin. "I don't know the exact time. We were watching and then Abby said she was going to go get us a drink. It took her a while, so I went down to the kitchen. Abby wasn't there so I called out to her and she answered from the bathroom that she was sick and that she was going to be a while." I shrugged and took a moment to take a deep breath. An image of Abby's broken body fluttered past my mind. Tears filled my eyes. "I told her I would see her at school tomorrow and left."

Both officers mumbled a reply as they watched me.

"You're new to the school. Correct?" Officer Gand asked.

"Yes," I responded, my voice a whisper. "Today would've been my third day. Abby and I had Creative Writing together. That's where we met." They hadn't asked for any of that information, but I gave it anyway.

"I see." Officer Vick eyed me suspiciously. "Did anyone seem to dislike Abby?"

I shook my head. "Not that I saw." I thought about Sydney and how she wasn't friendly. "I mean there are kids at school who don't hang

out with each other, but that's just life, isn't it?"

Officer Gand and officer Vick gave each other a knowing look.

"Tell us the name of those students she didn't' get along with?"

I sat on the chair across from the officers and clasped my hands between my knees. "There's a girl named Sydney and then a guy named Drake. I don't know their last names."

Officer Vick wrote something down. Then he gave me a direct look. "Are you a vampire?" he asked bluntly.

I gasped. I hated to admit it, but my mom might have been right about me staying out of this realm. It was so different. "No." I looked to Laeddin for help again. He worked his jaw but didn't say anything.

"Did you kill Abby Carrington?" Officer Gand asked.

A sob ripped from my throat. My body shook with grief and pain. Finally, I shook my head. "No, I didn't."

The officers stood. Officer Vick patted me awkwardly on the back. "There. There," he said, and pulled a small machine from his back pocket. "We'll just need a sample of your blood to verify." His eyes were hard, and I realized neither of them believed me.

"My blood?" I gave Laeddin a pleading look.

He stood and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "She is not a vampire. Look at your test. It shows negative."

I put a hand over my mouth, grateful he was this all powerful genie.

Both officers blinked as whatever magic Laeddin worked on them took hold. Officer Vick checked at the machine. "Negative. Great." He was surprised and showed the result to officer Gand.

Officer Gand shrugged. "Glad we cleared that up." He cleared his throat. "We'll find whoever hurt your friend. You can be sure of that."

They walked to the door. Laeddin followed them.

"If she thinks of anything else, please have her call us." Officer Vick handed Laeddin a card.

"I will. Thank you." He shut the door behind them.

I jumped out of the seat and ran over to Laeddin.

He put a finger to his lips.

Once we heard the police car drive away, he removed his finger.

"Are you okay?" He pulled me to his chest in a hug.

My body still shook uncontrollably. I was devastated, sick inside, definitely NOT okay. "What do you know about the demura?"

He rested his chin on my head. "I've never heard that word before today. But I may know of someone who does." He pushed me back so he could see my face. "I'll need to be gone a few hours. Maybe a day at the most. Will you be okay alone?"

In response my teeth started chattering. I really wanted to go home. But I couldn't. Not yet. I needed to find a way to end the demura. It was the least I could do for Abby. "Yes."

"That's my girl," Laeddin said sweetly. Whatever anger he harbored over the scratch on his neck, was gone. Right before my eyes, he vanished.

I turned in a circle, unsure what to do next. My phone beeped. I looked at it and realized I had a text.

You coming over or not? It was from Cam. Before I could answer, he sent another. Never mind I'll come to you.

Do you know where I live? I texted.

Yep. Be there in a few.

Okay.

I put my phone in the back pocket of my jeans and went to sit on the couch when I heard scratching.

"What the - " I opened the door and there was Gatsby.

He sauntered in. "Close the door. I need to speak with you and there isn't much time. Your friend Cameron will be here soon."

OceanofPDF.com

DRANK HER BLOOD

I GREW UP AROUND UNICORNS, trolls, elves, and vampires. They all talked often, sometimes annoyingly so. But that was in Sharra. A talking cat in the human realm was completely different, probably because humans were normal here, as were the animals. They weren't supposed to talk. And a mist-creature wasn't supposed to invade human bodies either.

Gatsby jumped on the couch.

I sat beside him, working to get a handle on myself. "What is it?"

Gatsby curled his tail around his paws. His yellow eyes studied me carefully. "I know what happened to Abby yesterday."

I was stunned. "You do?" My hand found my way over my mouth.

"It's okay, Jasmine. You didn't do anything wrong."

My bottom lip quivered. "I drank her blood." My voice was barely above a whisper.

Gatsby placed a paw on my knee. "If you hadn't, the demura would've killed you."

Tears dripped from my eyes. I knew he was right.

"Don't cry. You're getting blood tears all over your shirt."

Crying tears of blood happened with me once in a while, when I was really upset. "Toadstools on toast!" I quickly wiped my eyes. Cam would arrive any minute and I didn't want him to see my face or my shirt. I pulled off my shirt and tossed it in the corner, ran to the mirror and wiped any remnants of my blood tears. "Gatsby, do you know what the demura is? What it wants?"

"Of course I do." He licked his paw. "But Cam is on his way. Comfort your friend, and I'll tell you about the demura tonight."

"But - "

There was a knock at the door.

I realized I hadn't put on another shirt and was only in my black camisole tank, but it was fine. I opened the door and Gatsby ran out.

Cam looked awful. His eyes were puffy from crying.

He sniffled. "Hey."

"Hi Cam. Come in." I walked him into the kitchen. "Want a drink or something?"

"Got any liquor? I'd really like to get drunk and pass out." He sat on a stool; his face buried in his hands.

I went over and rubbed his back. "I'm so sorry, Cam." It was true. I was sorry for putting Abby in harm's way. It was my fault. The demura said so. I was sorry I ever came to Salem. I should've stayed in Sharra and become the princess my mom and dad wanted me to be. I never should've wished to become something I wasn't. The worst part was, if I'd come into the human realm with all of my powers and my wings, I would've been able to stop the demura. I had no doubt about that.

Cam sniffled. "It isn't your fault, Jack." He glanced at me. "How are you holding up?"

I pushed away the tears threatening to drop. "I'm - " I swallowed. "I'm surviving."

"You two seemed to really hit it off. She told me you guys were going to hang out yesterday. Did you?"

"Yes. We watched The Vampire Diaries for a while until she got sick." I hated lying, but at least it was partial truth.

"Weird." Cam pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. "Abby never got sick."

I told him how we ate licorice and then she went to get a drink. "Maybe the licorice made her sick?" My lips trembled and my shoulders shook. A sob caught in my throat. "Before I left, she said she would see me tomorrow at school." I swallowed back a sob.

Cam hugged me and I hugged him back. It was a sweet moment, a normal one, me hugging my friend, but it was marred by the fact that my face was against his neck. His heart pumped his warm blood through his veins. I longed to sink my teeth in his neck and - "I feel so bad for her family. They must be devastated."

"Yeah." He wiped his eyes. "Abby was close with her little sister."

I stopped listening at the mention of a sister. No one else was home when we were there. I was sure of it. But a part of me worried maybe that wasn't true. What if the little sister was home and saw something? Like me drinking Abby's blood.

"I didn't know she had a sister." I said, sniffling.

"She's like eleven or twelve. I'm not sure. Did you see her there yesterday?"

"No, I didn't. And the police didn't mention her either." I pulled away and walked over to the refrigerator.

"The police?"

"They were just here, asking questions." I pulled out a peppermint leaf, took a big sniff, and then put it behind my ear.

"What did they ask?"

I took the teapot from the stove and went to the sink. I didn't want any tea, but I needed something to do and I'd seen the cook in our kitchen brew it many times before. "Just whether I'd gone to her house. What we did. When I left."

"Ah, well yeah, you're probably the last person to see her alive." He sat up straighter. "I wish you could've gotten to know her better. She was so smart and funny and a great friend." A tear dripped onto his cheek.

I hurried over and hugged him. "You liked her?"

"Well, yeah. I did." Cam looked at me. "I mean not liked, liked her, but she was the best friend a person could ever have. When we were in junior high, she got in several fights trying to protect me, even

though I could've handled it. She once told me she was like a mamma bear with her cub when it came to how she felt about me." He smiled at the memory. "I wouldn't have survived without her."

"She seemed amazing. The little bit of time I spent with her proved that." I took a bag of chamomile tea from a box and stuck it in a mug.

"Amazing is an understatement," Cam said.

"How long were you two friends?" The teapot whistled. I took it from the stove and poured water in the mug.

"Her family moved to Salem when we were in the third grade. We were in the same reading group. She was shy and always had her nose in a book. Our teacher challenged us to read the Harry Potter books. We read those books twice by summer vacation. She was a total book nerd, so we got along together perfectly. I used to say her parents moved to Salem for me because I needed her." His eyes filled with tears.

"Cam, I'm so sorry." I removed the teabag and handed the mug to him. "Here, drink this. It'll calm your nerves." At least that was what the box said.

He brought it to his nose and sniffed. "What is it?"

"Chamomile tea."

"You made me tea?"

I shrugged. It was something to do. "Yeah."

Cam squeezed my hand. "It's perfect." He took a sip. "Thank you, Jack. I'm so glad you moved to Salem. If I didn't have you, I - " An odd look twisted his features. "What do you know about those new kids, Zoe and Peter?"

"Not much." I dumped the remaining water in the sink, watching the steam rise. It warmed my face. "I've talked to them a couple of times and we ate lunch together. They seem nice."

"Hmmmm," he took another sip. "I'll bet a thousand dollars one of them is a vampire."

I felt my eyes get wide. "Really?"

"Abby was sucked dry. Definitely a vampire. Those two arrived and my best friend dies. I'm checking them out." Cam's brows scrunched together and he crossed his arms.

OceanofPDF.com

ESSENCE OF EVIL

CAM and I hung out for several more hours. After he left, I went upstairs to change into my PJ's.

Gatsby said we would talk later. He needed a way to get in, so I opened the window. Before I had a chance to open a book, he jumped into my room.

"The boy seems to be doing better. You really are a good friend, Jasmine." He hopped on my bed and curled into a ball.

"Um, thanks." I fluffed some pillows and stuffed them behind my back. Gatsby appeared to have fallen asleep. I cleared my throat. "Are you going to tell me about the demura?"

His eyes blinked open. "I suppose I should."

I crossed my legs and sat forward.

"I'm actually surprised your genie friend didn't tell you about them."

"Why is that?" I suddenly felt a little sick. Had Laeddin brought the demura to Salem?

"Well, because a demura is the essence of an evil genie." He blinked several times, waiting for that bit of news to sink in.

My heart pounded in my throat. "How can a genie be evil? Aren't they required to obey those who possess their lamp? Do they have a choice?"

Gatsby crossed his paws. "Let me start at the beginning."

I clasped my hands together and sank further into my pillows. For some reason I dreaded hearing the story. What if it put Laeddin in a bad light? As difficult as the past few days had been, I didn't want him to be evil.

Gatsby began, "More than two thousand years ago, twelve brothers

were born to the king and queen of Debania. The king, being a selfish man, realized someday he would die and have to give up his throne. As the most powerful man in his kingdom he decided to find a way to live forever.

"The kingdom had a powerful sorcerer named Jaffar. The king went to the sorcerer and asked that he grant him eternal life. The sorcerer agreed, but only if the king brought with him twelve golden lamps and his sons.

"The king promised he would. The very next day he commanded the kingdom's blacksmith's create twelve beautiful lamps. Within the year all twelve were complete. Some were encrusted with gems. Others were gilded with diamonds. All were extremely beautiful and fine. He presented them as well as his sons to the sorcerer.

"Jaffar placed a lamp in front of each son and then cursed them all to an eternity of servitude. Once the sons were captive inside their lamps, he took the king's sword and stabbed him through the heart. While he lay dying, he asked why Jaffar broke his vow. Jaffar said, 'You will live forever through your sons. They will never die and for your selfishness, they will be required to serve others eternally.'" The effort of so much talking seemed to have tired Gatsby out. He rested his head on his paws and closed its eyes. "Laeddin is one of those brothers."

I closed my eyes too and thought about the story. Did that mean Laeddin was over two thousand years old? That was kind of creepy. And while I now knew Laeddin had eleven brothers and that a sorcerer by the name of Jaffar cursed them, I still didn't know how the demura came to be.

I sat up. "Gatsby, what about the demura?"

The cat yawned, his pink tongue curling as he flashed his sharp teeth. They looked a lot like my own. "Right." He climbed onto my lap and rubbed the top of his head against my hand.

"Fine." I chuckled and scratched him.

He purred. "After a thousand years, the oldest brother began his subjugation to a peculiar creature. It changed forms as often as it breathed. The oldest brother never got a sense of what it was, but according to the laws of the genie by which he was bound, he was forced to grant the creature three wishes.

The wishes were as unusual as the creature. The first wish demanded the brother give up his body and become dark smoke. The second wish was that the brother must possess humans in order to survive. And the creature's third wish was that the genie must destroy his bottle. The wishes didn't go against the three rules, so the brother had no choice but to obey."

"What was the creature, Gatsby?" I thought about the thing that kept appearing in my dream. I don't know why. But I was afraid.

"I have my theories, but don't know for sure." Gatsby rubbed his head against my hand since I paused in petting him. "The creature disappeared, and the oldest brother became the first demura or demon mist."

I stopped. "So there's only one demura and it's Laeddin's oldest brother?"

Gatsby pawed my hand. I began petting him again. "Over the next several hundred years the same creature found and took possession of all the brothers, demanding the same three wishes from each of them. There are now eleven demura. Laeddin is the only genie left who hasn't been turned by the creature."

My heart began pounding so hard I thought it would come out of my chest. "He's in danger?"

"Yes, he has been for several decades. That's probably why he was hiding in Sharra."

"Why is the creature changing the genies?"

Gatsby closed his eyes. His purring grew louder. "Most likely because he can."

"What like a game?" Sometimes when a creature could live for so

long, it would get bored. I'd seen it time and again. That was why the great mountain in Sharra was filled with prisoners.

"Yes, exactly. If he or they are who I think they are, then they created this world and use the creatures within as their playthings." He shook his head and yawned.

"How do you know about the demura and the story of the genies?"

Gatsby chuckled. "I've been around a really, really long time. There isn't much I don't know."

"Except you don't know what's after Laeddin?"

"Not for certain, no. But I've told you more than anyone else ever could have. You should be grateful for what I've given you." He rose and walked to the edge of my bed.

"Sorry, Gatsby. I am," I said, crossing my arms.

The cat jumped off my bed.

"Don't go. I need to know how to stop the demura. What can stop them?"

Gatsby turned and sat, licking one paw. "They no longer have their lamps, which is why they must enter the bodies of humans."

I moved to the edge of the bed.

"So either we get rid of all seven billion humans - " That wasn't even a possibility. "Or?"

"I've thought a lot about this. As I said, not one hundred percent sure, but I believe if the demura had their lamps, they would return to their original form and no longer need humans to survive."

I fell back on the bed. "But the lamps were destroyed. That's impossible." Defeat sat like a bad taste in my mouth.

Gatsby jumped on my bed and then onto my stomach. He walked up so that he was looking directly into my eyes. "You're speaking with a talking cat. All sorts of impossible things become possible every day. A hundred years ago no one believed there would be a phone you could carry in your pocket, allowing you to speak to anyone from

anywhere around the world, yet the impossible has happened. Fifty years ago, supernatural creatures were found only in myths and fairytales, now there are worldwide government agencies whose sole purpose is to protect humans from us." He yowled, irritated. "Nothing is impossible, Jasmine."

I leaned on my elbows, so we were almost cat nose to vampire nose.

"Thousands of years ago Sharra had her twin sister Silindra killed. Once she was gone vampires with wings no longer walked the Earth and it was believed they never would again. Yet here you are." Gatsby blinked. "Nothing is impossible." He jumped off me, went to the window, and landed on the sill. His yellow eyes studied me. "There is one other thing - but it's complicated and may not work."

"Whatever it is, tell me." I ran over to him.

"Jaffar cursed the brothers. If he removed the curse, then everything would go back to the way it was. The brothers would no longer be genies, which means they would no longer be demura."

I fell back on my butt. "Isn't he dead? I mean, it's been two thousand years."

Gatsby shook his furry head. For a cat, he was adorable. "I've been around more than two thousand years." He studied me like I was a mouse with eight heads.

"No way." I snorted, reaching out to scratch under his head.

He batted my hand away with his paw. "You were born of seven magics with the blood of Snow and Dorian. How can you question such things? I'm quite sure Jaffar is alive."

"Okay, where do I find him?"

"I suggest you ask your genie. He should know." Gatsby jumped out the window, into the darkness. I squealed, worried for him again, but the cat was gone. Something told me Gatsby was less cat and more something else, but I didn't know what.

I closed the window and went back to bed.

"Nothing is impossible." I thought about all the different stories I learned about the creatures of Sharra over the years. I thought about the story of Envy, the unicorn who gave her life to save Silindra and my mother. I thought and thought until I fell asleep.

THAT NIGHT the shadow man visited my dreams again. This time he took me into the forest of Sharra. It was surprising that he knew of my favorite place. We seemed to walk for a long time. I let him do the talking. He spoke nonstop, but I couldn't understand what he said. At first it was frustrating, but after a while, I relaxed, focusing on our surroundings.

It was new that I wasn't in complete darkness, but I still couldn't see the person talking to me. When I arrived at a clearing, a large quilt appeared out of the air and floated to the ground.

And suddenly I understood his words. "I took her into my arms, sank my teeth into her warm neck, and drank my fill," he said.

I turned to him, trying to see him. "You're a vampire?" The question left my lips before I realized I spoke.

"Oh, Jasmine. If only you would allow yourself to see." His arms were around my waist. I knew he would kiss me, just as before, and though I didn't see him, I didn't fight him either. Instead I sank into the kiss, allowed myself to enjoy it. Since this was a dream, and it was the only romantic action in my life, I kissed him back.

After a long while, he pulled back. "That was exquisite, Jasmine."

I sighed, unable to speak. The kiss had been amazing.

A sudden movement pulled my gaze from him.

There were several bound humans lying on the quilt. Their faces twisted with fear. Cameron was one of the prisoners. His dark eyes shone bright with betrayal. To him I was a monster. Shame burned my face.

"Drink from him first," my dream lover commanded.

I screamed.

OceanofPDF.com

LATE FOR SCHOOL

LAEDDIN STILL HADN'T RETURNED when I woke the next morning. His bedroom door was open, his bed still made. I dressed in jeans and a teal t-shirt, put my hair in twin tails, and put on a pair of teal Converse. They were my mom's favorite shoes. I'd seen her closet and the sixteen pairs she kept in there. She never wore them anymore, but she still loved them. I tried a pair on once and immediately understood why. They were super comfortable.

When Laeddin took me shopping at Bloomingdales, I knew I had to have a pair. For some reason wearing them made me feel closer to my mom. I missed her. And my dad too.

When I got down to the kitchen, I opened the fridge thinking there probably wouldn't be any blood, but it was there - a full glass of the red stuff.

I drank it and then picked up my backpack. How was I going to get to school?

Finally I decided there was no helping it. I needed him.

"Laeddin," I called.

He appeared immediately. "Jasmine," he said. He sounded tired. He looked haggard.

Even though the scent of his blood immediately entered my nose and made my mouth water, I ignored it and put a hand on his back. He flinched but didn't push my hand away.

I decided to tell him what I learned. Between the two of us maybe we could figure out how to bring back his brothers' lamps. "Laeddin, I know about your - "

"You're going to be late for school." He held the door open.

We walked to the car. I tried two more times to tell him what I

knew, but he wouldn't let me finish. "I have a lot on my mind, Jasmine. Can we talk after school?"

We arrived at Salem Academy in record time. I got out. "I guess," I said. As I watched him drive away, for the first time I wasn't thinking about myself, but him. I hoped he would be okay.

Cam stood by the front door. He looked a little better than yesterday. The whole school seemed quieter, more subdued. Everyone was also dressed in black. I kind of stood out. Then I remembered that humans wore black to mourn death. Ugh. Stupid. It was too late to do anything about it though. Luckily my jeans were dark.

I went up to Cam and put an arm around his shoulders. "You hanging in there, Cam?"

"I'm - I can't go inside. Every inch of that school reminds me of Abby." He worked hard to fight back tears. His lips twitched and he kept wiping his eyes. Cam wore all black today too. Black pants. Black turtleneck. Black shoes.

"You can," I told him. "I'm here."

Some random girl walked by. She whispered to her friend. "That's the girl who was with Abby. My father said they sent Gant and Vick to question her."

They walked through the door into the school, but I could still hear and see them. The girl's friend looked back. "Did they give her the vampire test?"

"It came back negative, but I think the bloodsuckers can compel us - like that one show with the brothers - " She kept talking, but I lost track.

"Well look at her, she isn't even wearing black today. Totally cold." A girl with long blond hair gave me a once over, her features disgusted.

"You're kind of squeezing too hard, Jack." Cam tried to push my hand off his shoulder.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just upset." I relaxed my hand at my side.

"Don't let them get to you. The truth is I came to school today for you. I have a feeling there's going to be another witch hunt and you're the witch." He gave me a sad smile.

I gasped. But noticed that all of the students were looking our way. Cam was probably right.

"Great. Should I go home?"

He shook his head. "The best thing to do is stand up to them. Don't let them know they're getting to you."

"Okay." I grimaced.

Peter and Zoe came down the stairs.

"Hey Cam. We heard what happened. We're so sorry." Zoe wrapped an arm around me. Peter patted Cam on the shoulder.

"We heard you were the last to see her," Zoe said to me in a whisper.

I twisted some of my hair around a finger nervously. Cam and I gave each other a look. We'd decided to get to know more about the two of them. "I guess I was."

Cam rolled his shoulders. "Thanks guys. We'll see you at lunch?" He tried to give them a smile.

"Sure." Peter took Zoe's hand and they walked away together.

"They're so in sync. It's like one can't breathe without the other." I gave Cam a disgusted look.

He wasn't watching me but staring after Peter and Zoe. "That's when you know it's true love. Those two will still be together fifty years from now." He sniffled. "Maybe even a thousand unless we do something to stop them."

I was horrified by Cam's comment, but also had to admire Zoe and Peter. They really were in love and at such a young age. It didn't seem possible, but their love was like a living thing. Almost visible. Definitely tangible. Intense. It almost reminded me of -

No way. Impossible.

AS I SAT through Creative Writing, one thought kept creeping into my mind: The demura said it would go after those I cared about. It had known about Abby. Would it go after Cam next?

Being friends with anyone was probably a bad idea.

When class ended, I made my way to the locker room. I forgot gym clothes again, but the ones Abby found for me were still in her locker. The inside smelled like her. I sat on the bench and tried not to cry.

Sydney came in. She glared. "Did you kill her?"

"Of course not." I bit the inside of my cheek. Anger filled my veins with a desire for revenge. "Did you?"

Of course I knew she hadn't killed Abby. The demura had. But something told me she knew more than she was letting on.

She threw her hands in the air. "Whatever," she said, going over to her locker.

The other girls in the locker room were more focused on us than changing.

I went over to Sydney and forced her to look at me. "You know something. I can see it in your eyes."

A brief flicker of fear danced across her face. "No, I don't. You're a liar. Freak."

Ugh. Name-calling. It was so juvenile, yet still seemed to work even in high school.

I let her go and quickly changed. There were several sets of eyes on my back, my tattooed wings, but I didn't bother to give a crap. They could look all they wanted. I had too much to worry about.

Today the teacher just had us walk around the gym because she understood we were hurting.

I walked alone, which was fine, though I searched for Troy. He wasn't here today, and I figured he either recruited his person for the

Seven Magics Academy or felt like laying low. It didn't matter. I had a lot to think about. Gatsby said anything was possible. Internally I made a list of questions.

How do I bring back the destroyed lamps?

How do I keep Laeddin from becoming a demura? Is stopping it even possible?

How did I make sure the demura stalking me didn't go after Cam or Peter or Zoe?

It all seemed hopeless. When the bell rang, I was still no closer to finding any answers.

I took extra-long in the locker room, which meant I would be late to my next class. But I didn't care. Normal high school life wasn't working out the way I thought it would.

"Jasmine, I need to talk to you." Laeddin suddenly appeared in front of me.

I squealed and covered myself with my shirt. "What are you doing in here?" My cheeks burned hot.

Laeddin's eyes perused my undressed body.

I glared.

He turned around and I quickly put my clothes on.

"What do you want?" I asked when I was dressed.

He turned and his eyes softened. "Come on."

In the blink of an eye we were gone from the locker room and back in our living room.

OceanofPDF.com

ELEVEN BROTHERS

LAEDDIN PULLED ME INTO A HUG. "We need to talk."

The scent of his blood lit my throat on fire. Not to mention the way his skin smelled and felt. And the way he looked in his jeans and button up shirt. He was beautiful in every way.

I pushed him back. "I tried to talk to you several times this morning, but you wouldn't listen." I crossed my arms.

"I know. But there is something about me, about my family you need to know." He sighed. "It has to do with the demura."

I twisted some hair between my fingers. "Go on." I already knew thanks to Gatsby, but I'd give him a moment.

"You better sit down. It's kind of a long story." He led me over to the couch.

When we were sitting, he began, "Many years ago - "

"You mean two thousand years ago, don't you?" I crossed my arms and leaned back against the cushions.

Laeddin's brows furrowed. "How do you know?"

"Well, old man, if you would've let me talk this morning, I would've told you that I know everything."

"Everything?" He smirked.

"Well, smarty pants, I know about your eleven brothers. I know about your father and Jaffar, and the lamps, and the strange creature changing your brothers into the demura. And worst of all, I know you're next." My stomach fluttered like nervous pixilettes danced inside. I didn't know much about Laeddin, but I wanted to. And I definitely didn't want him to become a demura.

"Okay, you do know everything." His face turned serious. "Do you happen to know how to stop them?"

Before I had a chance to answer, he continued, "As soon as I realized what was happening to my brothers, I started searching for a way to change them back, but so far nothing's worked." He ran a hand through his hair.

"What about Jaffar?"

He gave me a strange look. "What about him?"

"Well, he's the one who cursed you to become a genie, right?"

"Yes." Laeddin leaned forward.

"What if you convinced him to remove the curse?" I clasped my hands between my knees, trying to remember all Gatsby had said.

He seemed to consider my words. "So your suggestion is find him - "

"It's been two thousand years. He's probably forgotten about his reasons for cursing you in the first place. I bet if you asked him to remove it from you and your brothers, he'd do it." I cleared my throat. "And if your brothers are no longer genies, they can't be demura either."

Laeddin stood. "That's not a bad idea, but I don't know - "

There was Gatsby's other idea. "Can I wish your brothers' lamps back? Undestroy them?"

Laeddin shook his head. "That sounds like a great idea, but it wouldn't work."

"Why not? All I'd have to do is say I wish - "

Laeddin placed a hand over my mouth. "Stop."

I pulled his hand away.

"You have to be careful with your wishes. If you wished that, time could reverse, or volcanoes could erupt. The world could split. Everything could change." His eyes were frightened. "Don't ever make a wish unless you talk to me about it first. Okay."

I sulked; irritated by the way he scolded me - like I was a silly child. Compared to him, I was.

He huffed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"But why would all of those things happen? It's just a simple wish."

"No, actually. It isn't. Destroying a genie's lamp, it takes the greatest of power. I'm sure my brothers had to move Heaven and Earth to obey the command of that creature. And reversing it could kill more people than we would ever hope to save."

"Okay. Okay. I get it. I'm sorry." I folded my arms.

Laeddin came forward and took my hands. "I'm sorry. I appreciate the thought." He shook them and then dropped them. His mind was obviously elsewhere, working on things he wasn't sharing with me.

"So let's go talk to Jaffar. The sooner he removes your curse the better."

Laeddin began to pace. "Give me a second." I tried to fathom what he was thinking, but I had no idea.

I picked up my phone and texted Cam. We were supposed to meet for lunch, but since I was no longer in school, I didn't want him to worry.

Hi Cam. I went home. Sorry.

He texted back immediately. Don't ever do that to me again!

Sorry, I texted back.

Will you be here tomorrow?

I thought about that. Who knew how long it would take us to find Jaffar and get him to remove the curse? And then once the curse was removed -

I slapped my forehead. If Laeddin were no longer a genie, would I remain wingless and without the seven magics? When I first made my wish, becoming wingless was what I wanted, but not forever. Just for a little while. Or, if Laeddin were no longer a genie, would my wish stop existing? Would I automatically return to the way I was? That would mean never seeing Cam again, or Peter and Zoe. Well, who knew with them. I supposed I could live with that last part as long as

they were safe.

Jack??? Answer me.

I don't know, I quickly texted back. Then added, I need to work some things out.

Okay. Keep me posted.

Will do. I felt bad, but I would feel much worse if the demura took him over. So I didn't say anything more. Instead I went back into the living room. Laeddin was no longer pacing but seated on the couch. He looked miserable.

"What's wrong?" I wasn't nearly as eager as I'd been a few minutes ago.

"I still think your idea is great. It's just - " He ran a hand through his hair.

I sat beside him on the couch. "If you're no longer a genie, will I stay as I am now, or will I go back to the way I was before?"

He became more miserable. Had he not thought about that?

"The only way for you to return to the way you were is to wish it, but that is dangerous too." He turned to face me. "Have you already tired of normal?"

I snorted. "Not much has been normal since I arrived here."

"That's true." Laeddin tilted his head, observing me kindly. "Perhaps you've gathered that normal is a relative term."

"Yes, I suppose I have." I leaned nearer to Laeddin, drawn to his scent.

"Well the easiest way to handle this would be to have you wish to return to the way you were and then once you've returned home, I can go to Jaffar and ask him to remove the curse." He stood and started to pace again.

"Actually that won't work at all." I grabbed his hand, a strong need to comfort him overwhelming me.

"Why not?" he stopped and gave a wry smile.

"Well because." I pulled him down on the couch. "What if he tells you no? Then what? The demura will still feed on humans and you'll most likely become one too."

"But it isn't your place to worry about humans. There are the chayot, the angelic guardians of the human realm." He shrugged. "As soon as they catch wind of what is happening, they will do something." He forced a smile. "Besides, the only way the creature can change me is if it becomes my master and you're my master right now."

"I know what the chayot are. My uncle used to be the leader." Of course I knew what the chayot were. Did the chayot know about the demura? If not, it might be a good idea to tell them. "Should we share what we know with the chayot?"

"Probably." He took a deep breath. "But it might not be a bad idea to make certain." Laeddin patted my hand. "Any ideas how to get a hold of them?"

I jumped to my feet and ran to the door. For the first time in days I felt a little like myself again. It surprised me that I actually missed being myself. "Yep. Come on."

OceanofPDF.com

BLANKETED FEARS

THE NIGHT AIR WAS COLD, and the sky was so clear hundreds of thousands of stars were visible. "Isn't it beautiful?" I asked, making conversation.

"Beyond comprehension."

"Ri - " I glanced at him and realized he wasn't looking at the stars but at me. "Oh." My face burned with embarrassment. I was grateful for the darkness.

His hands were clasped behind his back. He nudged my shoulder.

I nudged him back.

"So where are we going?" Laeddin asked.

He was the most relaxed I'd seen him. The dark did that to people. It washed away worries and blanketed fears.

"If anyone knows how to find the chayot leader, it's my grandfather, Professor Pops." I pointed at the large house coming into view.

"You're going to reveal yourself to him? I thought you wanted to keep it a secret. Besides, are you sure he still lives here?" He pointed at the fancy sports cars and trucks with lift kits parked in the driveway.

"He already knows. He is my English teacher at school. And he positively still lives here." We were halfway up the drive when I stopped. "He knows the chayot and can tell us how to get a hold of them. Besides," I tilted my head at Laeddin, "I don't think I have a choice."

"I guess not," Laeddin said. I could swear I saw him smile.

I climbed the steps and knocked on the large door. The thump of music could be heard from inside. I was about to knock again when

the door burst open.

"Hey," he said, smiling big. Then he saw Laeddin and his eyes narrowed in anger. "What's he doing here?"

"We need Pops' help," I said, flatly, pushing my way in. "And he's with me."

Troy's gaze flicked between the two of us a few times as though he were debating what to do. "Wait here. I'll go ask him." Troy disappeared down the hall, leaving the door ajar.

"Thanks. It's kind of urgent," I hollered after him, moving into the entryway and pulling Laeddin in too. I closed the door and waited, my nerves jangling like windchimes.

"Troy, who's at the door?" Professor Pops came into view.

"Hi Pops." I ran into his outstretched arms, burying my face in his chest. He smelled of cigar smoke and lemon tea. "This is Laeddin," I finally said. "We were wondering if we could speak with you privately for a moment."

He glanced at Laeddin and back at me before allowing his lips to curve into a grin. "Very well. Follow me." He went back the way he came.

Laeddin and I followed him through the kitchen and down the hall.

"Are you still going back to Sharra," Pops asked when he saw Troy. The guy appeared from a door just off the kitchen.

"Yes, sir." Troy pushed past us and went to the refrigerator where he grabbed a soda before slamming it shot. "See ya - Jack." He winked and went back to the entryway, probably to go up the stairs to the second floor.

"Bye." I couldn't get over how hot he was. Gorgeous.

Laeddin and I continued following my grandfather until we reached his office. Once we were inside, he closed the door. "Have a seat." He indicated two leather chairs. I took the one closest to the window.

Pops went around his desk, sat, and then steepled his fingers. "Now, how can I help you?"

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. Laeddin patted my hand, his way of encouraging me.

"Uh, where to begin - " I crossed my arms and my legs, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

"The beginning is always best." He smiled, causing the wrinkles near his eyes to crinkle.

It was strange, knowing grandfather was a vampire and seeing him in the human realm, looking very old and very human. I wondered how he made himself look that way.

Flustered, I studied my shoes, unsure where to start. Should I tell him about the genie? That seemed like the most logical beginning.

Pops gave a grandfatherly smile. "Let's see if I can help you out." He scooted forward. "Your friend here is a genie and you're here about the demura."

It felt like my mouth dropped onto the shiny black desk. "Yes."

He nodded. "Excellent. That's as I suspected."

"How did you - ? Are you - ?" I was astounded. I glanced at Laeddin who looked as surprised as I was.

Laeddin sat back in his chair.

"Sometimes I forget you're a vampire. You look so human," I added, admiring the gray in his hair and his wrinkles. I guessed magic helped him hide in the human realm.

His eyes twinkled with amusement. "You mean old." He chuckled. "That's the way I like it. I prefer the human realm over life in Sharra."

I could understand that. I'd made a wish to live in the human realm.

Professor Pops continued, "I want to live among them since I was born one, but if I were never to age, people would start to get suspicious. As it is, every fifty years or so I have to move just so

people don't begin to wonder how old I really am. If I didn't, they would become afraid without realizing why, and I don't want that."

"That makes sense."

"Good." He shuffled some papers around on his desk and then gave me a serious look. "Now why don't you tell me what's going on?"

I crossed my legs under me, glanced at Laeddin, and told him. All of it. About the cave in Sharra. Meeting Laeddin. Wishing to live like a human and go to high school. I even showed him my wing tattoo. Laeddin interjected some, giving parts of his story.

I thought about mentioning Gatsby but changed my mind at the last second. It didn't seem like Pops or Laeddin needed to know that my mom's cat could talk if he wanted to.

Professor Pops listened intently, nodding at times, seemingly absorbed in my story. His kindness encouraged me to keep going. I rested my hands on his desk, leaning closer and told him about the demura, explaining what they were and what they wanted. I added that Laeddin and I thought it might be a good idea to tell the chayot.

I finished with, "I told Laeddin if anyone knew how to reach them it was you."

"Well thank you, Jasmine. That's very kind. They do need to know." Professor Pops leaned back in his chair.

"You'll tell them, then?" I moved to the edge of my chair.

"Of course, my dear." Professor Pops swiveled in his seat and pulled a book from one of the shelves lining the bookcase behind him, setting it on the desk between us. Nodding toward the book he said, "Is this what you encountered?"

I pulled the book closer. When Laeddin leaned in to see as well, I held my breath, fighting to ignore his beckoning blood.

The book had pictures of skulls with smoke coming off them, their eyes glowed red. Human bodies bent at strange angles. The pictures definitely resembled what I'd seen happen with the man in the forest

and with Abby. Several different kinds of names were given, but demura wasn't one of them. There also wasn't any information on how they could be killed. "I think so."

"I gather you have an idea about what to do to stop these demura?" Professor Pops asked.

"Maybe," I said.

"Are you prepared for the consequences of what may happen to your brothers?" Professor Pops asked Laeddin. He seemed genuinely concerned.

I sensed the quickening of Laeddin's pulse. He swallowed. It must be so hard for him. Knowing it was his brothers doing so much damage. I felt certain if at some point they were anything like Laeddin, they would've been kind, good men. I finally understood why he hadn't wanted to show himself to me in the cave. Laeddin had been hiding, not from the world, but from the strange creature changing his brothers into monsters.

I reached out a placed my hand over his. He put his other hand over mine. "We - Laeddin and I - are going to find Jaffar and ask him to remove the curse." It made me sick to think about it. For some strange reason the idea felt wrong. Yet I couldn't decipher why or think of a better option.

"By removing the curse, the demura will no longer have the power of a genie. It stands to reason they will simply disappear." Laeddin's words were quiet and I suddenly understood something else. Something big. Something I didn't know if I was ready to deal with. If we got Jaffar to reverse the curse and Laeddin was no longer a genie, would he continue to live? As a man, he would've died long ago.

"Laeddin," I whispered, feeling an ache in my heart.

He cleared his throat. "If the sorcerer can remove the curse, whatever the consequences, it'll be worth it."

No, it wouldn't be worth it, my mind screamed. I didn't want to lose Laeddin. I didn't want to be without him.

Professor Pops pulled the book back toward him. "I will tell the chayot about your plan." His features softened. "Maybe you should let me tell your mom and dad too? Let them help?"

I shook my head. "No. I - we can do this." I gave Laeddin a quick look for verification that we could in fact do this. He bobbed his head once in agreement, so I continued. "I believe Jaffar will reverse the curse and then I can get back to normal." My shoulders turned in and I bowed my head. My wish to be normal seemed stupid, but I couldn't change how I felt. I wanted high school? Didn't I? Or was I just being stubborn? And didn't want to believe my mom and dad might have been right all along? I blew out my breath.

Professor Pops' face was grave. I figured as soon as we left, he'd tell them. I just hoped Laeddin and I could accomplish our goal before my mom and dad interfered.

"While the two of you are gone the chayot will make sure your friends are kept safe." He stood and went to his office door. Opened it.

Laeddin and I went to the door. Professor Pops clamped a hand on Laeddin's shoulder. "Take care of yourself." He turned to me. "And you, my granddaughter. If anything were to happen to you - " he trailed off. My stoic grandfather was choked up.

Seeing his emotions so close to the surface brought mine up as well.

"I will." Laeddin tried to smile.

"Please let me know when you've returned," Professor Pops said, wrapping me in a hug. "I love you, you know."

"Love you too, Pops."

Until that moment I'd never seen him be anything but calm and collected. I could tell by the strength of his embrace that he didn't want to let me go.

I hugged him tighter. Help from him and my parents probably wouldn't be so bad, but something inside wouldn't let me ask. I wanted to do this. I wanted to prove to them that I wasn't a child.

Still, I couldn't help wondering how my mom would handle the situation is she were me.

"I'll call when we are back," I said.

Laeddin and I followed Professor Pops to the front door. Someone watched us from upstairs. I glanced up and saw Troy. When he realized I caught him, he backed away. If my grandfather didn't tell my parents, Troy probably would.

"Thank you for stopping by." Professor Pops opened the door and we walked into the chilled night.

OceanofPDF.com

MAGIC CARPET

WE WALKED TOWARD THE HOUSE, but I got the sense Laeddin didn't intend to take us all the way back. "What's the plan?" I asked. The selfish part of me wanted to put off the confrontation with Jaffar for as long as possible. I didn't want to lose him just like I lost Abby.

If Jaffar even agrees, my mind whispered. And part of me didn't want him to. I kept going back to my wishes. I had two left. Couldn't I just wish the genies were no longer demura? What would happen if I did? Would all of them disappear? Did that include Laeddin? I wasn't ready to have him be gone.

Before Laeddin could answer, a golden carpet landed at our feet, shimmering in the moonlight. Laeddin stepped on and held out a hand for me.

"Are you serious?" I asked, holding my ground. Riding on something was not the same as flying with wings.

Laeddin smiled sadly. "A magic carpet is one of my favorite ways to travel."

I glanced around at the houses in our neighborhood. They weren't close together. Trees, shrubs, flowers, and great expanses of land separated one house from the next. "Won't we be seen?"

"No," he whispered. "That's part of the carpet's magic."

I hesitantly climbed on. Flying was my thing, but I hadn't ever done it without my wings.

"It's safe, don't worry." He wrapped his arms around my waist. As soon as I was on, the carpet took off. I couldn't help it, I squealed. Laeddin chuckled. "Do you want to sit?"

We zoomed up and out over the trees. In the distance were the lights of the city of Boston. The higher we went in the sky, the bigger

the moon and stars seemed to become. We were flying fast, and the wind should've whipped through my hair, but it was as calm as if we were still on the ground.

"This is crazy," I said as we flew past a tall building.

He pulled me closer. "It is," he agreed.

"So where are we going?" I leaned over the edge, watching people and cars go by.

"Back to the home of my youth. Jaffar is still there. I want to try to sneak up on him. It's highly unlikely that'll happen, but maybe he'll be asleep." Laeddin brushed a piece of my hair out of my face.

"Okay." I gulped down a knot of pain. "If this is going to take a while, I may sit." I kneeled down, pulling Laeddin down too. His aqua eyes held mine. There was so much I didn't know about him; so much I still wanted to know. "What if I wished the world and everything but us just froze?"

Laeddin sat and crossed his legs. "What would be the purpose of that wish?" he asked, gently.

"We could have more time together," I said simply.

"That's not a bad wish. It's very sweet actually." He took my hands, weaving my fingertips with his. "But then what? We'd be together in a world held frozen in time until - "

"I know." I sighed, understanding the wish was greedy and completely irrational.

"No, I'm serious. It's probably obvious I have feelings for you. I've tried to keep them in check. When you grazed me with your teeth, it took every ounce of effort I possessed not to kiss you right then and there."

I blinked. "I thought you were angry."

"I was." He gave a wry smile. "Jasmine, I'm an old, old man and I was pretending to be your parental guardian. It felt like if I gave in, I'd be taking advantage of you, of your youth and your innocence." As he

spoke, his thumb caressed the inside of one of my hands. It was distracting.

"I'm not that young and innocent," I said, trying not to sound too upset. I wasn't a child for goodness sake.

"You are, Jasmine - "

I started to interrupt but he put a finger over my lips.

"The truth is, I wouldn't mind spending several eternities with you."

"Really?" I smiled. That was the sweetest thing I ever heard.

Then Laeddin did something so completely unexpected. He leaned in and kissed me.

I didn't dare breathe, thinking he would remember that it was me he kissed, or he'd change his mind, but he didn't. His lips softened, caressing mine.

Flames of desire and need and hunger arose in me with abandon. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back with fervor.

His lips moved against mine, matching my need. Laeddin pulled me onto his lap and I wrapped my legs around him.

"Jasmine." He said my name, but I didn't know how. His lips never left mine. They demanded more. His tongue pressed my lips apart, exploring, tangling with mine.

When our lips finally parted, we both were breathing heavily.

It was my first real kiss.

"That," he began, taking my face in his hands, "was amazing."

I bit my lip, unable to speak. I wanted to do it again. But I wanted to taste him even more. I wanted his blood in my mouth, on my tongue, in my body. I wanted him.

He seemed to recognize my need.

"After," he said with a smile.

Immediately I knew he meant if we got out of this situation, if he

didn't turn to dust, and we were able to be together, he'd let me drink from him. That alone increased my determination to somehow make sure he wouldn't die.

Suddenly the world around us shimmered and we shot through a hole in the sky. The darkness seemed to open up and swallow us and then spit us out again. I closed my eyes for the briefest moment, fighting dizziness. When I opened them again, we were in a totally new land.

"We're here," Laeddin breathed.

I untangled myself from him and stood. "Where's here?" The landscape was different than the human realm and that of Sharra. The colors seemed more vibrant.

The carpet landed in a deep green meadow. Laeddin took my hand and we stepped off the carpet together.

"This is the home of my youth. Welcome to Debania."

"It's breathtaking," I said, not sure where to look first.

Green ivy covered what I guessed had been a dwelling of some kind. It had crumbled with time and age. Colorful flowers bloomed everywhere on trees, bushes, and ground cover. The air seemed to cling to my skin, like the spray of perfume. It was heavy with spicy fragrance.

I walked over to a tree and plucked a fruit. The color was reminiscent of an orange. I peeled back the skin and sniffed. "What kind of fruit is this?"

"May I?"

I handed the fruit over. He finished peeling it, separated one of the sections and popped it in his mouth. After he swallowed, he said, "It's an orange palm."

"What does it taste like?" I'd never tried human food and up until that moment hadn't ever wanted to. But the smell was amazing. I thought if I were ever to eat human food an orange palm would be

what I would want.

Laeddin smiled. It was large and full of joy. "It tastes like an orange and a pomegranate combined."

"Mmmmm," I said even though I didn't know what either tasted like.

Laeddin ate another piece as he walked forward. "That used to be the main house." He pointed at the building covered in ivy. "This was our fruit grove." He picked up the pace until he was jogging. I followed. "See there?"

"Yes." Another crumbled building was covered in more ivy.

"That was the servants' quarters. Behind that were the stables." He continued on.

I kept after him, enjoying his boyish excitement, knowing he was putting off our unavoidable meeting between Jaffar. If he did reverse the curse, it would mean Laeddin would be gone and I would be alone again.

"If we were to keep going another mile or so, we'd find an incredible cluster of waterfalls." He glanced at me and then in the direction of the falls. "Want to see them?"

I did. Terribly. It was wonderful seeing this side of him. "Are they close to where Jaffar lives?" I didn't want to bring it up, but I couldn't help myself. It was the reason we were here.

Some of the happiness left his face. "It is, actually." Laeddin took my hand. "That's why we're walking. If I don't use my magic, we will hopefully be able to sneak up on him, and maybe just maybe that surprise will be enough to convince him to reverse the curse." He said the words, but they weren't convincing. I guessed he probably already knew we were here. But Laeddin wasn't ready to face him yet and neither was I.

After a short time, it became apparent we had an audience. The creatures had dark brown fur covering their bodies. Closer to the head, the fur became the color of butter. Their faces were a robin's egg

blue in color. When the sunlight struck the blue color just right, their faces looked like skulls.

They lined the trees, covering the branches and scaring away the birds. Like soldiers standing at attention, waiting for orders.

"What are they?" I whispered.

"Skull monkeys," Laeddin responded, squeezing my hand.

"I should've guessed."

Laeddin chuckled. "They are the keepers of the land. As long as we don't do anything they deem unworthy, they won't bother us."

I wanted to ask him if he had a list of items they would consider disrespectful, but I was too nervous.

The skull monkeys' presence didn't seem to bother Laeddin at all. As we walked along some unseen path, he pointed out the different birds, insects, trees, and flowers indigenous to this part of the world. The most interesting was a black flower that was bigger than my hand. Seven large leaves made up the base and there were several smaller flowers inside, like a large black cotton ball. Its center was red as were the veins within the petals, making the flower appear to be dripping blood. "What is that one called?"

He smiled, plucked one of the flowers and put it behind my ear. The aroma was deep and luscious. "It's a frevara au regalia." He leaned in and sniffed the flower he placed in my hair. "One of our gardeners created it for the Queen. In our language, frevara au regalia literally translates to the Queen of Hearts.

"I like that." I turned so our faces were inches apart. His scent was everywhere. His eyes flickered to my lips. "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

Laeddin leaned down, his breath caressing my lips. "I have." He cupped my face in his hands.

I shivered, and raised toward him, the desire to kiss him again overwhelming. For the briefest moment I forgot everything except my

need for his lips on mine.

Until the screaming began. I gasped, my heart pounding in my throat. "What's that?"

Laeddin glanced to either side of us, stepping back. "The skull monkeys. Perhaps I shouldn't have picked the flower?" He grinned mischievously.

I looked in the trees. They moved like they were alive. "What are they doing?" I stood closer to him. "Should we be worried?"

"If you weren't a vampire and I wasn't a genie, I would say yes." He winked. "But I think we can take care of ourselves."

Laeddin grabbed my hand and ran the rest of the way to the waterfalls. When we came to a stop, neither of us was breathing heavily, but his hair was windblown, which meant mine probably was too. I didn't care though. The scenery was amazing.

"Wow." There were at least a dozen waterfalls, two of which were incredibly large while the rest were smaller. "This place is magical," I breathed.

"It is," he agreed, pulling me forward.

We continued hand in hand until we arrived at the base of the closest waterfall. Mist coated my body and wet my hair so that it hung damp in my eyes.

"Take off your shoes." As Laeddin spoke he removed his. They were loafers and just slid off. Mine were Converse and took a little more time.

When they were off, I followed Laeddin to the edge of the pool surrounding the waterfall. The ground under my feet was squishy and mud seeped between my toes.

"Hurry," he demanded, his eyes alight with joy.

I dipped one toe in and then another. It was tepid, like lukewarm bath water.

"Feels good, right?" He moved his hands along the surface of the

water, splashing me.

"I can't believe you just did that."

He splashed me again. "Believe it, Jasmine."

"You're in so much trouble." I dove in, going for his legs, determined to knock him off his feet, and soak him. But as soon as my hands touched his calves, he lifted me out of the water.

"Heyyyy," I whined, until I took a good look at his face. "What?"

He pulled me to him. "Do not say a word. No matter what. He isn't to know what you are."

"But - " That didn't make sense.

"No," Laeddin barked quietly.

"Okay," I said, hearing the worry in his voice.

He let go and moved so that he was in front of me. His hand rested on my hip, keeping me firmly in place. I slowly turned around. The "he" Laeddin mentioned was tall. His skin was slightly tinted green and he was dressed from head to toe in black. In his right hand was a long staff tipped with a deep purple orb, which gave off an eerie glow. I knew immediately he was Jaffar.

Seeing him made me realize I wasn't scared, but suddenly very sad. If Laeddin convinced him to remove the curse, what would happen to him? What would happen to me?

"Laeddin. How long has it been?" His voice was at once loud and soft, melodic and grating.

OceanofPDF.com

A WICKED DEAL

LAEDDIN FOUND my hand under the water. He took it in his. "Two thousand years, Jaffar. You look well." I felt his shoulders shrug. "You look the same."

His thin lips curled into a smile. "So do you, youngest son." As he spoke hundreds of skull monkeys appeared behind him. They sounded like a cheering crowd. Jaffar raised his bony hand and the monkeys quieted. "Who is the girl you have with you?"

Laeddin's hand tightened around mine. I knew he was telling me not to say a word, so I kept quiet.

"This is Jackie. She's my newest mistress."

"Ahhhhh, well step out from behind the genie, child. Let me have a look at you." He waved his hand and Laeddin was forcefully pushed away.

I really didn't want to look at him, so I pretended to be shy.

"There's no need to fear me or the skull monkeys. We mean you no harm." He glided along the ground as though he were floating.

I didn't respond but peered at him from under my lashes.

Jaffar squinted shrewdly. "Interesting." To Laeddin, he asked, "Why have you come back to Debania?"

"Perhaps you can allow Jackie and me to climb out of the water and we can go someplace more comfortable." Laeddin's hand found mine under the water again.

"There's no need, Laeddin." His voice became more grating. "Unless I like what you have to say, you'll pay for coming back here."

Anger simmered in my heart. The sorcerer had better not harm him.

"We've come to ask that you remove the curse. It's been two

thousand years." He raised the hand not holding mine out of the water in a pleading manner.

Jaffar began laughing, hard and sinister. Just as quickly as he began, he stopped. Snapped his fingers and the skull monkeys rushed us.

Laeddin turned and murmured to me. "They won't hurt us. Hold very still and say nothing."

I remained motionless as one of the monkeys lifted me out of the water and carried me over its head. It seemed incredibly strong. I dropped my head so that I could look behind and see what was happening to Laeddin. A skull monkey picked him up and was carrying him overhead as well.

Seeing that he was okay, I turned to see where the monkey was taking me. It walked a short distance and then stopped. I wanted to ask what was happening, but I held my tongue.

Jaffar was unexpectedly in front of me. "For your insolence I've decided to let you spend the next decade within the Caves of Vipers. If, after ten years, you've survived, I'll consider your request.

My skull monkey lifted me high above its head and I realized it was going to drop me. While Laeddin and I could easily last ten years down there, my friends didn't have that luxury. And what would my parents think if I was gone that long? They would be frantic. What would happen if they tried to come after me?

"Wait," I yelled.

The skull monkey froze. Jaffar stepped closer. "What is it? Do you wish to beg for your life?"

"If you throw us into the cave, I can just wish us free and then Laeddin will just ask again. Isn't there another way?" I hoped to reason with him.

Jaffar was standing directly above me. "You want something different than he does, don't you?"

I swallowed.

He continued, "Oh, this is wonderful. You want him. The genie has become important to you."

I lifted my chin defiantly. "So?" It was true. In my heart of hearts I wanted him to survive. That was the wish I held close. But it was so selfish.

"So, why don't you ask me what you want? Maybe I'll consider it." His robes swished as he moved.

"Is there a way to take the curse from Laeddin and his brothers without making Laeddin disappear or die?" As the words came out, I felt like a silly child.

"Did you hear that, Laeddin? The child has feelings for you." He touched my face and flinched. "You pulse with magic." He gasped. "You are a vampire." He turned me in the monkey's hands so that my back faced him. I didn't look at Laeddin. I couldn't. His fear reached out and strangled me. I couldn't see Jaffar's expression when he lifted my shirt, but I heard the sharp intake of breath. "You are an Original." He placed me on my feet. "This changes everything."

"It does," I asked, hopeful, adjusting my shirt.

"Of course." He snapped his fingers and all of the monkeys vanished. The sounds of birds and insects returned.

Laeddin took hold of my hand. "Knowing what she is changes nothing, Jaffar."

I snuck a look at him. His face was hard with resolve.

Laeddin was furious. I swallowed, ignoring the racing of my heart. He obviously had no idea how serious I was about keeping him in my life.

"Why does my being an original vampire change things, Jaffar?"

The slight grin he'd been wearing increased to a full-fledged smile. "There's something I want and only you can give it to me."

"Really?" I had no idea what that could be.

"Oh, yes. If you give me what I want, I will remove the curse from the brothers - "

I was about to interrupt him, but he held up a hand, knowing what I wanted to say. "And I'll make sure Laeddin returns to your time exactly as he is now." He peered down his straight nose. "I am a sorcerer of my word."

My heart lifted. I couldn't help it. That would solve everything. My human friends would be safe from the demura and Laeddin would still be with me.

What if he's tired of living, I asked myself. That was a possibility. But he just kissed me and told me he'd be willing to spend eternities with me. His words meant something, didn't they? I glanced at him. He wouldn't meet my gaze, but instead kept his focus on some unseen thing.

"Do we have a deal?" Jaffar stood so close I could smell him, a mixture of decay and bitter herbs.

"What do you want?" For some reason I was suddenly nervous.

"I want you to give me your wings in exchange for all that I have promised."

I gasped. "My wings?"

"Do not do it. We can find another way." Laeddin faced me, desperation now clear in his eyes. He took my chin in his hand and made me look at him. "No." His eyes softened. "Please. Don't."

I thought about what giving up my wings would truly mean. Never flying again. Never lifting into the air. Never feeling the breeze caress my body or whisper through my hair. A week ago I couldn't get rid of them fast enough. I'd wanted nothing more than a normal life. One without wings, like my mom and dad, my uncles and Cindy.

Not forever though. A hole formed in the pit of my stomach. If I gave them up, Cam and the other humans would be safe. Was it a fair trade?

"You don't know what'll happen to you if they're gone. Your wings are a part of who you are, Jasmine." Laeddin begged with his eyes, asking me to listen.

But I didn't. I pulled myself from Laeddin's grasp and faced Jaffar. "My wings are yours, after I have proof that the demura are gone and the genies are no longer cursed." My arms were at my sides, my hands in fists, and I tried to look like what I was doing was easy.

His lip curled in what I guessed was supposed to be a grin. "You have a deal."

OceanofPDF.com

DESTROY THEM ALL

LAEDDIN JUMPED FORWARD, grabbing his arm.

"She isn't from our realm, Jaffar. You can't make a deal with her. It's against the rules of magic."

Jaffar screeched, pushing him away as though he were made of paper. "I just did." He struck the ground once with his staff. A circular light shot from the ground and radiated across the land.

Laeddin fell to his knees. I watched, waiting for the tattoos around his wrists to vanish.

"Watch," Jaffar commanded. The scenery in front of me swirled like wet watercolors. And before my eyes was a new landscape. I watched a demura about to enter a body, but it suddenly stopped, glanced in my direction and then vanished. "That's one."

From behind I heard Laeddin gasp. One of his brothers had just been killed before his eyes. I wanted to go to him, hug him and tell him I was sorry. I wanted to take away his pain, but I couldn't. Not while Jaffar was there. Not while I needed to make sure all the demura were gone.

A similar scene to the first happened ten more times. With every death, Laeddin's pain grew so strong, it felt like an object I could reach out and touch. Would he be able to forgive me?

The final demura was the one in Salem. "That is Iza. He is stalking the young man. Do you see?"

The young man he mentioned was Cam. He carried a backpack and walked nervously down a trail in the forest. The demura hovered above, trailing a little way behind, like the tail of a kite. "What are you doing in the woods?" I whispered.

He seemed to hear and turned. "Jack, is that you?"

I covered my mouth.

The demura floated in front of Cam. "Can you tell me where your friend is?"

Cam tried to run backward, away from the demura, but he tripped over a tree root and fell.

The demura drew closer.

"Make it stop," I shouted.

Iza changed direction and headed my way. It didn't get far before it evaporated and disappeared just as the others had.

I sighed with relief. Cam was safe.

The swirling scenery faded, and I could no longer see Cam.

"There, you've witnessed the demura are gone."

I was afraid to look at Laeddin, but I had to verify his tattoos were removed. He told me they would vanish when we was no longer a genie. Sorrow etched his brow.

Laeddin, my mind cried, wanting nothing more than to wish his pain away.

Laeddin checked his wrists at the same time I did. The tattoos were still there.

"What about Laeddin? He still wears the mark of the genie."

Jaffar laughed. "I said I would free the brothers from the curse, but I didn't say which ones. You should be glad I reversed the curse on the eleven demura."

"That isn't what we agreed on." I stepped forward. If I had to, I would drain the sorcerer dry. Take his blood for my own and show him he was messing with the wrong girl.

"Oh, but it is, Jasmine." His eyes glowed the color of the orb on his staff. "Give me my wings, vampire." His staff struck the ground and a dark light rippled out. As soon as it reached me, it crawled up my body. Pain radiated from my back. It was as though Jaffar was tearing the wings from my back with his bare hands.

I screamed and screamed and screamed until my throat went raw. At some point I felt strong hands lift me and I wondered if it was the skull monkey preparing to throw me into the Cave of Vipers.

I didn't care. The pain radiating from my back was so intense I wanted nothing more than to die. Death would've been preferable to the agonizing ripping and clawing.

My mind swirled with shadowy creatures. They whispered and chattered. I strained to hear, but I couldn't understand.

Two shapeless shadows appeared in my mind. They dipped and swirled like dancing phantoms.

"She is close," one said.

"Yes, her end is near," the other added.

"This is better than we could've have planned."

"It's enchanting. The vampire will easily take her now."

WE WERE NO LONGER in Laeddin's realm. The scent around me changed. I knew I'd been brought back to the human realm, to the house that was my mother's. I wanted to open my eyes, talk to Laeddin, but my body wouldn't allow it.

Somehow, I was still connected to Jaffar.

I watched him fly through the night, using my wings. He was no longer clad in black but wore a blood red cape and a white shirt that contrasted sharply with my wings. He reminded me of someone, but as soon as I had the thought, it vanished.

I watched Jaffar attack a human. His eyes stared lifelessly into the night as he drained him dry. That caused my mind to reel with disbelief. Had my wings changed Jaffar into a vampire? When he finished drinking, he flew into the land of Sharra and descended on Titan's mountain.

Row after row of crypts lined the catacombs inside the mountain.

Jaffar roamed the crypts, until he found the one he wanted. Then

he opened it.

A female vampire lay inside. Jaffar tore a gash in his wrist and placed the wound over the vampire's mouth. After several moments, the vampire corpse grabbed on to Jaffar's wrist.

"Drink, Velencia. We have much work to do."

As Velencia drank another vampire entered the catacombs.

"What are you doing here? I know you served under the new Queen."

The vampire bowed low. "I've seen the error of my ways and have come to realize Snow White is not the ruler we need. It is you."

Jaffar gave her an evil grin. "Well, Ciana, that you knew I was here and who I am tells me your loyalties are at least somewhat true. I may yet have use for you."

"Thank you," Ciana said, standing upright.

My already sickened heart sank deeper into despair. I believed Ciana to be my friend, almost like a second mother.

Jaffar's dark eyes found mine, as though he could see me through the vision, our connection that strong. He hissed, allowing his fangs to show. Shocked, I tried to back away. "You've seen enough." Jaffar snapped his fingers.

My mind went numb. Life no longer glinted in a kaleidoscope of colors. There was only gray.

LOUD VOICES ERUPTED all around me. They were arguing. I wanted to make them to stop, but I was too tired.

"If we don't take her back to Sharra, she'll die." It was my dad's voice. He knew where I was. He found me! I tried to open my eyes but couldn't.

"I can't let you. She is bound to me and I cannot disobey her wish." Laeddin sounded pained, like he ached to help, but my wish demanded I stay in the human realm.

"You have to let us. You must. It's been a week since the two of you returned from Debania and nothing's changed. She hasn't moved." Mom! She and my Dad knew what I did and they knew Laeddin.

"She's waking," Laeddin whispered. "And I can't let you take her back. Jaffar didn't break the bond between Jasmine and me. Jasmine still has two wishes and I cannot be separated from her until I grant them."

"You can come back too," Mom insisted.

"No, I can't. Her first wish still holds. She must remain in the human realm until she wishes otherwise." Laeddin's voice echoed with finality.

"Ugh! Fine," my mom snapped.

"Then I must ask you not to tell her what you know. We'll find a way to help her on her terms." That was my dad's voice. They were keeping secrets from me.

"Promise you won't tell her, genie. If you care for her the way I believe you do, you will do what we say. Clearly, her wish is important, even now. Perhaps if I would've been more understanding we wouldn't be in this situation," Mom said.

"Nonsense," Dad added.

"I won't reveal anything, but she must remain in the human realm. Do what you must, but I will not remove her from this house." Laeddin's voice was tolerant, but adamant.

"Very well," Dad said. "I hope she knows just how much we love her."

OceanofPDF.com

VAMPIRE SECRETS

OceanofPDF.com

RIPPED AWAY MY WINGS

"Ms. Ryder? Are you listening?" Mr. Henry, my grandfather looked over the top of his reading glasses.

That was me. I, Jasmine, the only princess of Sharra was pretending my last name was Ryder and was sitting in history class, daydreaming.

Something I found myself doing a lot lately.

"Uh, sorry. What was the question?" As I spoke, I scrunched down in my chair.

Several students snickered.

Drake called me a freak under his breath.

My blood boiled, but I pushed it down.

A quick glance at the clock above the door confirmed history class would be over two minutes.

Two horrendously long minutes.

"Was the Civil War necessary to abolish slavery?" Mr. Henry came around his desk, removing his reading glasses and tucking them into the pocket of his tan sweater.

I would never tell him this, but the students at school called him Mr. Rogers. The description fit.

He always wore a sweater over a button down shirt and he always wore slacks with the same pair of loafers.

Personally, I thought it weird he was semi-retired from his teaching positions at Harvard and the Seven Magics Academy so he could teach high school in the human realm, but what did I know?

He was a vampire with a conscious, that was for sure.

But he didn't need the money. He just liked teaching.

"Well, let's see." I was still distracted.

Today was my first day back after being out of school for a month while my body healed after Jaffar ripped my wings away.

Cam told me this was Pops' first day back too.

I knew that, of course.

He came to visit while I was healing and told me one of his other adoptive sons, a guy named Jesse was in trouble, but didn't say why or how or what. Troy went with him.

I saw Troy at lunch and noticed a difference.

His smile was gone, and his eyes were haunted.

I wanted to ask him what happened but hadn't had the chance yet.

"Ms. Ryder?" Mr. Henry said again.

I snapped out of it. "Abolishing slavery was necessary. Equal rights for all is an intrinsic part of every human life. As for the - "

The bell rang. Thank the gods of all realms.

Mr. Henry returned to his seat. We weren't excused until he said so.

But I felt the tension in the room.

It was Friday and this was the last class of the day. Everyone had their books closed, ready to bolt as soon as Mr. Henry gave the word.

"All of you have a paper due next Wednesday on the very question I asked Ms. Ryder. If you haven't started, you better take some time this weekend. I want you to give me your honest opinion and back it up."

I heard several classmates groan.

I think I was one of them. I hadn't started my paper yet, though I had an idea about what I wanted to say.

Mr. Henry removed his glasses from his pocket again and slid them on his nose. "You are excused. Have a good weekend." He looked up and winked.

I waited for a girl I didn't know and her friend to pass by my desk. As I got out of my chair, someone hissed in my ear.

"Freak." It was Drake.

"Yeah, you said that already," I said, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

I didn't even bother to look at him.

My whole body shook with anger and some fear.

When Jaffar ripped away my wings he took so much more, including my vampire abilities.

I was exactly what I always wanted to be. I didn't need to drink blood. Couldn't even smell it. No more vampire hearing, seeing, moving, or anything else.

I was truly normal.

And it was horrifying.

Drake laughed and slapped me on the back. I jerked like he just branded me with a fiery poker. The black tattoo on my back was now red and scarred and still quite tender.

"Ms. Ryder, may I speak with you, please?"

The classroom was nearly cleared out, and I had a straight shot to my grandfather. He wasn't focused at me, but Drake and he didn't look happy. Scary was more like it.

Drake straightened, readjusted his book, and continued down the aisle. When he was at the exit, he glanced back and made the motion that I should hang myself.

"Mr. Smythe, one more like that and you'll have detention with me all week."

Drake gasped, his eyes getting big.

"What's it going to be?" Professor Pops asked.

"But you don't run detention," Drake said, trying to remain nonchalant. It wasn't working.

Slowly Professor Pops faced him. "Mr. Smythe, I'll make a special

exception for you."

"Yes sir." Drake ran from the room.

When he was gone, Pops' expression softened. "Did you want to come over for dinner tonight? I believe Troy is making his famous steak and potatoes."

At the thought of steak my mouth watered. Troy was an excellent cook - at least when it came to his steak. It was really all he made. Since becoming normal, he cooked steak for me more than once and it was delicious.

"Hmmm, sounds good." I needed to do something besides hang out at my house. "What time?"

Troy walked in with Peter and Zoe right behind him. "Actually Pops I was just coming to tell you I won't be home until late tonight. I'm going out with Peter and Zoe."

My heart immediately lifted when I saw them, especially Peter and Zoe. I wasn't sure why I responded to them the way I did, but I really liked them. They were friendly, kind-hearted, and fun.

Zoe had short red hair, a gazillion freckles and grass green eyes. Peter was tan with dark hair and eyes that almost looked black, except when the light hit them just right. Then they were like water in oil, their color shifting from one end of the rainbow to the other. They were cool and reminded me a little of my dad's eyes. I'd said as much to him one night. Peter laughed and said that was awesome.

When I became fully conscious after my deal with Jaffar, it was Peter and Zoe's faces I saw first. Laeddin said the two of them somehow knew Professor Pops. They knew about the supernatural, and they wanted to help. I guessed they must be supernatural too. Since Zoe constantly wore peppermint like I used to, I guessed she must be a vampire.

And I envied her.

But the two of them had become permanent fixtures in my house and I didn't want it any other way. I adored them even if I knew

nothing about them. In fact, even after a month of spending nearly every day with them, I still had no idea where they lived.

All I knew was they recently moved here from out of the country. It seemed super lucky they found each other. The chemistry between them was so strong, so powerful. I didn't need to have vampire powers to feel it.

"What are you guys doing?" I asked, trying not to sound sad they hadn't invited me.

Peter and Zoe gave each other a look, one that said they were having a conversation without using their mouths. Troy coughed. "Well, we're going to - "

"Why don't you take Jasmine with you?" Professor Pops said. "It might be good for her."

Zoe gasped. "I don't think that's a good idea. She hasn't completely healed yet."

Peter and Troy nodded in agreement.

"It's okay, Professor Pops. If they don't want me to go with them, I don't have to." An ache twisted my heart. It hurt not to be included. Even if I did appreciate why they didn't want me to go. I wasn't healed, but without my wings I didn't think I ever would be. I had to find a way to accept my new life.

Laeddin suggested I tell my parents, see if there was a way they could help.

Just after losing my wings and while I was still unconscious, I swore I heard my parents talking to Laeddin. Like they already knew what I was up to and all that happened. But when I brought them up, Laeddin just shrugged and mumbled something incoherent about dreaming and that maybe it was my subconscious mind working through how to tell them.

I thought that sounded like a bunch of bologna. After a week, I still couldn't bring myself to talk to my parents, and decided he was probably right. My parents would be so disappointed with my

decisions. They wouldn't understand.

"I think it would be a great idea. Tonight is supposed to be a recon mission, right?" Professor Pops removed his glasses and stood. "Nothing dangerous."

Recon? Danger? I liked the sound of both, and my heart wobbled at the possibilities.

The three of them nodded as one.

Zoe's face seemed to be getting paler by the second. Even her freckles appeared lighter. Peter shrugged like he was okay with it, and Troy? Well he just looked the way I felt, like an empty husk. I wanted to talk to him at some point.

Professor Pops cleared his throat. He began organizing and gathering the papers on his desk. "She needs to know what's going on. You can't keep if from her any longer." He eyed Peter and Zoe. Peter shuffled his feet, uncomfortable. Zoe lifted her chin. Professor Pops turned his stony glare on me. "If there's one thing I've learned over the many centuries I've been alive it's that secrets don't protect, they don't save, or shield." He shook his head. "When secrets come out, and trust me, they will, they serve only to hurt, hinder, and create bigger problems." He put his briefcase on the desk, flipped the metal clasps, and opened it. An aroma of fresh wood immediately hit my nose. It was a good smell. He tucked several stacks of papers inside before shutting the lid.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat knowing he was right. The truth was I missed my parents terribly, but I wasn't ready to face them yet. Better they didn't know where I was. When they found out all hell would break loose.

I also missed Abrea. So, so much. If I went back to Sharra and told my parents then I could see her, even if it would be briefly since they would probably ground me for life or worse, put me on troll duty.

"Fine," Zoe said. "You can come." It was obvious she didn't want me to.

I shook my head, fiddling with the frayed edges of my history book. "Really, I don't want to put you guys out. Go do whatever it is you're going to do without me. I was thinking I'd watch a movie with Laeddin tonight.

At the mention of Laeddin, Peter's features became hard. "No. We'd love to have you hang with us instead of the old man." He ground his teeth together.

I studied him, working to decipher why he didn't like Laeddin.

"Yes, we do need a fourth," Troy added.

"Excellent," Professor Pops said, moving past us, and then standing at the door, indicating we should leave. Troy got there first.

"I won't be around tomorrow or Sunday," Pops said. His steely eyes found Troy's. I watched as something I couldn't understand passed between them. "I've got a few things to do, but I'll be back Monday."

Troy's shoulders slumped. "I understand."

"Good." He grasped Troy's arm. "Can you stay behind a moment? I need to speak with you privately."

Troy ran a hand through his hair. "Sure."

"See you Monday," Pops said, excusing us with a wink.

The three of us walked down the hall. The school was mostly empty. Debris littered the floor. White poster board covered in glitter and red, white, and black paint adorned the walls, announcing the coming Winter Formal. The theme was: A Sky Full of Enchanted Stars.

Peter kicked a piece of wadded up paper and caught it in his free hand.

"How was school today?" Peter asked, tossing the paper into the trash.

"Fine," I said, shrugging. "It was nice to be out of the house." I didn't add that it sucked not having my vampire powers and wings.

"You feeling any more like yourself?" Zoe asked.

I kept my eyes on the floor, blinking a few times so that I wouldn't

cry. It meant a lot they cared. In the last week, Cameron stopped coming around.

As if he knew I was thinking about him, he appeared on the stairs from the second floor.

"Hey, Cam," I hollered.

He turned and raised a hand in greeting. Today he wore his curly black hair cropped super short, like he just got it cut. His brown eyes were sad against his handsome face, but his clothes were as fashion forward as ever. He wore pink jeans with a black button down shirt and black and pink suede shoes. "Hey, Jack." The diamond studs he wore on his ears sparkled in the light from the window as he turned back around and kept walking without stopping to talk.

"Can I catch up with you two at Pops' house later?"

"Okay. We're leaving at seven," Zoe said, her lips pursed tightly.

"I'll be there," I responded and then ran after Cam. I needed to talk to him. No time like the present to find out why he quit coming around or responding to my texts. "Cam," I hollered when he reached the bottom step. "Wait a sec."

He kept walking and my heart sank. What was up with him? Did I do something?

"Cam," I shouted again.

He stopped and whipped around. "I know it's your fault Abby's dead. Drake told me."

It felt like he slapped me. When did he start hanging out with Drake? Before I could respond, Cam took off. Two could play at that game. When he went out the front doors, I started running. I pushed open the door and paused, looking in both directions to see which way he went.

He was at the curb and getting into a suped-up red and black Camaro. Just before he slammed the door, his eyes met mine. They were angry but mostly sad.

"Ugh," I shouted, as he drove away, pounding my fists against my thighs and stomping one booted foot.

"Hey, freak. What'd those jeans ever do to you?" Drake snickered as he and his friend sauntered over.

I tried to push past them down the steps, but Drake grabbed the edge of my tee shirt and held on. My history book fell, spilling papers everywhere.

"Don't walk away from me, freak. Didn't your parents teach you that's rude?" His eyes glittered with anger.

I gulped down my fear. There was no one around, no one to help, and I no longer had my vampire strength. "What do you want?" I asked through clenched teeth, trying not to let the fact that I was scared show.

He sneered. "What do we want from the freak, Sam?"

The guy with him ran his hands down the front of my shirt, grabbing the loops of my jeans. "I think the freak should keep us company. She may be weird, but she's got a kick ass body."

Drake huffed. "Interesting." He seemed to be debating. "Go get your car and pull it around while I stay here with her."

"Sure thing, man." Sam went down the steps and took a left toward the student parking lot. When he was out of sight, Drake gave me a once over.

"I know what you are. You're disgusting and shouldn't be in this realm." Spit from his mouth hit my cheek while he spoke.

I wiped it away. "What do you mean?" I asked, even though I somehow knew he knew what I was. Even though it was impossible. And at the moment, I wasn't supernatural, but just like him.

He wrapped my tee shirt around his fist, pulling me closer. "I know you're a vampire. I can smell it on you."

That surprised me. "Like right now you can?" I didn't have my powers anymore, but maybe there were still there or something.

"Yes, you reek."

I don't know why but knowing that he knew made me happy. "Really? So what are you, then?"

His face got close to mine and I could smell his breath. It was a gross mixture of Mountain Dew and something else. I wasn't sure what. "I'm a chayot, Jack. Ever heard of us?"

I gasped. "Whoa. My uncle Gabe used to be the leader of the chayot."

"You know Gabe?" He leaned back a little shocked.

I shrugged. "We aren't close. He lives in a different realm now, but yeah, like I said, he's my uncle."

Drake snorted. "Your uncle is an idiot. Anyone who would give up leadership of the chayot and turn away from his calling deserves eternal - "

He was interrupted by the appearance of an elfin woman. I felt my heart lurch at seeing her. In the human realm. That was dangerous.

Midnight blue smoke swirled around her momentarily and then dissipated. She had blue-gray skin, ebony eyes, and long straight navy blue hair. Her clothes were steel leather. Black leather straps crisscrossed between her breasts, supporting what I guessed was a double sword harness from the look of the two sword handles that poked out behind either side of her head.

"Where did you come from?" Drake yelped. Even I heard the revulsion in his voice.

"The elven realm," she said, stepping forward so that she and Drake were toe to toe. She was as tall as he was, nearly six feet. Drake moved back, but she took hold of the front of his shirt, giving him a vicious glare. "You are chayot though not a good one. Evil flows through your veins." She inhaled deeply through her nose; her eyes narrowed into two slits. "I can see it."

Drake's mouth gaped open like a broken breadbox. "I don't - " His

face began to turn red. It looked like she was suffocating him. Yeah, I wasn't a fan of Drake, but I didn't want him to die.

"Hey. Stop. You're hurting him." I grabbed her hand. But as soon as I touched it, a vision filled my mind. One where the world was covered in darkness and the only light came from one woman. She was a vampire. Beautiful. Cruel. Not at all like my mom, Snow White, the Vampire Queen. And worst of all, she had my wings. I screamed.

The elf turned momentarily my direction. "You. What a waste." She gave me a once over and clucked her tongue. "You'll be taken care of soon enough." She twisted my hand off hers and flung me away. I landed on the ground at the bottom of the stairs and the concrete dug into my already tender back.

Facing Drake she said, "The Mistress will enjoy feeding from your essence and turning you into one of her subjects." Drake's body went slack and crumpled like a puppet without strings.

"What have you done?" I stood on wobbly legs. My back felt wet, like it was bleeding. It was a sensation I wasn't used to. Physical pain was still new to me.

She turned back and smiled. "Don't worry, Jasmine. The Mistress has plans for you as well."

Drake's body seemed to disintegrate right before my eyes.

"He's gone to the Mistress. You'll see him again. Without question. And he'll be better than ever." She vanished the same way she came, with a whoosh.

I stumbled back, hitting the stair rail. Pain blasted through my body again, but I barely felt it. Shock over watching Drake die and turn to nothingness overwhelmed all my senses. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to gather my strength. Ever since Jaffar took my wings I felt like a waste of space.

"Hey, Jasmine. You alright?"

Without seeing him I knew it was Laeddin. A slight wind blew his scent toward me. I didn't crave his blood anymore, but he had a

particular aroma - exotic spices and oranges - that was mouth-watering. I took another deep breath. "Yeah, I'm fine." I opened my eyes, drinking him in.

Laeddin was gorgeousness personified. His dark, slightly too long hair and aquamarine eyes against tan skin and a muscled body were like a digital painting.

Each of his wrists was tattooed in black tribal cuffs. To the general population the tattoos didn't say much, except maybe he'd gone through a rebellious phase. But to those who understood the supernatural world, the marks declared Laeddin was a genie.

Laeddin didn't wear the normal attire for a genie. He had on a faded pair of jeans and red tee shirt, the kind that cost six hundred bucks a piece. Behind him was his white Mercedes convertible. The top was still down due to the unseasonably warm weather we were having.

As Laeddin said many times, I was his master. I saved him from the same fate as his brothers, becoming a demura and then disappearing into the ether. But I hadn't freed him, and every time I saw his tattoos I was reminded of my failure. I meant to free him, but Jaffar played me. Laeddin and I couldn't be together while I was his master and he was my servant. At least that was what he said. It made sense. Really, I didn't know whether I wanted to be with him or not. He was over two thousand years old, though he didn't look a day over twenty. But we'd kissed and it was beyond memorable. Like sparks and heat.

"You sure?" He came forward and picked up my book and scattered papers. I debated telling him about the vision that had filled my mind when I touched the elf.

"Yeah." I tried to stand but fell back.

Laeddin dropped my books and ran over. "You are not fine, Princess." He put an arm around my waist, and I flinched. "What the jinn?" He touched my back. "Your shirt is soaked with blood." He helped me stand.

"Thanks," I whispered.

"Come on. Let's get you home." His breath brushed against my cheek. It was like a sultry night cruising through the sky on his magic carpet.

I leaned into him. "Sounds good."

He picked up my book and papers and then helped me into his car. When I was buckled, he started the engine and drove away.

I tried to get comfortable, but when my shirt caught against my back I cried out. Laeddin sped up, pushing the car to get home faster. I closed my eyes and imagined I was flying with Abrea. We chased a flock of blackbirds, diving through clouds and spinning through trees. Leaves whipped against my cheek. I felt the sting and my eyes watered. As we cruised along the babbling stream of Sharra, I stuck my hand in, allowing the cool water to tickle my fingers.

"We're here," Laeddin said softly. He turned off the engine. I opened my eyes and sighed. In reality there was no Abrea. No wings. No flying.

Ever.

Again.

A sob ripped from my throat.

Laeddin came around and helped me out of the car.

"Can't I wish the pain away? Or wish my wings back?" I pleaded with my eyes and my heart.

His arm brushed against my back. "Not without serious consequences."

"Well maybe I don't care about the consequences," I said, frustrated.

Laeddin let out a ragged breath. "I told you not to do it." He shut the car door and walked up to the house.

I froze. It occurred to me what I said. When I traded my wings away, it'd been to protect Laeddin. I hadn't wanted him to disappear

like his brothers. Sure, they were no longer demura, but they no longer existed either - at least not in this realm. Jaffar agreed to keep Laeddin just as he was if I agreed to give him my wings. "Crap," I hissed, following him inside.

I found him at a cupboard in the kitchen. "I'm sorry, Laeddin. I didn't mean it," I said, falling onto a kitchen stool, letting my head smack against the counter.

"Yes, you did. And that's okay. I've been alive a long time. Lived my life. You shouldn't have agreed to Jaffar's deal." I heard him set something on the counter and looked up. It was a plastic tote full of bandages, ointment, creams, sprays, and other items I didn't know how to use.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, eyeing the tote nervously. While I never saw him use any of that stuff, my body flinched. Pain was in my future.

Laeddin set a can of something labeled antiseptic on the counter and went to the sink where he washed his hands with hand soap. Then he took a washcloth from a drawer next to the sink and turned the water all the way to hot. "We need to take care of your back before infection sets in." After a few moments, steam rose upward into his face, making his dark hair curl at the ends. I watched, fascinated. Once he was happy with the temperature, he got the washcloth wet, turned off the water, and wrung out the cloth. "This is going to hurt, but I need to clean out your injury and take a look at it."

I nodded, too scared to say anything.

"Take off your shirt," he said when he stood behind me.

It was crazy, but my face got hot. To cover up my embarrassment, I quickly pulled off the shirt.

"Unhook your bra. I would, but my hands are clean, and I want to keep them that way." His voice was tender.

My face burned. I reached back and unhooked it, hissing in pain as my bra released. I heard his breath suck in and had a thought. "Can't

you just, you know, make it better with your genie magic?"

"I could," he began, "but if I healed your back with my magic without cleaning everything out first, I might seal in some kind of infection, or worse."

"Sure, but if that happened couldn't you just use your magic to fix that too." I thought about my magic. Since I was created by magic, surely my mom could have healed me. I could have too, if I had my wings. Using my wish to make my wings disappear took my magic. Jaffar ripping my wings out of me took all my vampire abilities.

"My magic isn't like yours. It doesn't come from the source. It came from Jaffar. So, while it's powerful, it's also deceptive, which was Jaffar's intention, I'm sure. The power I possess takes a wish literally and performs it exactly."

That made sense. "Okay." My body trembled, my nerve endings responding to the anticipation of the hurt I would feel. "I'm just not used to pain."

"I know, Princess, and I'm sorry." He pressed the washcloth gently against my back.

I let out a scream, my body intuitively trying to shrink away from the pain.

"Hang on," he said, his voice soothing.

I gritted my teeth. My instincts raged, demanding I turn around and end the genie because doing so would end the pain. But I held still. After a moment he started to pat at the open wounds and a whole new set of pain seeped through my body. I started to pant. "Please. Stop," I begged.

"Almost finished. Be strong," Laeddin murmured.

I slammed my hands into fists, watching them turn white as the blood left the area. I focused on them until Laeddin removed the cloth.

"There, I think I got it all." He tossed the bloody cloth into the

sink's stainless steel basin. Then he picked up the antiseptic.

I couldn't take any more pain. I felt weak like I just ran ten miles. "Please," I said, my voice hoarse. "No more."

He touched my shoulder and I flinched. "I'm going to spray this on your back and then I'll feel comfortable using my magic to heal the rest. Okay?"

I clamped my teeth together more tightly as well as my fists. Nodded.

The spray was icy cold against my skin, but it didn't hurt. I felt muscles I hadn't realized were flexed begin to relax. When he finished, he set the can on the counter next to me.

"This next part shouldn't hurt at all, Princess."

"Good," I responded, allowing my jaw to loosen, ignoring his obnoxious need to call me Princess. It was my birthright, but it wasn't me.

I waited a few seconds, anticipating more pain. Instead warmth crept over my skin and my body responded like a flower opening for the morning sun. Relief swept over me. "That's better," I said, leaning my forehead against my fists.

"It's working," Laeddin replied. "Almost done."

I relaxed further, feeling like I could fall asleep where I sat. Images of my childhood fluttered across my mind. Of the day my dad and I went fishing in Peony Lake. Then my mind drifted again - to nothing.

"What the hell is going on?"

I sat up with a snap, knocking my head into something behind me.

There was a noise.

I turned toward the voice. It was Peter. He looked angry, like furious.

"Laeddin was healing my back," I said, mortification causing my cheeks to burn again. All that covered my breasts was the front of my dangling navy and hot pink polka-dot bra.

Zoe's eyes narrowed.

I bit my lip, quickly grabbed my shirt and tried to cover up. My face got so hot it felt like a furnace.

OceanofPDF.com

ACTUALLY HUMAN

"REALLY?" Peter said, putting his hands on his hips. He came closer, studying my back. "It looks about the same." He sounded accusing, not that it was any of his freaking business.

But I felt like I should explain. "I had a run in with Drake and an elfish woman. The wound reopened." I showed them the blood on my shirt. Tears pricked my eyes and before I knew it, I hopped off the stool, ran up the stairs and tossed myself across my bed. Yeah, not my finest moment.

I lay there with my arms tucked under my body, still clutching my bloody shirt, and forced myself not to cry. Sometimes, when I was super emotional, if I cried, my tears would be red, like blood. But since Jaffar stole my wings, I'd become so close to human it was scary. Perhaps I was actually human. I knew I was no longer me - a vampire created from the seven magics and the blood of my parents - that was for sure. I was a shadow. A shell. A husk.

The worst part about the feelings was that I was now exactly what I believed I wanted. A normal teenaged girl. Yet, I hated it. I wanted to rip off my skin. Shake myself from the body that no longer felt like it belonged to me. Tears pressed against my eyes and I let them come.

Screw it, I thought.

When the wetness fell against my comforter, I was saddened to see they weren't red. And that made me cry harder.

"Jasmine, we need to talk." The voice belonged to the cat, Gatsby. He'd been my mom's cat although she never mentioned he could talk. I don't think he talked to her, but when he was around me, he was quite chatty. Since I lost my wings, Gatsby hadn't come around again. Until that moment I thought he'd found himself a new home, especially since I never fed him.

"About what?" I asked, sniffling.

"The impending darkness. The Akuma. The woman who robbed you of your wings. Shall I go on?" The gray short-haired cat jumped on the bed and sat on my pillow.

I was surprised he knew so much, but he got the last part wrong. "It wasn't a woman, but a man. Jaffar."

"In Debania, the genie's realm, she wore a different body, but she's always been the same." The cat snorted. "Jaffar was and is Sharra, the old queen, and the vampire your mother took the crown from."

"How do you know all of this?" I sniffled, wiping my nose on my shirt.

"I told you I've been around a long time." Gatsby started licking one of his paws.

"Jaffar is Sharra. That's what you're telling me?" My heart pounded so hard I thought it might break bones. "But my mom - "

"She didn't kill Sharra, only wounded her deeply. In the last seventeen plus years, Sharra has been biding her time, waiting for the moment she could have what she always wanted."

"But my mom said Sharra didn't like the wings." My mom had told me about Sharra, of course. Plus, we learned about her in classes at the Seven Magics Academy. In a lot of ways, she was a legend. But we thought she died.

The cat blinked several times and I wondered if he suddenly went mute. He lay down so we were nose to nose. "Sharra preferred human bodies over her original. She didn't like that she looked more like the apes as a vampire. 'Humans were much prettier,' she said more than once. Giving up her wings in exchange for a human body was a tradeoff she accepted, but secretly she always missed them." Gatsby licked his nose and yawned, and I smelled kitty breath.

I pushed myself onto my knees and then sat. "You knew her?" I wiped my face with the sleeve of my shirt.

"First of all - " he paused, his head tilting. "You're about to have company. I'll come back later." He jumped off my bed and was out the window in seconds.

"Hey, Jack," Zoe said, knocking on my door. I wondered what Laeddin told them about the elf and Drake, about how I watched another person die.

I whimpered. "Go away." My mind was reeling with what Gatsby said. I needed to tell Laeddin and I might even need to tell my mom and dad. This was serious.

"Okay, I will. But - " The handle turned and she peeked in. "Hi," she said, smiling sheepishly.

"Hi," I replied.

"May I touch your scars?" she asked, entering my room and sitting on the edge of the bed.

That was a weird request, but I shouldn't have been surprised. When my wing outline had looked like a large black tattoo, everyone wanted to touch that too. Why should ugly, red scars in the same shape be any different?

"I guess."

There was the tiniest touch as Zoe traced a finger along the scars. "Laeddin told us what happened today. Well, the part he saw. About Drake. And the female."

I swallowed, desperate not to talk about it. None of it. I didn't like Drake, but I felt bad for him and for those who loved him. He was a chayot and I wondered what sort of help or repercussions would ensue become of his death. I realized I should probably tell Pops what happened. The chayot would want to know about Drake and the elf, too.

But as Zoe outlined my scars, I forced myself to relax, if only for a moment. The scars should've disgusted her. That was how I felt. I tried not to look at them if I could help it. In fact I saw the winged scars all of twice in the last several weeks. But as Zoe's finger skimmed across

the thickened skin, I felt lighter. The dull pain that constantly plagued my back regardless of Laeddin's magic lessened. And my energy came back in full. I felt better. Stronger. I knew it wouldn't last, but for the briefest moment it felt like my wings had returned. Was she using magic?

I glanced at Zoe, wanting to thank her. I didn't know what she was doing with her finger, but l liked it. I appreciated it. She looked so sad though.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," she whispered. I wasn't sure if she meant the thing with Drake or was talking about me losing my wings, but I chose to believe she meant the latter.

"It isn't your fault. It's mine." I didn't want her to stop, but I needed a shower before I went with her, Peter, and Troy to do whatever we were going to do tonight. Pressing my shirt more tightly against my chest, I climbed off the bed and walked to the bathroom. "Did you still want me to go with you guys?" I asked hesitantly.

"Of course." She stood. "When you've finished showering, come down. We'll be waiting. I texted Troy to meet here instead of his house." At the door to my bedroom she paused and looked around. "I love what you've done with the space."

Before I could respond she closed the door. "Thanks," I whispered anyway.

In the bathroom, I turned on the water, undressing while I waited for the water to warm. For reasons I couldn't explain I turned my back toward the mirror, a sudden need to see the scarred whisper of the grandness that used to be my wings.

Just as before, they were raw and red. The scars looked fresh, like the wound just closed. Certain areas were swollen and puffy. But most of the pain was gone. So there was that, at least.

I quickly showered.

When I was finished, I rubbed the towel through my hair, especially at the roots, and then went to my dresser. I put on matching

bra, undies, and socks in boring gray. I opened my closet doors to dress but stopped. I had no idea what we were doing. Professor Pops mentioned recon, so I figured it wasn't going to be anything fancy. It was warmer than usual outside during the day, but at night the temperature dropped a great deal. Making a quick decision, I chose a pair of loose jeans and a gray pullover sweatshirt. Then put on my favorite combat boots.

I decided against any jewelry, but still needed to work on my face and hair. I went into the bathroom, put some tinted lotion on my face followed by a quick brush of powder, and then lined my eyelids with black liner. I was about to apply some sparkling taupe gloss when I realized I hadn't brushed my teeth since that morning. So I quickly did that, applied gloss and a thick coat of mascara to my lashes. Finished with my face, I put a large dollop of mousse in my long wet hair and rubbed it in. Then I turned on the blow dryer and scrunched my hair with my hand while putting warm heat on it. The effect was messy, wavy black curls. As a final touch I took a comb and worked out any pieces that were too tangled and sprayed it with hair spray.

In the full-length mirror I turned back and forth, checking my reflection. I looked alright.

Grabbing my phone, I tucked it into my back pocket. At my dresser, I opened the fake gold genie lamp and took a twenty from inside, sprayed some of my favorite Tory Burch perfume on my neck and wrists and then opened my bedroom door.

In the hallway, I heard arguing. It was low, as though they were trying to keep what they were saying from me. Laeddin also had the TV on, which he hardly ever did. Something serious was up.

At the top of the stairs, I strained to listen.

"You are way too old for her." That was Peter. I guessed his words were aimed at Laeddin and that they were about me. It bugged me that he thought it was his place to decide who I should like, regardless of the age. We hardly knew each other.

Laeddin responded, but I didn't hear what he said.

Zoe's soft voice added, "We just want what's best for her."

Laeddin mumbled something else. I nearly shouted with frustration. With every fiber of my being I wanted to know what he was saying. Since Laeddin brought me back from his realm, there was a strange rift between us. We were cordial to each other, almost overly so, but we weren't intimate. Not like we'd been when he first took me to his realm. He'd kissed me for goodness sake. And it wasn't a sweet, chaste kiss either. It was deep, sensual, and passionate. A kiss to end all kisses.

I believed we'd moved to the next level. That maybe we might actually date, hold hands, something. But we hadn't done any of it. We talked over breakfast. He drove me to school. Occasionally we turned on a movie we both wanted to watch, but there wasn't any romance. There'd been zilch. It was like we went backward. Definitely not forward.

"Maybe she should come and live with us."

"I don't think so," Laeddin hissed.

"You can't control her, genie." Peter again.

"Of course not," Laeddin snapped. "She controls me, and I know her wish as do you."

I figured it was time to get down there and rescue Laeddin. Placing a large, fake smile on my face, I bounced down the stairs. "K, I'm ready," I said in a high singsong voice that sounded nothing like me.

Peter and Zoe looked up. Peter put a hand on Zoe's shoulder and squeezed. Their expressions were pinched.

Laeddin looked tired. "I don't like this," he said.

"I'll be fine." I stood next to him, pulled on his shoulder so that he was forced to bend down and kissed him on the cheek. "And thank you for taking care of my back earlier. It feels much better."

He bowed. "You're welcome."

Flustered by his actions, I turned to Peter and Zoe. "So what are we doing?" I wanted to change the subject. Get them to stop talking to Laeddin about me, about stuff that was none of their business.

Zoe's brows creased together.

Peter cleared his throat. "There's been some bizarre, um, activities happening around Salem since - " He pointed at me. I was surprised. It didn't feel right to have him be so tongue-tied.

I rested a hand on the counter, a vine of fear winding through my stomach. "Just spit it out, Peter." I said the words because I wanted to know, but I was also anxious about what he would say. Bizarre activities? What did that mean?

Zoe spoke up. "The first night you came back without your wings was when the first demonic creature appeared."

"Demonic creature?" I asked, even though I heard her right. I was repeating everything to hide the fact that I was freaked out. They were talking nonsense and I wasn't expecting it.

"We've learned the creatures are Akuma," Peter chimed in, crossing his arms.

"A-coo-ma," I said, wrapping my mouth around the odd word.

"That's right. Professor Pops spoke with his friend Kenmei and found out the word is Japanese for demon," Zoe added, shifting from one leg to the other.

"We have no idea who they're working for or what they want, but it seems they might be here because of you." Peter's voice wasn't accusatory, but his words sure felt like it.

"Because of me?" I wasn't surprised not after what Gatsby told me. And I remembered what the elfin woman said. "When Drake was being a jerk, the elf said that Drake was a bad chayot and that - "

"Hold up, Drake was a chayot?" Peter asked. He looked stunned.

"Yeah, the elf said evil flowed through his veins. She also said that she was sending Drake to 'the Mistress' and that he would return,

better than ever." As I spoke, the dread that had begun infesting my stomach reached up through my ribs. It tangled between each bone, taking hold and squeezing.

"Did she say who the Mistress was?" Zoe moved closer, her eyes focused keenly on me.

"No, but I - " I paused. If I told them about Sharra, they would want to know where I heard such things. Then I would have to explain Gatsby, the talking cat. They might think me crazy.

"What?" Zoe peered at me, her eyes kind but also worried.

"Nothing. Never mind."

"And she just appeared in the front of the school?" Zoe asked, her head tilting in question as she took my hand in hers. I felt the warmth, the magic. But more than that, I felt familiarity. For not the first time I questioned not only who she was but also what she was.

"Yes, she did," I finally said.

"What about her name? Did she tell you her name?" Peter interjected.

"No," I said, wishing I could be more help, but I didn't know how to share my information yet. Plus, it stung to know the Akuma were in Salem because of me. If the government found out, this town would go from peaceful to unpredictable. "She did say I would be taken care of soon enough."

"Anything else?" Laeddin took my hand and curled it in his.

I wanted to melt, to fall into his arms, lean my face upward and feel his lips on mine. I wanted -

"Jasmine? Did the elf say anything else?" His words snapped me back to reality.

"Oh, gosh." I stepped back, feeling my face flame up at the thoughts I just had. "No. That's it." I turned away, going into the living room, focusing on the TV. The news was on. There was a picture of the sky and then numbers. I tuned out Laeddin, Peter and Zoe, and

focused on the newscaster.

"Let me preface this by saying that there is no need to panic. The President is scheduled to confirm this later tonight, and he has assured us there is nothing to fear." The newscaster was almost too handsome, too perfect. He smiled into the camera. Perhaps to settle down the millions of people he just told not to panic. Even my heart was racing.

The newscaster continued, "Scientists are puzzled by the extraordinary phenomena that began occurring nearly five weeks ago."

That was right after Jaffar took my wings.

He was still talking, "It has been confirmed that Earth is losing five extra minutes of light per day. Scientists predict that at this rate darkness will completely consume the planet in one hundred and eleven days." He took a long pause, obviously for effect, to let it sink in. That was crazy. In less than four months Earth could be completely dark?

"They know it isn't the moon or a planet blocking the sun's light. Scientists have ruled out meteors, a dead star, or any other space singularities. Satellite data has also confirmed that the Earth, Sun, Moon, and surrounding planets are orbiting normally, that it's business as usual. As far as they can tell nothing from space is causing the darkness.

"For now they've turned their efforts inward, focusing on Earth itself. So far testing hasn't revealed anything unusual.

"At this time what they know for sure is that the sun is still putting off as much heat as ever. Usually with the dark comes cooler temperatures, but that hasn't been the case. In fact Boston and surrounding areas have been having an unseasonably warm winter.

"There is talk the darkness could be supernatural in nature. The chayot are working closely with government officials around the globe to solve the problem.

"That's all we have to report at the moment but stay tuned to KBTV

for all the latest updates."

A commercial came on.

"Sweet unicorn blood. Hey, did you guys hear that?" I turned and saw Laeddin, Peter, and Zoe were directly behind me. "What does it mean?" I had a feeling I knew what it meant.

Zoe's face turned white as a newly bleached sheet. "I have to get back." She shimmered and vanished.

I gasped. "Where'd she go?" It took powerful magic to just vanish out of thin air.

"Back to Sharra," Peter said, slumping onto the couch.

"Sharra?" I sat next to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "What do you mean?" Even as I asked, I knew. The reason Zoe's touch felt so familiar, the reason I had such a connection with Peter and Zoe was that somehow Peter and Zoe were actually my mom and dad. Snow and Dorian. "I can't believe it." I shook my head as anger and discouragement and even embarrassment overwhelmed me. "Dad, you tricked me? Deceived me?"

Disappointment stuck in my throat like too much bread. I went to the front door and yanked it open. I couldn't believe they thought it a good idea to turn themselves into teenaged kids and meddle in my life! It was the most awful thing parents could ever do. It was weird enough to think they were even teenagers in the first place, but going through it again so they could spy on me?

"I need to go for a walk."

Peter stood and looked ready to say something.

Laeddin moved like he intended to go with me.

I put a hand up. "By myself. Alone. Do not follow me!"

OceanofPDF.com

TROY IN A TREE

DARKNESS ENVELOPED me and I calmed a little. As a vampire, I loved the dark. When I reached the end of the drive, I debated whether to go left or right. Right meant I would head toward Pops' house. There wasn't any place else to go after that.

Left meant I could walk around the neighborhood. That was what I needed. But I couldn't make my legs move that way. My heart kept urging me to go right. I wanted to see Professor Pops. Maybe even Troy. They were good friends.

"Hey."

My heart jumped. The voice came from above. I looked up and saw Troy sitting on one of the larger tree branches quite high up, his legs dangling over the edge.

"Hey yourself," I returned, clasping one hand over my heart. "How did you - " Before I could finish, he jumped. I was momentarily frightened for him, until he landed with a thud on both feet, crouching slightly. There was a huge smirk on his face.

"I'll bet you ten bucks and a ride on my back that you need some time alone with me." He straightened. I had to tilt my head to see his face.

I snorted. "A ride on your back, huh? Sounds lame." I took a couple of steps down the sidewalk to the left. It took a lot of effort. I didn't want to walk away. Honestly, I hoped he stopped me. Yeah, I was playing games. Total teenager thing to do.

"Jack, you have no idea."

I stopped. "Like a piggy-back ride?" I asked, curious about why he would suggest a ride on his back.

He shrugged. "I guess that could be fun, but I was thinking more

along the lines of a dragon-back ride." He winked, his eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

It was then I realized I hadn't known what kind of supernatural Troy was. Too much had been going on. All of it revolving around me. Gah! "You're a dragon?" I asked, not bothering to hide my shock. Of all the creatures I imagined that wasn't one of them.

"Correct." He took several steps into the darkness near the tree trunk. "Wait here a moment," he whispered.

I did, excited about the prospect of flying.

Flying.

Oh. My. Goodness. I was going to get to fly again. My heart sped up and I squinted, hoping I could watch him shift. The ground shook and a surge of hot wind struck my cheek. His shadow became enormous, his eyes like twin flashlights.

"Come here," Troy said.

"O-Okay." I was nervous. I'd never seen a real live dragon before. Mom told me of riding on Abernathy, but it wasn't the same as seeing one in real life. I moved toward him and let him step closer as well.

From out of the shadow came a gloriously large dragon. I was surprised. Pleasantly surprised. "You're awesome," I said, carefully stepping closer. His wings beat the air, causing leaves that should've fallen long ago to swirl about us. Some landed in my hair and I brushed them out.

Troy shook his head too, sending a few stray leaves to their doom. A puff of smoke curled from his nose. "Thanks."

"Can I touch you?" I reached out a hand curiously, wanting to know what his scales felt like, whether they were cold or warm, smooth or rough.

He responded with s quick snap of his sharp teeth. I screamed, pulling my hand back like he'd actually bitten me.

Troy laughed. "Sorry. Dragon humor. It won't happen again."

I smiled. "Funny." In the dark it was impossible to tell what color his scales were. They looked black, as did his eyes and his wings. Troy lay down, curling his tail around his body. "Climb on."

I stepped toward him and then stopped. "Um, how? I don't want to hurt you."

He chuckled. "Unless you're a lot heavier than you look, I'll be fine." He flicked his tail slightly. "You can use my tail as a stepstool."

"Okay." I carefully stepped up and then lifted myself onto his back. His scales were smooth and warm, but not hot. Only a few degrees hotter than my body temperature. When I was all the way on, I situated my knees so that they were around his neck, out of the way of his wings. I looked for a place to hold on and placed my hands under two of his scales. "Aren't you afraid that you'll be spotted? Like on satellites and stuff?"

Troy stepped out from the trees' shadow and then leapt into the air. I yelped at the sudden rush. Held on tight. I didn't want to fall off.

"To answer your question, no, I don't worry about satellites. Magic surrounds my dragon form and magic trumps human science any day." He beat his wings in one giant motion, heading higher and higher. The air became thinner and colder. It was a sensation I wasn't accustomed to. As a vampire I hadn't experience extreme temperatures. I was feeling it now though. I clamped my mouth shut, not wanting Troy to hear my teeth chattering.

It looked like we were going to fly to the moon. Troy opened his wings wide and the moonlight allowed me to see that Troy's dragon scales were bronze, like the color of a new penny. His wings were light copper, and the tips were silver. He'd been awesome in the dark, but in the light? His tail meandered behind him like a giant snake and his wings, like those of a giant bat, beat against the night air. He was amazing.

A giggle snuck out of me. It was the happiest I'd been in more than a month.

"Ready to have some fun?" Troy's head whipped around so I could see one eye. He winked.

"Sure. If you think you can have fun," I said in mock sarcasm.

"Psssssh. Hang on tight." He tucked his wings close to his sides and then spun us in a tight spiral, like a rocket shooting from Earth.

The feeling was amazing, and I laughed. "More."

He pulled us out of the spiral and then popped his wings. Like a kite caught in a sudden wind burst, we shot upward and then just floated. Where a moment ago we'd been going fast as lighting now we coasted, a bronze cloud in the night sky. It was nice. Relaxing. I knew I missed flying but until that moment I didn't realize how much.

Without thinking I rested my head against the top of his, closing my eyes, savoring the sensation. There was something like a humming deep within his body, almost like purring.

"This is nice," Troy said, after we'd been floating a while.

"It is," I agreed, taking a deep, cleansing breath. "Exactly what I needed."

"Tough day?" he asked.

"That's putting it mildly."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin." I let my hands droop on either side of his neck.

"Just spit it out."

"Let's see. Jaffar ripped the very essence of who I am away when he took my wings. Drake and his gross buddy tried to hurt me after school. Then an elf woman showed up and killed Drake, like right in front of me. The guy I thought I really cared about is sweet, but we kissed - " I paused, remembering. It'd been wonderful, better than I imagined my first kiss could be.

"You and Laeddin kissed? Isn't he like a thousand years old or something?"

I smacked Troy, but doubted he even felt it. "Yeah, but it isn't like that. It's - Never mind," I huffed.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. The elf lady told me that the Mistress is out to get me and the people I thought were my friends are actually my parents." At that, I shuddered. I still couldn't wrap my mind about it. The whole idea that they disguised themselves to stay close to me so they could keep tabs on me was creepy and way too overprotective.

Troy growled. "I'm glad you finally know. It was weird that I couldn't tell you."

"You knew?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah, I kind of found out when I overheard Pops talking with them right after Laeddin brought you back. When I confronted them about it, they told me the truth. I wanted to tell you right away. It's wrong when adults think they need to keep secrets. In fact it pisses me off." He snarled and fire came out of his mouth.

"It sounds like you've had some personal experience. Want to tell me about it?" I knew something was up with him too.

He groaned.

"You don't have to. It's just I noticed you weren't yourself at school. Not since you and Pops got back from wherever the two of you went."

"We went to Utah to help a friend. While we were there, my brother Jesse was - " Troy paused.

I waited, feeling that he needed some time with his thoughts.

We coasted, heading toward the ocean. The air changed the closer we got. Troy took us along the shore, and I listened to the waves, enjoying the salty water spray and the smell of the brine and sand.

After several long minutes Troy finally spoke. "Jesse was sucked into another realm. I wanted to go after him, find a way to bring him home. But Pops isn't letting me, mainly because my father won't let him let me."

"You know your biological father?" That was surprising.

Troy let out another trail of fire. "My father is a dragon by the name of Abernathy, not that he's ever given a crap about me."

Whoa. I knew of Abernathy. Of course. My mom had only good things to say about him, though she mentioned he tended to keep to himself and stay out of magical affairs - unless absolutely necessary. "Oh," was all I said.

"Exactly. Without Pops I would've been killed or worse. He has given me a home, a place to live, a family, and a purpose. But I was kind of lonely. Until Jesse showed up. We clicked right away. And now that he's gone, I can't sleep, I can barely eat, and I have zero tolerance for stupid high school drama, if you catch my meaning. At the moment, I'm taking a break from SMA recruiting."

I swallowed. Jesse sounded like a brother as well as a friend to Troy. "I'm sorry, Troy."

"Me too. It's killing me not to do something to find him. The only thing that's helped is going out Akuma hunting with Peter and Zoe - your mom and dad. Without that I might have gone insane and eaten the local villagers."

I chuckled bitterly as he blew out a huge puff of smoke.

"But enough about me. What about you? How can we solve your problems?"

I crossed my hands on Troy's head and rested my chin on them. "No idea. And I think that's what has me so irritated. I'm the one who made the wish to be like a normal teenager. I'm the one who wanted to come into the human world. Now that I am like a normal teenaged girl, I feel sick. I feel - "

"What?" Troy urged.

"Wrong." Tears pricked my lashes, but I didn't let them fall. Instead I cleared my throat and went on. "And as much as I disliked Drake, I didn't want him to die. But he did, and there's no way to bring him back. With the Mistress woman - " I paused, debating whether to tell

him what I thought I knew about her. Troy was a dragon. Surely, he wouldn't think I was crazy if I told him I got my information from a talking cat.

"What about her?" Troy asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"I don't know what she wants. Other than to kill me or use me or some nonsense. The thing with Laeddin wasn't even worth discussing. I didn't know what that man wanted. "And my parents?" I snorted in frustration. "What can I say about that situation?"

Troy began flying us inland, back to Salem. I watched the houses and cars and people flit by almost as though we were in a dream. "Here's what I'm thinking, if you want my two cents?"

"Yes, please."

"Do you know where Jaffar is?"

I hedged because I didn't know. "No. Laeddin has gone back to his realm several times. When he returns it's always the same. No one has seen her. No one knows where she is. It's like she disappeared. And trust me, if a woman with a creepy staff and my wings were flying around, her people would notice."

"Agreed. But tell me this. Why do you keep calling Jaffar a woman?"

Looked like I let the cat out of the bag. So I told him about Gatsby and what he told me. Troy listened. "Sharra and Jaffar are one and the same, huh? Let's put a talon in that. Finding her is a priority, but since we don't know where to start, we'll focus on something else."

"I guess." I was relieved to have told someone though.

Troy went on, "We know Sharra is connected to the Akuma, so why don't you come hang with us during nightly recon? Sooner or later one of them is going to know something."

That reminded me of the one hundred and eleven days until total darkness. I shared my thoughts on the subject with Troy. "I think it's possible the darkness is connected to her and the Akuma as well."

"You're probably right," Troy agreed.

"Okay. What about Drake?" I liked we were talking it out. Even if we didn't solve anything, it felt good just to voice the issues.

"There's nothing you can do about him either, right?" Troy spoke with finality. He was right about that too.

"True," I said. "Fine, smarty pants, what about my parents? What should I do about them?"

A deep rumbling shook Troy's body. "They are good people and as Peter and Zoe you have the chance to truly get to know them. I think it would be cool. If I had any kind of chance of spending time with my parents, I would."

I realized what a total jerk I was being about them. Troy was right. It was better to have them around than not at all.

I lifted my head. "You're right, I guess. If I can get over the invasion of privacy factor," I said softly, caressing his head. Telling him with my touch how sorry I was. The peculiar purring sound echoed through him again.

"Good. Then it's settled. You, me, Peter, and Zoe - "

"You. Me. My mom and dad," I corrected.

Troy laughed, filling the night air with smoke. "Let's call them Peter and Zoe though since you're going to school with them. Deal?"

"Fine." I slammed by cheek against his head.

Troy kept laughing. "We'll make our nightly rounds searching for Akuma, questioning the ones we find and capture. You'll try to find a guy to date that's around your age instead of one who's old enough to be your great-great-great-great-great-great. Well, you get the idea. The dude is old, and you need one who's closer to your age. And I'll try to stay calm and trust Pops knows what he's doing when it comes to Jesse. Maybe between the two of us we might be able to find some happiness."

We arrived back in our neighborhood. Troy landed and walked

back into the shadow of the tree.

"Are you with me?" he asked.

I climbed off his back, sad the flying was over, but so incredibly grateful he'd given me such a gift in the first place. "Yes," I agreed, stepping off his tail.

Troy shook. "Cool. Now give me a few seconds to shift back."

"Oh." I blushed as I quickly turned away. The ground shook slightly.

"It's not like I have to get naked," he said. "You can turn around. I'm decent."

I did and immediately saw that he was shirtless. The green shirt he was wearing hung in his hand. "Serious?" I asked. "Waiting for me to compliment you on your perfect abs?"

Troy smiled big. "You think my abs are perfect?"

I blushed again. Then tried to cover it up with a shrug. "They aren't bad."

He winked. "That's good enough." He pulled his shirt over his head.

I kept my eyes on the driveway until Troy stepped into my personal bubble and lifted my face with one of his fingers. His eyes were hazel. His lips were gorgeous, just like the rest of him.

"Thanks for taking me flying. It was exactly what I needed." I spoke gently, licking my lips as I studied his face. My heart danced in a happy excitement at being so close to him like that.

"Thank you, Jack," he said, his voice hushed. He was so close I could smell his minty breath and the sandalwood scent of his skin.

"I didn't do anything," I shrugged.

"Oh, you did. I needed to talk to someone for a long time, but there just wasn't anyone who would understand. Until you." He leaned down and I instantly realized that he was going to kiss me.

Did I want that?

I didn't have a chance to debate it further because his lips were on

mine. Soft and warm.

I thought I would be repulsed by a kiss from anyone but Laeddin, but as Troy's lips moved against mine, the barrier I'd built around my heart slowly began to melt and I did something I never thought I would. I kissed him back.

Troy responded by grabbing the loops of my jeans, pulling me closer.

It was different than kissing Laeddin, but in a good way. I was buzzed with feelings for him. Not only was he a hot guy, but he knew how to kiss.

When Troy finally lifted his lips from mine, he smiled.

For some reason I thought of the girl he made out with my first day of school. Their kissing wasn't like the one I just shared with Troy. Our kiss was chaste compared to theirs. But I still liked it.

He brushed his thumbs along my jaw. "I wanted to do that from the moment I saw you in Sharra."

I watched his mouth move and wished he would kiss me again. "Before I knew your name, you were Hot Guy," I admitted, biting my bottom lip.

We both laughed. "You aren't wrong." He released me and I was suddenly cold. "Flying with you rocked." He kissed my cheek and took off jogging toward his house. When he was nearly halfway there he turned back. "Totally rocked," he yelled and waved good-bye.

A huge grin spread across my face. I waved back, enjoying the view as I watched him run the rest of the way home.

When I could no longer see him, I headed toward my house. It was time I had an honest talk with my mom and dad.

"Jasmine?"

"Who's there?" I stopped, trying to see without my vampire abilities. It couldn't be Troy.

"It's me." Christopher stepped into view, the vampire who bit my

mom all those years ago, the one who betrayed her. He was her Hunter and now the seventh member of the council.

In Sharra he always wore the common dress, which was brown or black trousers made of soft, breathable material, boots that went to his knees, a long-sleeved linen shirt and a leather vest. Tonight he had on jeans and a tight white tee shirt, which said he was just another teenager. Even though I knew he was older, born in the nineteen sixties, he was still gorgeous. If I hadn't been nervous about him being at my house, I would've been impressed.

"What do you want?"

"Something's coming. It's big. Last time," he paused and glanced at the ground, "I chose Sharra because I wanted power and I thought she would win. This time," he looked up, his features serious, urgent even, "I choose you. Since I met you on the road those many years ago, I've known we - "

"Jasmine?" Laeddin called from the front door. I hadn't heard it open.

"We what?" I asked.

Christopher's features looked pained, like he desperately wanted to say more. "Later," he said and took off.

"Coming," I hollered.

OceanofPDF.com

GLAD YOU ARE HERE

WHEN I GOT INSIDE, Laeddin was back in the living room with Peter. He had a look on his face that said we would discuss what he just witnessed later. The TV was still on and Peter was focused on it. I glanced around, then remembered my mom had left. The serious conversation I planned couldn't happen tonight after all.

I thought about her in Sharra, curious about whether she changed back and forth between herself and Zoe.

If not, she would totally freak out Ciana, the vampire who helped raise me. I loved Ciana. She'd taken care of me since I was little when my parents were working. We played together during my mom's long meetings.

In that moment, I remembered the vision right after Jaffar took my wings. She was flying and went into the mountain where all evil supernaturals were imprisoned. There she woke someone. A vampire she called Velencia. And Ciana had entered the tomb.

My nanny betrayed me.

Betrayed my mom and dad. Everyone. Our whole world. She was on Sharra's side. My mom needed to know what I'd seen.

She needed to know about Sharra and Ciana and the one called Velencia.

"I need to speak with Mom," I said, walking over to Peter.

"Okay." He pulled me into a hug.

I let him hold me for a long time. It felt good to have his arms around me, even if they weren't the normal dad arms.

"I'm glad you're here, Dad."

Peter sucked in his breath. "You are?" He held me away so he could read my face.

I remembered what Troy said and took his sincere words to heart. "Yeah."

A giant smile spread over his face. "That's a relief. We didn't follow you because we didn't trust you. Our only thought was keeping you safe." He shook his head. "We didn't do a very good job."

"Oh, Dad." I hugged him. "It wasn't your fault. It was mine. I thought I could do it on my own. I thought I knew better." The words caught in my throat. "I'm sorry."

He gave me a squeeze and shook my shoulders lovingly. "It's okay. We're going to get through this. Together. Deal?"

I nodded. "What about Mom? Is she gone for good?"

"I'm going to head up to bed," Laeddin said, interrupting. His eyes were shrouded, but he seemed pleased my dad and I were talking. Laeddin and I had unresolved issues, but they could wait. I wouldn't bring up our kiss or the divide between us while my Dad was around.

"Goodnight." I gave him a hopeful smile.

"Night."

I watched him walk up the stairs. When he was out of sight, I turned back to my dad, the handsome boy who looked nothing like my father. And I wondered how he did it. How he and my mom made it happen. Was it her magic? His? Both of them together?

Touching his face, I asked, "How is this possible? Is it an illusion?" I patted his cheek. It was scratchy. He needed a shave.

"It isn't an illusion. It's the magic of the seven combined with one of Aunt Cindy's potions."

"Ohhh." Aunt Cindy used to teach at the Seven Magics Academy. Gabe did too for a while, but when Cindy became pregnant, they decided to live in Polonias for a time. It was quieter, less volatile. She and Gabe had two children now. Elsa and Ana. I'd met them a few times. They were sweet, though one possessed much more power than the other. "How long will the spell last?"

"These are our bodies until we take Cindy's reversal potion." Peter patted his stomach. "It's nice to have a six pack again." He chuckled.

"So this could be permanent?"

He shrugged. "I suppose, though I definitely don't want this body to be mine for good. Six pack abs or not, I like my original body better."

I nodded. "Agreed."

Peter kissed my forehead. "I'm going to go speak with your mom. Find out what she's learned. Hopefully I'll see you tomorrow."

"K. See ya." I didn't mention the recon mission. We didn't go, but that was okay. Maybe tomorrow night. Before he opened a portal back to Sharra, I took his hand. "The three of us need to talk."

"We will. Get some rest."

Once he was gone, I went upstairs. At Laeddin's door, I paused and closed a hand in a fist to knock. But if Laeddin opened the door what would I say?

I kept going until I reached my room.

Sleep came quickly, though I kept waking up from nightmares.

I opened my eyes and immediately knew I was no longer in Salem, in my bed. All around me were the corpses of dead unicorns. There were hundreds of them. The land was dark, as though the realm were going through a lunar eclipse. Some light eked out. Enough to allow me to know I was soaring above, seeing everything from the air.

My gaze swept the landscape. I took in the unusual forest of magenta trees, several long valleys full of black flowers, and a large body of water.

I looked down and saw my reflection. The eyes staring back weren't mine. They were those of Sharra.

And as though she saw me, she smiled and started to laugh. "Young vampire, your end is near."

Gasping, I jerked awake. As soon as I was sure I was in my bed,

staring up at my ceiling, I relaxed and fall back asleep.

The next morning was Saturday so I threw my hair up in a messy ponytail, put on lip gloss and a little mascara. Then dressed in charcoal yoga pants, a teal tank, and gray running shoes.

Downstairs, I went to the fridge. Laeddin, who was busy in the kitchen, glanced over. He wore his standard jeans and tee shirt. "What you making?" I asked, grabbing the orange juice and setting it on the counter.

"Fresh fruit and scrambled eggs with red peppers, onions, and cheese, and toast. You're hungry, right?" Laeddin eyed me knowingly.

"Starved," I said, grabbing two glasses from the cupboard and setting them next to the orange juice on the counter. He and I had created a morning routine, where he cooked, and I got everything ready. I took two plates down and set them on the counter next to the stove where Laeddin was cooking. Then I poured the juice, put the container away, grabbed the strawberry jam and the bowl of fresh fruit, and two napkins, and placed them all on the counter.

The toaster popped. Laeddin buttered two pieces of golden brown toast and put them on the plates. Then scraped the eggs onto one plate, leaving the other empty. That was because Laeddin didn't eat any kind of meat, including eggs.

I sat on the stool and waited while he brought the plates over.

"Let's eat." Laeddin scooped some fruit on to his plate and smeared jam on his toast.

I took a bite of scrambled egg. It was seasoned to perfection. And I savored the flavors. "These taste amazing," I said after swallowing. It was strange though. The food, while delicious, didn't seem to be nourishing. I drank all of my orange juice, but still felt thirsty.

Laeddin watched me, chewing a strawberry.

I put some jam on my toast but didn't take a bite. The food had lost its savor. "Are you alright?" It was a generic question, but I needed to start somewhere.

He glanced over. "Worried. About you." He took another piece of fruit and put it in his mouth.

I knew it was because of who he saw me talking to last night. Not Troy, but the Hunter. "That was Christopher. He came to warn me that something big was coming."

Laeddin swallowed. "And what exactly is that?" His tone said he already didn't believe whatever I would share.

"I don't know. You interrupted before he got the chance to tell me." I stabbed a piece of watermelon and put it in my mouth. Chewed and swallowed. It tasted like ash.

Laeddin glanced down at his food. "Think he'll be back?"

"Probably." I hoped so. Any information I could get would help us.

We ate in silence for a while. Well, I pushed around my food while Laeddin ate. I was trying to find the courage to bring up what I'd so rudely blurted out yesterday. Finally, I said, "What I - "

Laeddin put up a hand. "Don't start. What you said was one of the first honest sentences you've uttered since Jaffar took your wings."

"But, it isn't - "

"Stop it." He was abruptly angry. "I'm going to say this once. One time."

"Okay," I said quietly, staring at my food.

Laeddin set down his fork and turned his body to face mine. "I was there when Jaffar took your wings. I know you felt a lot of pain. I can't even imagine how awful it must've been, must still be." His eyes became glassy, brimming with tears. "But I had to watch it happen and could do nothing about it." He blinked several times.

I let his words sink in. Tried to think about what the situation must've been like for him. I hadn't done that before.

"He reached into your back and tore them from your body, through your skin. They fought, as though they didn't want to leave, but Jaffar was stronger. He was determined. And because you were willing to

give them away, Jaffar finally won against them and pulled your glorious wings free. You passed out, which is understandable, but I had to listen to him talk about how weak you were, how disappointing it was that you had such an amazing gift and chose to throw them away so easily. I had to watch as he used his magic to force your wings onto his back." Laeddin paused and wiped a hand over his face. He looked pale. The memories shredding him.

"I didn't know," I whispered, slowly beginning to understand. The terror hadn't happened to him, but it did happen in front of him. I couldn't imagine what that must've been like, witnessing such a scene. "I'm sorry." I still needed to tell him about Jaffar. That he wasn't really a 'he' after all, but a she. And her name was Sharra. The same vampire my mom fought and believed she destroyed. Before I could think how to begin, Laeddin cut off my thoughts.

His face twisted back into anger. "You should be," he said through gritted teeth. "Not for what I had to witness, but for what you gave up."

Tears sprang to my eyes. He was right. So right. But it didn't matter. The damage was done. My wings were gone. And Laeddin was safe. Alive. That was worth something, wasn't it?

Laeddin leaned in and touched his lips to mine. It was a soft kiss, full of emotion, but it also felt like a last kiss, and I clung to him. Too soon it was over, and he leaned back. Then taking my face in his hands he wiped away my tears with his thumbs. "I'm really grateful you thought enough of me to do what you did." He closed his eyes and I sensed he was holding back some emotion he didn't want me to see. "But we're going to find a way to get your wings back from Jaffar." At his words, he opened his eyes. "Now why don't you finish - " Laeddin was interrupted by a knock at the front door. "You expecting anyone?"

I shook my head, still too emotional to speak.

"I'll get rid of whoever it is." He went to the door and pulled it open. "Morning," he said to whoever it was.

"I'm officer Gand. This is officer Vick. We were here a few weeks ago. We're with the SCPD. If you don't mind, we'd like to talk to Miss Jackie Ryder again. We have a few more questions for her."

I hopped off the stool and went to the door. I remembered them. They were the same officers I spoke with after Abby died. Both were around the same height. They didn't look that old, probably in their twenties. Officer Gand was the one with strawberry blond hair and officer Vick had dark brown hair. They were both dressed in navy uniforms.

When Officer Vick saw me, he smiled. Not a hey-how-ya-doin' smile, but an a-ha-now-we've-got-you smile.

"May we come in?" Officer Gand asked as he took a step into the house.

"Of course." Laeddin stood back so they could get by. "Have a seat." He indicated the couch in the living room.

"Thank you," Officer Gand said.

They sat on the couch, but only the edge. Officer Vick took out his pad of paper and a pencil. "Do you know a Drake Smythe? He's a student at the school you attend." As he asked, he looked me directly in the eyes, his liquid brown ones staring deep into my violet ones.

"Yes, I know him," I said, sitting in the chair next to the knick-knack shelf.

The officers glanced at each other.

"Did you speak with Drake yesterday, after school?"

That wasn't how I'd put it. The jerk manhandled me. "Yes," I said finally. I realized why the officers had come. Drake vanished into nothing in the front of the school. That meant he hadn't gone home last night. He was missing. And I was the last one to see him alive. Well me and his friend.

Officer Vick cleared his throat. "A Mr. Cameron Anderson told us that he saw you and Drake talking. Care to elaborate on what was

said."

I clasped my hands together in my lap as the awful memories swirled through my mind. What Drake planned to do to me yesterday made me sick, but I could only deal with one thing at a time. "If you're asking what we talked about, it wasn't anything good. Drake was kind of a bully. He threatened me with bodily harm and other things." I hoped they would understand my meaning because I didn't want to speak the words aloud.

Officer Gand nodded. "I see. And what did you do?"

"Well, officer, there wasn't much I could do. He's a lot bigger than me and had my shirt wrapped around his fist and was in my face."

"And after that?" Officer Vick urged.

I shrugged. "Nothing. Laeddin showed up and called me over. When Drake saw him, he let me go, and I went home." While I spoke, I looked at Laeddin. He seemed to approve with how I fabricated the story.

"Is this correct?" Officer Gand asked Laeddin.

"Yes. Normally when I pick her up, I don't get out of the car, but I saw what that boy was doing to her and I thought I might need to step in. But as Jackie said, as soon as I called her, Drake let go, and she ran to the car. After that we drove home."

I watched officer Vick scratch notes on his pad with his pencil. Every once in a while he paused and look up. "It's odd that the last time there was an issue with a student at Salem Academy, you were involved. Before you arrived in town, the worst we had to deal with was some drunk and disorderly conduct." He gave me a shrewd look. "But since you've arrived, there's been a student who disappeared, one that was killed and now another one's gone missing."

"Care to comment on that, Miss Ryder?" Officer Gand asked without missing a beat once Officer Vick finished.

I swallowed. In both cases it was my fault. I had no excuse. "What happened to Abby is awful," I whispered. "I don't know about Drake."

That was the truth. The elf said Drake would be back, more evil than ever. But I certainly couldn't tell them that. They had supernatural sensory gear. One whiff that was what we were dealing with and things in Salem would get ugly. I didn't want to think about the consequences.

"What about you, sir?" He studied Laeddin. "Anything to add?" Officer Vick said, tapping the eraser portion of the pencil against his pad of paper.

"If I hear anything, I'll be sure to let the police know. But other than what Jackie and I have already told you we don't know more."

Officer Gand stood.

Officer Vick followed. "Very well."

They walked to the door and officer Gand opened it.

"Feel free to get in touch if you think of anything else." Officer Vick handed Laeddin a card.

"We will," Laeddin replied.

"Don't leave town," Officer Gand added.

"We won't," I said.

"Have a nice day." Officer Vick followed officer Gand out the door and down the walkway to their squad car.

Laeddin and I waited in the doorway and watched them drive away. When they were out of sight, Laeddin closed the door and turned to me. "We need to figure out who the Mistress is and what's going on with these Akuma."

"I know," I said, figuring now was as good a time as any to share about the talking cat.

"Where to begin is a good question." He popped another strawberry into his mouth.

I shook my head. Nervous about what to say, but Laeddin needed to know. "No, I mean I think I know who she is."

That got his attention. He took his plate to the sink. "You do?"

OceanofPDF.com

WORN LEATHER

AFTER I SHARED what Gatsby told me as well as what I witnessed just after Jaffar took my wings, we both decided it wasn't much of a leap to think the Mistress and Sharra were the same. With that knowledge in tow, we debated what to do with the information.

We had several heated discussions about what her plan was with the Akuma and the dwindling light, if she was causing it. We also knew we needed to tell Pops and we definitely needed to tell my mom and dad.

Before we talked to them, Laeddin wanted to see what information he could find in his realm's library. It was located in one of four circular towers that made up each corner of his family's castle.

When we arrived, I sneezed.

The castle library's air was dusty and smelled of old paper and worn leather. The books were on shelves that began at floor level and went all the way to the top in every direction, three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of books.

We each grabbed a tome and started reading, pouring over the thick volumes that held the histories of his realm.

Jaffar was all over in the writings. Some historians called him the equivalent to a saint or a prophet, though little was known of his personal life. He married young. His wife had a child. But nothing more. Nowhere did it mention his wife's or the child's name. It said nothing about his magical abilities or how he came to possess them.

There were also stories of "the benevolent priest" saving crops from pestilence, healing children with horrible flesh-eating diseases, and stopping wars before they began.

Other stories called him a wicked sorcerer, full of guile and

mischievousness. They said he'd gone mad, that his only joy came from bringing misery to others.

The story of the king and his twelve sons was in the histories as well, alongside a story where Jaffar killed every last villager in a town called Ashanda for no apparent reason.

There was nothing to explain why Jaffar would desire wings, though thanks to Gatsby, I knew. Laeddin wanted to find something to back up what Gatsby said. There wasn't anything. Neither was there a mention of the Akuma or anything that would explain why Jaffar wanted to send the human realm into permanent darkness. And nothing about his true origins. Where he came from?

I kept going back to that. If Jaffar was Sharra, why did she see fit to live in the realm of Debania as well as the land of Sharra? Boredom? Arrogance? Both? It seemed her purpose was only sinister. Now that Debania was nothing more than an overgrown jungle, had she decided to move on to the human realm? Of all the creatures in all the realms, humans seemed to be the least likely choice. They possessed no magic. But maybe that was it. If she ruled over humans with her magic and my wings, she would seem like a god. It felt like I was onto something, but I hadn't quite reached it yet. It was still a big deal. The chayot would fight against her. And surely they would have the power to keep her from taking over.

There was also another reason. One less calculating. Revenge. My mom was from the human realm. Hurting that realm would hurt my mom.

"What if we are wrong about the darkness only happening in the human realm? What if it's happening to every realm? Laeddin looked up from the tan leather book in his lap.

I put aside my revenge theory. "How can we find out?" I closed my book and walked over to stand beside him.

Laeddin closed his book as well. Stood, and slid the thick volume back into its place. "Come on." He took hold of my hand and we were

no longer in the library.

We were standing on a bridge made completely of stone. It was probably eight to ten feet wide and had a rock rail that went to my waist. The bridge began at one tower and arched over the tower directly across from it. We stood in the center of the bridge. I admired the courtyard below. I also noticed three more bridges just like the one we stood on connecting one tower to the nest. It was quite beautiful.

Below was a lush courtyard covered in wildflowers. Trees were heavy with fruit. A path wound in a circle toward the very center, where there was a large statue of a king, queen, and a child. The queen was looking down at the child she had in her arms. The king had his arm around the queen, his gaze also on the child.

"Who are they?" I asked, breathlessly.

"The king and queen are my grandparents and the child is my father."

"It's amazing." I glanced over and noticed he didn't look happy. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He let go of my hand and walked to the other side of the eight-foot wide bridge.

I followed; my gaze caught by a circular orb attached to the rail. On top was a dial similar to a sundial.

Laeddin placed all ten fingers in slight grooves along the edge of the dial and it began to move, making a whirring noise. After several seconds it stopped.

I waited for him to tell me what it did.

"The darkness doesn't seem to be affecting my realm." He spoke with surprise in his voice. "I really thought we were onto something, but everything appears normal."

I placed a hand on his back. "I thought so too."

He shrugged. "I'm going to send you back. I know Peter and Troy

want you to go Akuna hunting with them tonight. I'm going to stay here and continue to search the histories."

I wanted to tell him not to worry. I wanted to ask him to come with us. But the look on his face told me he would say no. His mind was made up. "Okay," I agreed. He needed to do something here and didn't want to share with me.

A soft wind brushed against my skin and I was no longer with Laeddin but in my room. I quickly checked my phone. Troy and Peter both texted me, asking that I meet them at Professor Pops' house.

I stuck my phone in the inner pocket of my yoga pants and went down the darkened stairs, past the living room and into the kitchen. From the refrigerator I grabbed a water bottle and chugged the whole thing down. It was crazy but I still felt thirsty. Not just thirsty. Parched.

"Still longing for liquid refreshment, aren't you?" A male voice asked quietly.

I whipped around and gazed straight into glowing red eyes. "Christopher."

"That's right."

"You're the one from my dreams." As I spoke my cheeks warmed. He and I had kissed multiple times.

"Right again." He was so close, his breath brushed against my cheek. "Thirsty, Jasmine?"

I struggled to meet his gaze. "Maybe," I answered, feeling nervous. Memories of him flooded my mind. The way he kissed me. The way I kissed him back. With such abandon. My parents would be ticked if they found out. "You need to leave." My voice trembled.

Christopher stepped into the light. His eyes no longer glowed, making him less menacing. As he had the night before, he looked sincere. "You need blood, Jasmine."

"You're wrong." I shook my head, backing up. But as I said the

words, I speculated whether he were right. I didn't have my vampire abilities and I missed them. And just this morning I found the taste of food to suddenly be lacking.

"I'm exactly right, but not just any blood will help you. It must be the blood of a Hunter. My blood." He lifted his wrist to his mouth and bared his fangs.

My pulse quickened at the thought of blood. But before he had a chance to give me some of his, there was a knock on the front door. Christopher vanished.

Taking a deep breath, I ran over and checked the peephole. It was Troy. "I'm so glad to see you," I gushed as he came in.

Troy was immediately on edge, obviously sensing my visitor though Chris was gone. "Where's the genie?" Troy skulked from room to room like a six-foot dragon ninja. He flipped on lights as he went. I figured it was for my benefit since his vision was probably excellent in the dark.

"He isn't here," I said as Troy checked my room.

When he noticed the window was open, he quickly closed it and gave me a disappointed stare. "That's just asking for trouble. Keep it locked."

A quick flash of Gatsby trying to get in came to mind, but I had a feeling if the cat really wanted to talk to me, he'd find a way. "Yeah, you're right." I sat on the edge of my bed and picked up a sparkly black pillow, hugging it to my chest. I was freaked for many reasons.

Troy opened my closet doors, peeked inside. "No one in here," he went on.

I could've told him that.

"Hey, this is cute. Why haven't you worn this?" He pulled out a white peasant top that came with a black and maroon checkered vest.

I shrugged. "Haven't had the chance yet."

"Makes sense." He pushed that aside and tugged on the shirt

hanging next to it. "Nice," he said. It was red with black hearts on it.

It felt like he was stalling or something. "What are you doing?" I asked, feeling the tiniest bit frustrated. It was weird having him rifle through my clothes.

"Sorry, Jack." He closed the closet and sat next to me on the bed. "You ready to go hunt down an Akuma?"

"Sure." I had no idea what that entailed but I'd do just about anything to take my mind off things.

"Awesome, let's go." He took my hand and pulled me off the bed and I tossed the pillow as I followed Troy out.

We locked up the house and took his truck for the short drive back to Pops' mansion. Once inside, he walked me through the kitchen and down the stairs to the basement. I knew where he was taking me. To the Museum for the Supernatural. I'd never seen it before, but I heard about it.

Even though I knew, when we got downstairs and Troy flipped on the light, my breath still sucked in. It was nearly bare. Troy explained there was recently some trouble and Professor Pops was reassembling the magical creatures, but he didn't give more detail.

We weren't there for the purpose of studying the creatures anyway. Troy walked toward the back and unlocked the door to what appeared to be a weapon's room.

"Pick your poison," he said, flipping on the light. It buzzed and flickered the way old lights did.

I picked up the weapon closest to me. It was a brushed onyx bow. A quiver of arrows sat next to it, though the feathers on the ends weren't feathers at all but made of thin strips of metal. I gently brushed the tips of my fingers along the stiff fibers. While still in Sharra, the bow had been a weapon I practiced with. But I wasn't good enough at it to make it my weapon of choice. Heck, the only weapon I ever needed was myself.

Not now though.

"We've found only one way to kill the Akuma," Troy said, picking up an axe and twirling it in his hand. "They must be beheaded." He set the axe down. "So keep that in mind when choosing."

The idea of cutting off the head of a creature, even an evil one, filled me with dread. "Maybe this isn't a good idea," I said, placing the bow and the arrows back on the table.

Troy lifted a broadsword and pulled it from its scabbard. "What we're doing is important, Jack. We need to find out who the Mistress is, what she wants, and why the Akuma are being created. Plus, the Akuma are already dead. They are soulless."

"You're sure?" I asked, selecting a katana. The sword had a black handle wrapped with silver thread. I would tell Troy what I knew, but decided to wait until I could tell him, and my mom and dad and Pops all at once.

"Yes. Whatever soul they had before the Mistress got a hold of them is gone. We find the Akuma mainly in graveyards because they feed on corpses.

I shuddered. "But how do you know their souls are gone?"

Troy set down his sword. Then he took the one I held and placed it on the counter next to his. "I'm half dragon, Jack."

"I know," I said, wondering where he was going with the comment.

Troy took my hands. It surprised me and my heart raced. "One of my dragon abilities is that I can sense the soul in a creature." He shook my hands playfully. "Like yours," he began looking deep into my eyes. "I know you're feeling displaced without your wings, your magic, and your vampire abilities. I can't imagine losing so much so quickly. But the part of you that has remained the same is your soul. Still vibrant. Still warm and kind and giving."

"Thanks, Troy." I looked away, embarrassed by his compliments.

"But you're also sad and that makes me sad. So we need to figure out what's going on."

I nodded.

Peter, aka my dad, walked into the room. His jaw was clenched, and I realized he was upset that Troy was so close to me, that he was holding my hands. "You two ready to go?"

I pulled my hands from Troy's and went to my dad. "Is Mom coming back?"

"Not tonight." He took a sword from the table covered in all sorts of weapons, removed it from its sheath and buckled the sheath over one shoulder and across his chest. Then he slid the blade into the sheath along his back. "Load up. Let's go."

Troy buckled a thick leather belt around his hips and slid the sword into place.

"Can't you just become the dragon and fight that way?" I asked as I watched.

"If it comes to that, I will, but it's better if I don't. I tend to destroy things when I'm in that form and we don't want the government getting more suspicious than they already are." Troy picked up the katana I'd been holding. "You gonna use this?"

It was that or nothing. "Yeah. I buckled the leather sheath across my shoulders and around my back, casing my sword the way my dad had. Peter walked out of the weapons room first. I followed and Troy brought up the rear, turning off the light and closing the door behind us. As I walked past the Museum for the Supernatural, I tried to decipher the creatures that must've been down here. It was difficult since they were gone and I wondered what happened but figured now wasn't the time to ask.

We climbed into Troy's truck. "What happens if we get pulled over by the cops?" I pushed his large sword out of the way and scooted into the seat next to him.

A smidge of the Troy I first met came back. He smirked. "We don't."

"Good."

"What brought that up?" Peter asked.

I told them about the police officers showing up at the house and asking me questions.

Peter growled. "This is getting much too dangerous," he said.

Troy agreed.

I was sorry I brought it up. Since my dad didn't look like my dad, but a teenaged guy from high school, it was easy to forget who he was.

Troy started his truck and pulled around the circular driveway. When we passed my house I glanced over and couldn't help an overwhelming feeling of sadness.

Since I met Laeddin and made that first wish my life had changed. A lot. Peter and Troy seemed to comprehend my melancholy at the same time. They each patted one of my thighs, realized what happened, scowled at each other and then looked away. It was humorous but I couldn't bring myself to laugh.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Harmony Grove Cemetery," Troy said.

"I was thinking we'd hit St. Mary's tonight. It's been a few days since we were last there," Peter said, staring out at the darkened night.

"Nah, I'm feeling Harmony Grove, man." Troy gave Peter a quick look. "I mean, sir."

"Fine." Peter rolled his shoulders and leaned his head against the rest.

Troy turned left onto Bridge Street. We drove a little and then he made a right on Friend Street and another onto to Harmony Grove Street. The cemetery was gated, with a large brick column on either side of the entrance and a wrought iron gate that was closed and locked.

"Uh, how are we getting in?" I glanced from Troy to Peter.

"Easy." Troy threw the truck in Park and shut it off before he

climbed out and helped me jump down.

Troy and I walked around the front. Peter was already at the entrance and climbing the iron gate. At the top, he grabbed the edges, pressed himself into a handstand and then flipped off onto the other side, landing on the asphalt with a light thud.

"Show off," I said.

Peter smiled and for the briefest moment I saw my dad. "Come on. It's easy. You can do it. It doesn't matter whether you're a human or a vampire or an original, you're still you and you've been training your whole life."

"I don't know." I shook my head worriedly even though he wasn't wrong.

Troy walked past me, climbed the gate and jumped over. "Your turn," he said.

I pulled down my shirt and started up. Before I'd given away my wings I could've just flown over. I never realized how much I used my wings until they were gone. By the time I reached the top my thighs were shaking. "I can't do this," I said.

"Can. Can. Can," Peter said.

Troy moved so that he was just below me. "Jump, Jack. I'll catch you."

"I don't know." Nervous butterflies danced in my stomach. What if I fell and broke a bone?

Neither of them were focused on me.

"Definitely not you," Peter said. "If anyone is going to catch her it'll be me."

"I'm a dragon, it should be me," Troy scoffed.

"I know what you are, and I don't care. Step out of the way, boy."

I could tell the guys were about to get into a fight when I heard a noise. It wasn't a growl. More like a whinny-grunt. I followed the sound as a unicorn moved into view, stomping its hoof and shaking its

mane.

"Dad?" Growing up, I'd met many unicorns. They were generous and sympathetic creatures. My mom explained it had to do with their nature. A unicorn's strongest magic was grounded in the power to heal. This unicorn must have missed that last part because it seemed determined on destroying instead. I was frozen as I watched it lower its head, pointing its sharp horn directly at my dad's back. There was a malicious gleam in the unicorn's black eyes.

Peter and Troy turned toward it. Keeping his eyes on the creature, Peter said, "Get my daughter off that fence. I'll go after the Akuma."

"Got it."

The unicorn was Akuma? Great!

I watched my dad pull his sword from its scabbard, bend his knees and assume a fighting stance. He held the sword like a baseball bat. I figured it must be a good head-chopping position.

The thought made me sick.

"Jack, I want you off that fence and in my arms. Now," Troy ordered.

I looked down into his handsome face, saw his strong chest, his muscled, outstretched arms and did the unthinkable. I jumped. Troy caught me easily and set me down.

"Thank you," I said as he set me on my feet. I was relieved and at the same time worried. Because in order to get out I was going to have to do that again.

"Troy. Jasmine. Get over here," Peter shouted. His words were garbled between the sounds of clanging metal and huffing.

I searched the area where my dad stood a moment before but couldn't see him. There was very little light, only what was coming from the moon and a couple of lights near the gate. I missed my vampire vision. "Da - " I started and then thought better of it. "Peter. Where are you?"

Troy took off like he knew exactly where Peter was. I followed the best I could, my katana at the ready. Gravestones were everywhere. I carefully stepped around them, crossed a paved road and continued through the neatly clipped lawn past more gravestones.

Troy was long gone.

I tripped over a gravestone and fell to my knees. "Crap," I cried, frustrated with myself. I wanted to help. I didn't want to disappoint my dad and Troy. Fighting noises were coming from deeper in the cemetery. I needed to get myself up off the ground.

"If you drink my blood, Jasmine, you'll be able to do so much more than fight. You'll be strong again."

It was Christopher. The Hunter was relentless. "Go away," I said, working my way back to standing. Then picked up my sword and held it out in the direction I thought his voice had come from. Without my vampire abilities I wasn't sure where he was.

He came forward. The moonlight allowed me to see his shadow but the only feature I could make out was his eyes. "I can't. Even if I wanted to, it's in me to protect you."

"That makes no sense!" And it didn't. I'd barely said fifty words to him over the course of my entire life.

"Really? Consider this." He moved closer. "You were created from your mother's blood. She drank from me. You were also created from the seven magics. So my blood created you too."

I started to walk away. "You're nuts, just like my mom said."

Christopher growled. "Maybe. Maybe not. But I know what you need. I can sense it. My magic comes from blood and yours is singing with need."

His words caused me to stop.

"Lies," I whispered, but wasn't committed.

"I'm not lying." He moved like lightning and was unexpectedly standing in front of me - so close, too close. His scent was powerful,

like apples baked in cinnamon and nutmeg.

I jumped back, nicking his neck with my blade. My eyes were mesmerized by steady trickle of red. I licked my lips. Was he right?

"I told you normal was overrated," he said, taking my chin in his hand.

I looked away, surprised by the intensity coming off him. It also bothered me to realize that he was no longer just a random man with the red eyes from my dreams. But Christopher. The Hunter. And I had looked forward to his kisses.

He raised his other hand and I followed it with my gaze as he tore a gash in his wrist with one of his fangs. "You need my blood. I know you need it. So, before it's too late, drink." He forced his wrist against my mouth.

I resisted, squeezing my lips together, but he pressed harder and his blood got in. As soon as the tang touched my tongue, my heart raced. It beat so strong I thought it would rip through my chest. I drank. And swallowed some more. His blood tasted incredible. It didn't take long to realize he was right. I'd been parched for weeks. Literally dying of thirst. Not for water or any other liquid a human required, but for blood. His blood.

I dropped my katana and took hold of his wrist with both hands, pressing it deeper into my mouth.

"That's it," he said, his voice soft like he was coaxing a baby animal.

In that moment, I didn't care. My parents had refused to let me drink from him. I thought it had to do with his betrayal. Whatever the reason, as his blood filled me like no other had, I thought the reason had to be completely stupid.

His blood soothed my throat, basically brought me back to life. An exquisite combination of power and sensuality. With each pull, my body became stronger. I could've kept drinking until the vampire was dry, but I knew that wouldn't do. I released his wrist and looked up.

Christopher smiled. "You look better already," he said, brushing some hair off my face.

What could I say to that? I knew he was right. I felt better. Not a hundred percent - I still didn't have my wings - but I no longer felt like a shell of the person I used to be. "I don't understand. No blood has ever effected me like yours. How? Do I have my powers back?"

Christopher winked. "I would think so." He picked up my sword and held it out. "Go find out."

I smiled, taking a deep breath. And knew. Immediately. I could smell everything.

His blood.

The scent of the soap he used to shower, a light dusting of cologne, and so much more.

I stretched my abilities further and realized I could smell Troy's blood and my dad's.

I did a little dance.

Christopher laughed.

I probably should've been embarrassed, but I wasn't. I couldn't help it. I'd never been so happy.

I could see, even in the dark, the color of his eyes. They were dark green.

"Hurry," he said. "Your dad and Troy could use your help."

"Right," I said remembering why I was here. I moved in the direction of them, but stopped. I wanted to thank the hunter. "Hey, tha - " But I stopped, looking around.

The vampire was gone.

I had no doubt I'd see him again. He still needed to explain why he thought we belonged together. My mom and dad would never allow that. Ever. My dad would kill him before he allowed Christopher and me to be married. If he ever found out I'd drunk the vampire's blood, or worse, kissed him, my dad might kill him anyway.

And my mom? I shuddered involuntarily at the thought. Christopher would probably wish for death after my mom finished with him.

I'd deal with that later. First, I had to go help Troy and my dad.

OceanofPDF.com

AKUMA

WE DIDN'T CAPTURE any of the Akuma. Troy, Peter, and I decapitated them all. There were five in the cemetery. The unicorn led Peter and Troy deeper into the cemetery to ambush them. But we cut off all of their heads. As soon as the head severed from the body, the Akuma fell apart, shriveled up and dissipated.

Emotionally, it was difficult to kill, but I got over it quickly when it was us or them.

Christopher's blood pumped through my veins and the more I fought the stronger I became. If I thought it was appropriate I would've cheered. My vampire abilities were back in force and I used them to their full potential, grateful I could actually help.

Troy and Peter noticed too.

After the last Akuma was beheaded, Troy came over. "Jack, you kicked ass." He held up his hand for a high five. I didn't leave him hanging.

"There's my girl," Peter said, pulling me into his chest for a hug.

"Thanks," I said, enjoying the compliments. When I pulled back, Peter squinted, staring at my mouth. "You've got blood," he pointed, "right there."

"Oh?" I wiped it away with my shirt, knowing it wasn't any of my own, or the Akuma's. They didn't bleed. That meant the blood was Christopher's.

"Let's go," Troy said. "I need a shower. I've got Akuma dust everywhere."

Peter nodded. "You two go ahead. I'm going back to Sharra. I should check on Snow."

I squeezed Peter's hand. "Tell Mom I love her, please?"

He squeezed back. "Of course." Then he was gone. Without even a portal. I had no idea how he did that. He wasn't a vampire. He was no longer human. Again I questioned what sort of creature he'd become.

"Jack?" Troy called, interrupting my thoughts. He must've noticed the flush on my cheeks or the happiness radiating from my eyes.

I could feel the difference at having Christopher's blood beating through my veins.

"You're different. What - " Troy started.

"Race you back?" I took off, my vision crystal clear in the darkness and my speed at full throttle. I didn't want to lie to Troy, but I didn't want to tell him what I'd done either.

"Dude." He was surprised.

"Hurry." I laughed and kept running.

He was gaining so I stepped it up, hurtling and dodging tombstones. I was going to win. I knew it.

But a name engraved on a large gravestone seemed to jump out as I passed, and I slid to a stop.

ABBY JONES

I moved to stand in front of her grave. Thankfully the dirt and grass in front hadn't been disturbed.

The Akuma elf who killed Drake said the Mistress sought out evil.

Abby hadn't had an evil bone in her body.

Her honey brown hair, dark hazel eyes, and freckled face came to mind. I hadn't known her long, but we'd become friends.

She loved to read and had hooked me on The Vampire Diaries. I was beyond heartbroken she was gone.

Troy came up beside me. "Jack, what are you? Oh." His hands rested on my shoulders. "I'm here, if you need someone."

"Thanks, Troy." I appreciated his nearness and leaned into him.

He stayed with me at the gravesite until I was ready to go. Then he

dropped me off at home. He put his truck in Park, got out, and came around to open my door. "This is totally odd timing. School is crazy. The world is going to crap, but I had a question." His face was dirty, his short hair rumpled, but his hazel eyes were hopeful.

"What?" I asked, hopping out of the truck.

Troy seemed nervous, but he took my hands. "You know how there's the Winter Formal coming up at school in a couple of weeks?"

"Um, I've seen the posters. I thought you were taking a break from pretending to still be in high school?" I hadn't thought about going.

Laeddin wouldn't go.

And I hadn't considered going with anyone but him.

Plus, I figured no one else would ask.

I was the school freak after all.

"Well," he smiled. It was a goofy half-smile that sent my heartbeat into an unexpected rhythm. "I always have a job to do. And Salem Academy seems to attract a lot of Supernaturals. Probably it's history, or whatever." He ran a hand over her hair, shaking it. Dust fluffed out around him. "Anyway, I wondered if you'd go to the dance with me."

"Really?" I was genuinely surprised.

"Yeah. I'll dress up in a tux. You'll wear a pretty pink princess dress."

I snorted. "No effing way."

Troy winked. He was teasing.

I didn't wear pink.

Over the past several weeks he'd come to know that.

"You'll wear a lovely dress. We'll take a limo. Go to dinner. Then hit the dance. Maybe take Pops' yacht out and watch the sunrise from the ocean." He shrugged nervously. "The whole thing. What do you think?"

It sounded really fun, especially the part about the sunrise on the ocean. That was a sight I'd like to see. "Yes. I'd love to."

Troy let out a big breath. "I'm so glad you said yes. Plan B was going to be a whole lot less cool, but way more entertaining."

"Oh, what was Plan B?"

He smirked. "I pull the dragon card and steal the pretty girl."

I laughed out loud. Couldn't help it. Troy was funny. "Well I guess I'm glad I said yes then too. I would've hated to pull the vampire card and been forced to kick your dragon ass."

Troy's eyes danced with joy. It was good to see him cheerful again. "After watching the way you fought tonight, it might be possible."

"Yep." I flicked him in the stomach.

He flinched, catching my hand in his. "I'm not sure whether you took some sort of vampire pill or if it's magic, but I'm glad you're acting more like yourself. You seem better."

"Almost," I said quietly. There was still the issue with my magic and my wings.

"Wanna talk about it?" He gave me a serious look, one that said he cared.

"Yes. I do. But not right now. I need a shower." I was covered in Akuma remnants too, and wanted it off. I started toward the house.

"You really do." He waved a hand in front of his nose.

I laughed again, noticing the smell of his blood. It was fragrant, like sandalwood and copper. My mouth watered. "See ya, Troy."

"Later, Jack."

After I closed and locked the front door, I went upstairs and took a shower. While I towel-dried my hair I went back downstairs and turned on the news.

Big mistake. It looked like people had gone bonkers. I hadn't seen any kind of crazy in Salem but then the town seemed pretty laid back.

In the bigger cities, like Boston, people were rioting. Breaking into stores, stealing stuff, demolishing cars, and hurting each other. There had also been a serious surge of murder and random muggings and

beatings, all kinds of crimes. It was awful and horrible to watch. The chayot were working in conjunction with the government officials, but they seemed at a loss as well.

To make matters worse, the local station had a countdown button. It was in the upper left hand corner of the screen. A glaring reminder that in one hundred nine days, twenty-two hours, eight minutes, forty-three -

Forty-two.

Forty-one.

Forty seconds. The Earth would go completely dark. That was serious. Weird. And lots of people were scared. Rightly so. Humans were behaving just as Sharra wanted them too.

At the thought, I started. How did I know such a thing?

Grinding my teeth, I thought of Troy. Maybe doing something as ordinary as going to a Winter Formal was a bad idea. A lot could happen in two weeks. The school might cancel the dance.

Last night, the President of the United States had addressed the nation. He'd stated that America as well as several other countries around the world had teams of people working tirelessly to get to the bottom of the problem, that they would find a solution, and all would be right with the world. He told people not to panic, which was a bad idea.

Apparently not a lot of people believed him.

How could they? They knew about the supernatural. It had to be scary to feel so out of control. I was a supernatural creature and even I couldn't believe something so scary could be fixed.

Total darkness.

There was chaos now, at just the idea of eternal night, but if it really happened? If the world went dark? The thought of what would become of the creatures of every realm filled my soul with terror. I knew the consequences would be immeasurable.

"Church groups are calling all people to repentance, claiming God is punishing us for our sins," the newscaster went on.

I couldn't watch any more. Shutting off the TV, I went up to bed. Turning on my beside table lamp, I climbed under the covers. Pulled the comforter tight around my chin. I hated that I was in the house alone.

"Laeddin?" I whispered.

He didn't appear. I knew it was because he was still in his realm and that I shouldn't bother him. But I needed him.

I thought about using one of my wishes to make him appear, but I immediately discarded the idea. Who knew what the penalties would be? So I turned off my light, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep.

It was impossible.

I tossed and turned.

There was a tap on the windowpane.

I froze. My first thought going to the Akuma. Had they hunted me down?

"Jasmine. Open up. I need to speak with you."

It was Gatsby. I let out a relieved sob, jumped out of bed and slid the pane open. I'd never been so happy to see an animal in my whole life. "Gatsby."

"I thought we agreed to leave the window open, vampire." Gatsby came in, darted off the sill, and walked arrogantly over to my bed. He jumped up and proceeded to curl himself into a ball on my pillow.

I shooed him off. "We did, but Troy said to keep it shut because of the Akuma and the Mistress."

At the mention of Troy's name, Gatsby's ears perked.

I got under the covers and lay back down. "You know who Troy is, don't you?"

The cat yowled. "Of course I do." He climbed on my chest and lay down. I was about to tell him to get off but decided against it. Gatsby

didn't weigh much. And the way his eyes searched mine, I had a feeling he needed my comfort as much as I needed his. "How is the boy?" he asked.

I tucked my hands behind my head so I could see him better. "He's good. He asked me to the Winter Formal, a dance at our school."

"Oh? And what did you say?" It was apparent the cat had a special interest in Troy.

"I said yes."

"Hmmmmm." He rested his head on his paws. "Is that wise given the way you feel about the genie?"

I hadn't thought about it. "I think so. It doesn't really matter how I feel about Laeddin anyway. He's made it clear nothing can happen between us while I still have wishes to make. Besides, I like being around Troy. He's nice. We have fun together."

"I see. Just know Troy has had a lot of sadness in his life, especially of late." Gatsby closed his eyes and began to purr.

The cat's need to protect Troy was surprising. "Did you need something?" I asked.

He opened one eye. "In the morning. Right now I want sleep."

I watched him a while, enjoying my newly reacquired vampire vision, until my eyes got droopy.

"I'm glad your abilities are back. It's nice to feel some joy coming off you but be careful how often you drink from the Hunter."

My lids flew open. "How did you know?"

"Easy," he began. "There was no one else who could've restored your abilities."

"Oh?" That had my attention. What did Gatsby know about Christopher's blood?

"Besides I can smell his blood on you."

"That's creepy." I tucked my arms under the covers.

"Creepy or not, it's the truth. Your parents will be none too happy

when they find out."

"But why?" I slammed my hands against the mattress. Gatsby opened an eye and glared. "His blood brought back my powers," I said, checking my anger. "It's because of him that I can see you without a light on. You'd think they'd want me to recover my abilities."

"First of all, I thought you wanted to be a normal teenager?" His other eye popped open.

"I - "

"Second, the Hunter exists to mark the Chosen. That was why Sharra created him and Hunters in general. His blood is meant to seduce and please. It's meant to deliver deception."

I sat up. I'd tasted those very things, felt those exact emotions while I drank from Christopher.

"Before your mother, Christopher had the ability to walk in the sunlight. Other than hunters, only the originals possessed the power. When they bred out their wings, that ability vanished as well, unless the vampire queen bestowed it upon them. Until you. You have all of the originals' gifts and you look human. If an original vampire were still alive, she would probably desire that above all else." He looked at me knowingly and I understood he meant Sharra. She didn't just want my wings and my power. She wanted me. To be me.

"What about Pops and Kenmei? They are no longer hunters but could still walk in the sunlight." I asked the question while I thought about Sharra.

"True, but they were hunters who overcame Sharra's power. They are truly special vampires. Elect in their own right, which is why they've managed to stay around so long." He yawned, flashing all of his cute, sharp teeth. "But that is neither here nor there," he said.

"I know you're trying to tell me about Sharra."

"I am, child." Gatsby closed his eyes. "We'll talk more in the morning. I need to rest."

"Fine." I closed my eyes, but sleep was a long ways off. I had too much to think about. Sharra. Christopher. The Akuma. My mom and dad. Troy. Laeddin -

---

I WAS flYING. As soon as I realized it, I giggled, glad to be in possession of my wings again. Spreading them wide I made a point to experience everything. The wind caressed my feathers. The air whipped against my face and through my hair.

"I wondered when you'd be back."

Her voice. I recognized it even though I didn't want to admit it.

"Who's there?" I asked, despite the fact that I knew. I just wanted to be wrong.

Sharra laughed. "We're connected, Jasmine. Your wings have created a bridge between us. You and I are a part of each other. It's a side effect I hadn't counted on, but I like it. It will serve me well."

My wings, I thought, feeling my heart beat faster.

"Sharra." I said her name just to make it real.

"Yes, I suppose I am. But that's not all."

My elation at flying quickly disintegrated.

I studied my surroundings and realized I was home, in my land of Sharra, and flying toward Titan's mountain.

At one time the mountain had been a secret hub filled with supernatural creatures studying ways to prevent disease and other, less helpful experiments. It'd been destroyed many years ago and transferred into Athwana Meyana, which was an old elfish term for Dark Soul's Sleep. Most everyone called it The Cave of Lost Souls. It was easier to say.

I had no desire to go in there again. The last time, she'd awakened Velencia. At the memory, I wondered what became of the vampire. I thought of asking but changed my mind when she drew us nearer to the mountain. Even though I tried to stop, it was useless. I wasn't in

control. Sharra was.

Or am I somehow in her body?

I didn't know.

We flew down and into the cave. Row after row of crypts lined the catacombs inside the mountain. She seemed to be searching for something.

"A particular vampire," she responded having read my mind.

"Who?"

"Don't worry. You wouldn't know him or his name. He was before your time."

I still wanted to know. His name might give me a clue as to what she was doing. "Tell me," I said.

The tip of my wing brushed against one of the crypts, knocking her off balance. She was still getting used to my wings. "They'll never fully belong to you," I said with more confidence than I felt.

Sharra cackled but I could feel she was angry. "Maybe not, but at least I have wings. You wished them away. They're mine now."

I growled.

Sharra laughed louder. "Stupid vampire girl." She stopped in front of a crypt and opened it. Inside was an extraordinarily handsome vampire. Slightly emaciated, it was still easy to make out his brown hair and perfectly sculpted face. His clothes were old, like those from the crusades. The front of his blue tunic was embroidered with three gold crowns. He wore black pants and matching boots. A long sword was strapped around his hips.

Sharra slit an incision in her wrist and placed the bleeding wound over his mouth.

"Drink, Arthur. We have much to do, you and I."

Nothing happened for several long seconds.

Then there was a loud gasp and suckling as Arthur pulled against Sharra's wrist.

I watched his already handsome face fill with a healthy pink glow. He drank and drank and drank until I believed he would drain her. I even felt her body grow weak with blood loss. Finally she shoved him off.

He sat up, searching his surroundings. "Why have you wakened me?"

Sharra got close. "Look into my eyes, dear one. It is I, Sharra, Queen of the Vampires, and soon-to-be almighty ruler of the entire world.

Arthur studied her a moment and then smiled. "It is you." His eyes closed a moment and he bowed his head. "My queen."

OceanofPDF.com

COMBAT BOOTS

SUNDAY MORNING, I got up and immediately craved Christopher's blood. Laeddin still wasn't home and Gatsby was gone. I hoped he was okay. Last night he promised to tell me about Sharra, but he wasn't around.

The dream or vision or whatever still lingered in the back of my mind. I wasn't sure what to make of it. Was I seeing what was truly happening or was it all a lie? I had a feeling it was similar to what happened between Christopher and me. It was real. If that were true, and I believed it was, the whole thing scared me.

After I dressed in jeans, my combat boots, and a plain black tee shirt, I went to the window. Sunlight peeked through the clouds. A light wind blew. Leaves that should've turned brown and died weeks ago rustled in the breeze. I tapped the glass, trying to decide if I should listen to Gatsby and leave the window open or do as Troy suggested and close it.

Finally I decided to leave it open. For now. If the cat hadn't returned by tonight, I'd close it. Especially if Laeddin hadn't come back either.

Breakfast consisted of toast and orange juice. Well, I took a bite of toast and immediately realized that it tasted like ash. I was a vampire again. Christopher's blood changed me back. But just to make sure, I took a drink of juice. It was tasteless.

My transformation was definite. I was once again on a blood only diet.

Yay!

I cleaned up and then decided to do something totally normal and start my homework. I checked my cell phone to make sure no one had called and was surprised to see a missed call from Cameron. And two

texts from him as well. I smiled in excitement. Maybe he was coming around.

I clicked on the texts. The first said: You may have the police convinced ur innocent but I know the truth.

The second: I know ur a murderer and a liar. My face fell. My heart twisted in fresh pain. We hadn't known each other long, but why not talk to me instead of listening to Drake? I saved his life. I'd given up so much to protect him. Not that he knew that. But still. It really hurt to realize he believed I was a freak like the rest of the school.

Am not, Cam. I texted, wounded.

Lie all you want. We are no longer friends. Lose my number. Got it? Otherwise I'll have my parents' lawyers slap you with a harassment lawsuit.

My kind? What did that mean? Did you know I was a supernatural?

Fine, I texted back and tossed the phone on the counter.

My phone beeped. I ignored it. The Civil War paper for my grandfather's class wasn't going to write itself.

Another flipping beep.

Then another.

"Grrrr." I picked up the phone, expecting more rude texts from Cameron. But they weren't.

They were from Troy.

The first: Any ideas on the color of your dress?

Second: You need to decide soon.

Third: Jack? You there?

I smiled as I texted: I was thinking black. It's my favorite color.

Okay. What's your second favorite color?

I laughed. Teal.

Ooooh. Good color.

Why do you want to know? My homework was completely forgotten.

Just planning stuff for the dance, he responded.

So it had to do with the dance? I was still shocked he asked me. Excited, too. I laughed. Come on. Spill the details. If I'm going to the dance with you that kind of makes it my business.

It has to do with flowers and my tie. You know, so we match.

You're such a girl! I texted with a snort.

Don't make me come over there and show you just how un-girly I am.

Oooooh. Promises. Promises. I got off the bar stool and went to the couch, a perma-grin on my face. Once I hit send I realized that sounded kind of flirty. Did I want to be flirty? Talking with Troy was fun. But what about Laeddin? I just didn't know anymore.

There was a knock at the door. I placed my phone on the counter and opened it.

Troy swooped in and caught me in his arms. "Jack," he said, dipping me.

I gasped. He took my breath away.

His green eyes danced with mischief. His body pressed against mine while his arms held on tightly. One of his hands gripped my neck under my ponytail and my skin prickled at the sensation.

"Troy," I said when I caught my breath. His name came out sounding eager, which was totally embarrassing, but whatever.

He smirked, kicked the door shut with his foot and leaned so that we were nose to nose. When his lips touched mine, my world tilted. It wasn't the sweet kiss of the other night but a slow burn. I felt it everywhere, especially in my lower belly and thighs. He moved his lips, gently caressing, slowly opening. I melted against him, my hands grabbing hold of his arms.

Our lips and bodies took control. He turned, pinned my back

against the door. "Jack?" he panted. His eyes searched mine.

"Yeah?" I asked between breaths, leaning in and kissing his chest through his shirt. I felt his heart beating strong. Smelled his blood. It smelled so good.

"Not. Girly," he said, trailing kisses from my ear, down my neck. I tilted my chin, allowing him access. His breath was warm against my throat. His hands went around my waist and under my shirt.

"No," I agreed kissing along his shoulder until I reached his neck. As soon as my lips touched his warm skin, I paused. The vein there beat strong and he smelled beyond appetizing. I doubted his blood would taste as incredible as Christopher's, but I wanted to find out. I'd had dragon blood before. But it was a very small amount from a very old dragon. Troy was young and fresh. What sorts of things would his blood do to my body?

That I desired blood directly from the vein was out of place for me. I never tasted the blood of a creature straight from their source before Christopher. My parents hadn't allowed it. And up until this moment, I'd never had such a strong desire to.

Now though.

I wanted to.

Bad.

My fangs extended and I grazed his neck. Tasted his skin with my tongue. Troy's body shook. "Jasmine?" He lifted his face, his eyes meeting mine. His were filled with urgency, need. "You have your fangs back? How?"

I tried to cover up the obvious as I nodded.

"You are so sexy." He pressed against me.

I swallowed, trying to focus on something other than my desire for his blood in my mouth. "So are you," I admitted nervously.

He smirked. "Are you ever going to say I'm girly again, Jack?"

"Well, I - "

He kissed each of my fangs.

It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done. With that one small act, I believed being a vampire was good enough. Better than good. And I realized that perhaps what I wanted wasn't normalcy but something completely abnormal. Something extraordinary. Love and attention from one I loved and admired. That could never be Laeddin, could it? "No. Never," I said softly.

He touched one of my fangs. "You want me, don't you?" His smirk didn't deter the truth.

"Yes, I do."

His eyes got dark. Hungry. "My blood might taste gross, you know. Being only half dragon."

"Doubt it. You smell delicious." My mouth watered. I dragged the tip of my nose against his skin as I inhaled. "So good."

Troy chuckled darkly. "Go on, then." He tilted his head out of the way, exposing his neck and the blood pulsing from the vein.

My fangs grew longer. I grabbed hold of his arms with my hands, needing to hold onto something. My breathing sped up in anticipation.

Gatsby meowed at the front door. Loudly.

We both stopped.

And then laughed.

"I'd better go. I was in the middle of chores when I took off." Troy kissed my forehead, running his thumb along my collarbone before opening the door.

Gatsby ran in.

"See you." I covered my mouth with my hand, waiting for my fangs to go away. I waved as he ran across the lawn and onto grandfather's property.

When I closed the door, Gatsby climbed up on the counter and appeared to be reading my homework assignment.

"What do you think?" I asked, sitting down in front of him.

"It's a total snooze fest, vampire. Why don't you put some blood and guts and dragon fire into it?"

I huffed. "Seriously. That's rude." Surprised, I added, "And why dragon fire?"

"Why not?" He arched his back. "And what's rude is that you almost drank from Troy. What if you'd hurt him or worse killed him?" Gatsby sat on my paper and started licking the fur on his front legs.

"How do you know about that?" I yanked my paper from under his butt. "And why do you care?" I tried to work out the wrinkles by rubbing it back and forth against the edge of the counter. "Plus, I wouldn't hurt Troy. I like him."

Gatsby made a sound like a sneeze. "You like him?"

"Yes. I do."

"Until Laeddin decides to give you his attention. Then what? You'll discard him like smelly shoes?" Gatsby moved over to my opened history book and lay on it. "Or what about Christopher? You like him too?"

"Sheesh, Gatsby." The cat wasn't wrong, and I felt suddenly silly. "Get off my book," I said, irritated. "But no. Troy is sweet and he's my friend first. I don't just dump friends and then forget them." I thought about Cam.

"Really? What about Abrea? It's been six weeks and you haven't said a word to her. You didn't even say good-bye and she was supposed to be your best friend." He closed his eyes and started purring.

"You - " I didn't have a comeback. Gatsby had a point. "You're right. I should speak with her."

"Yes, you should. And soon. But first we need to discuss Sharra."

I felt my eyes get wide. "You have more information?" I crossed my arms and rested my elbows on the counter.

Gatsby yawned. Licked his paws and wiped his whiskers.

"Spill it, cat," I said, my homework once again forgotten. I was never going to get that paper done.

"The Mistress, as you've been calling her and Sharra are one and the same." He brushed at his ear, grooming himself.

"I knew that already," I said, shaking cat hair off my book, even though there wasn't any.

"I see." He blinked, watching me a few moments.

"What I don't know is how Velencia and Arthur fit." I caught him up to speed and asked Gatsby what he thought.

He didn't respond right away and I waited.

I couldn't un see the vampires' faces when Sharra raised them from the dead with her blood. I returned to my seat. "Well?" I prodded.

"Velencia's part is already done, I believe. Sharra would've used her to create the Akuma." He walked in a circle several times before settling into a ball on the counter, though he didn't rest his head, but kept his eyes trained on me.

"Do you mean Velencia is dead?" I was shocked. I don't know why. But it was weird.

"Not exactly. Velencia was a powerful witch before Sharra changed her. Of course she had ulterior motives. Sharra hoped Velencia would be so happy with the change that she would allow Sharra to use her magic - to use her. When that didn't work, they had a falling out." He rested his head against his paws. "Creatures took sides, as they do. But Sharra wasn't having it. She coerced Velencia's mate into betraying his love, in exchange for power and what vampires coveted most. The ability to walk in the sun." Gatsby closed his eyes.

"And?" I prodded, hoping to hear the rest of the story.

He opened one yellow eye. "That's why Velencia was in the tomb. The betrayal worked. Velencia was captured, starved, and then laid to rest."

"So when Sharra woke her, Velencia knew it wouldn't end well?"

How awful. Sharra was a monster.

"I think Velencia hoped, but in the end, her permanent death was imminent. Sharra killed her own sister. She has no qualms killing, destroying, taking and doing whatever it takes to get what she wants." He stretched a paw, revealing his sharp claws. "You'll do well to remember that. Sharra cannot be reasoned with and she will not stop until she has what she wants."

I closed my eyes, letting his words sink in. All of this was out of my league. I was still a teenager for crying out loud. Gratitude washed over me. How grateful I was for those in my life, especially my parents. "How do I stop her?" I finally asked.

"I'm still working on that," he said and tucked his face into his chest.

OceanofPDF.com

HUNTING

AFTER GATSBY LEFT, I texted Troy: We need to talk. Are my mom and dad back?

No. Has Laeddin returned? Troy replied.

No. And I'm starting to worry. I can't go back to his realm without him, either.

Peter and Zoe just showed up. They need to speak with you too. We're coming over.

K.

Dress for Akuma hunting. We're going again tonight.

Got it.

I ran upstairs. Since I was already wearing jeans and a tee shirt, I left those on, but changed into my favorite black boots. Then I grabbed a black hoodie. The back had a teal skull sporting a pink bow. I thought it quite appropriate for what we would be doing. I swiped some gloss over my lips and fixed my ponytail, then went back downstairs to wait.

Not too many minutes later, someone knocked on the door. I opened it, expecting my mom, dad, and Troy, but it wasn't them. It was a woman with long red hair, striking blue eyes - exactly like my mom's - and the creamiest skin I'd ever seen. It was almost transparent. She wasn't very tall, and she was thin.

The woman smiled. "Hi Jasmine."

"Uh, hi." A nervous flutter jolted my insides even though I thought I knew who she was.

"I'm Ariel, dear. Your grandmother." Her beautiful smile got bigger.

"It is you." I'd never met her, but my mom talked about her a lot. "I thought you were still in Mizu."

"I was." She stepped forward. "Do you mind if I come in?"

"Oh my gosh. I'm sorry. Yes, please come in." I held the door open and then directed her to the couch after I closed it.

After she sat, she said, "I thought I might find your mother here. She wasn't in Sharra. Do you know where she is?"

I went to the kitchen. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No thank you." She patted the seat and I went over, sitting beside her. "Mom is on her way over. Is everything all right?"

Ariel leaned back, pulled her legs up and crossed them underneath her. "Not really. That's why I need to speak with Snow."

"What's wrong?" I faced her more fully, thinking we couldn't handle another problem.

"It's Mizu. Our city is dying, and I need to find a safe place for the people to go."

"That's terrible. But how is such a thing possible?" My mom told me about Mizu and her mom as well as the adventures she and Cindy and the others experience when they were young. Before that moment it was just that. A story.

"The magic that created Mizu was designed to keep us safe during Sharra's reign."

My heart began beating harder. "But it's stopped?"

Ariel nodded. "Mizu was supposed to disappear as soon as Sharra was no longer the vampire queen, but it's held up the last fifteen years. Really well, in fact. And my people didn't want to leave. But over the last six weeks Mizu has slowly begun to die. I figure it has another three months, four at the most, until it will no longer sustain life."

"I think I know why." My heart beat rapidly. The consequences for my actions were farther reaching than I ever would've guessed.

"You do?" Ariel questioned.

"Yes," I said, and was about to tell her everything when the door

opened and Troy came in followed by Peter and Zoe and a heavy dose of warm air.

"Hey," I said, standing.

Ariel stood too.

When Zoe saw her, she ran over.

Ariel put up her hands in a position of defense. "Hey there. Easy. I don't know you."

Zoe slid to a stop. Shocked. "Mom?" Pain slashed across my mom's face.

Her reaction sent a stabbing pain through my heart, until it occurred to me what was happening. "Mom, you don't look anything like yourself, remember?"

Relief washed over Zoe's face. "You're right!" She reached over and hugged me. "Sorry for scaring you Mom, but it's me. Your daughter."

Ariel squinted and tilted her head to one side, searching for a sign her daughter was telling the truth. "Why do you look like that?" she finally asked.

While my parents explained what they'd done and why they were now Peter and Zoe, I went over to Troy. "Hi," I whispered, feeling shy.

His arms were crossed an amused expression making his already gorgeous face even hotter. "That's Snow's real mom?"

"Yes, she's been in Mizu for a long time. This is my first time meeting her too." I watched him watch my family and couldn't help the lurch of joy at having him nearby.

"What do we know about her?" he asked, pressing his lips together. He reminded me of a bodyguard.

I shrugged. "Just what my mom told me over the years." I placed a hand on his forearm. "She's okay. Mom would've said if I couldn't trust her."

He lifted a brow. "Things change. People change," he went on.

"Troy. Jeez, paranoid much?" Zoe glared from across the room.

Then she hugged her mom.

"Fine. Just checking. I want Jack safe. That's all." Troy's body relaxed, though he didn't uncross his arms.

"Who's Jack?" Ariel asked, squeezing Zoe.

"I am." I laughed. "It's the name I go by in the human realm."

Ariel shook her head. "You're all so complicated. Different names. Different faces. How the H-E-double crab legs am I supposed to keep up? I'm old." She made a face. There wasn't a single wrinkle to prove her age. She could've been twenty or two hundred and twenty.

Her comment lightened the seriousness in the room, and we all chuckled.

"Agreed," Mom said, and winked. "Why don't you explain why you think Mizu is dying?" Mom sat and Ariel joined her.

I remained standing next to Troy while Peter sat on the floor in front of his wife.

"As I said, it has to do with the magic. It was meant to give out years ago," Ariel said.

Mom took Ariel's hand. "I didn't know," she said. "But if Mizu's magic is giving out, we will find them a place to live."

"Thank you, dear." Ariel pressed a kiss to my mom's cheek.

"Sharra's back," I blurted.

Mom and Dad both stood like they'd been electrocuted.

"How do you know?" Dad asked, working to keep his face calm, but his hands were balled into fists.

"She's the Mistress. She's Jaffar. They are all one and the same." I bit the inside of my cheek and flinched. Blood oozed from the wound, but only briefly before it healed again.

"Well, go on, Jack. Don't keep us in suspense." Troy said the words, but it was obvious everyone was thinking the same thing.

"Okay," I began and then stopped, nervous. Because we all sort of guessed what was happening to the realms had to do with me giving

my wings to Jaffar. But they really had no idea. I wished Gatsby would return. He was the one with all the answers. I only knew what I'd been told.

I went over to a lone chair and sat.

"How do you know?" Mom asked.

Gatsby never said I couldn't tell everyone he was a talking cat. I told Laeddin and the cat hadn't gotten upset. Taking a deep breath, I told them all of it. About Sharra using Velencia to create the Akuma, about Arthur. Everything Gatsby told me, I shared with them.

When I finished the room was silent. "All of this from Gatsby?" Dad asked.

"A cat?" Ariel reiterated.

"So Jaffar was a disguise. He was always Sharra?" Troy asked quietly.

Mom's eyes were glazed over. I left the chair and knelt in front of her. "Mom?"

"My cat told you this?" she finally said. She didn't meet my gaze, but seemed to be elsewhere in her mind.

"Yes. I know it sounds crazy, but I believe him." I took her hands in mine.

"What makes you think such a thing?" Peter asked. He seemed to be the calmest of the group.

"I do. Between the dreams I've been having and what he said, it all fits together." I stood, turning so I could see each of their faces. Different shades of incredulity and disbelief shown through.

"And you're sure she woke Arthur?" Snow asked.

"That was the name she called him."

"But the one called Velencia is dead," Ariel said. "She used them to create something called Akuma?"

Peter quickly explained what the Akuma were. Ariel nodded. "Great."

"Yeah, they're freaky," I said. "But from my dreams, I also learned that Ciana is on Sharra's side. She isn't to be trusted." It hurt to say those words, but mom needed to know.

"You're sure," Zoe said, tears pressing against her eyes. "I wondered where she went. No one has seen her in weeks." Her features got angry and she gritted her teeth. "I believe you," she said, softly.

Peter nodded. "So do it." He wrapped an arm around Snow. "But I'm not clear about how she created the Akuma? Why use the vampire?"

"I think Sharra used Velencia to torture the vampire. But Sharra also used Velencia's magic against her. The Akuma are creatures with evil tendencies. She changes them, knowing they will be loyal to her. Because she changed Velencia into a vampire, but she wasn't loyal to Sharra." I hoped that made sense. It felt clearer in my head.

"Makes sense to me." Troy dropped into a chair.

"How do we stop her?" Ariel asked. It wasn't her problem. She had Mizu to worry about. But I appreciated her willingness to be supportive.

Zoe shook her head. "I thought I destroyed Sharra years ago." Mom's voice sounded haunted. She turned away. Peter put his arms around her and said something only she could hear.

Zoe shook her head.

Peter rubbed Zoe's back. "It'll be okay. We'll figure it out." He glanced at me and I nodded.

She faced my direction. Worry flickered across Zoe's face. "Did you see Christopher? Has he joined Sharra as well?"

I felt my face get hot. Now probably wasn't the best time to tell her that I not only saw Christopher but I drank from him as well. "No. He isn't with her." That wasn't a lie and I took a little comfort in that.

"That's a relief." Zoe leaned into Peter. "I got the feeling he changed his ways over the years, but with him - " Her voice trailed off. "You

know for certain?"

"I think so," I said, looking away. I'd heard the story of the way he betrayed my mom, but everything worked out in the end. She was with my dad and that had been their destiny. But the knowledge didn't change the fact that Christopher hurt my mom.

"I don't think we can trust him," Peter growled, his eyes trained on me.

I swallowed, nodding. Yeah, now definitely wasn't the time. They would freak when I told them Christopher believed he was my betrothed.

"What about the other vampire Sharra woke? Arthur. What is his part in all of this?" Troy asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"What's her end game?" Dad asked. He seemed to be thinking through different scenarios in his head.

"Gatsby said it's revenge. She wants to punish Mom and everything and everyone that means something to her. Beyond that, if she is the only light and the rest of the world is in darkness, then they will need her, and she can easily rule." I kept my voice even, though I felt sick. Over the course of the histories I read, I knew many creatures had done horrible things for a whole lot less than was Sharra's reasoning.

Mom cleared her throat like she ate a frog and forgot about it. "If she succeeds in putting the planet and all realms into darkness, she might get her wish. Those in the land of Sharra are already fidgety. They're scared and angry." She clutched Peter's hand. "It was the pixilettes who noticed the darkness first. Before the reporter from this realm shared that the darkness was falling over the human realm, I was inclined to think the darkness in Sharra was nothing to worry about. Many of the creatures there want to leave and return to their own realms and I don't blame them." She looked dejected and my heart broke for my mom.

"I understand your concern," Ariel said, patting her hand. "But it

isn't your fault."

Mom ground her teeth. I could hear it. "Actually, it is. I should've destroyed Sharra when I had the chance."

"You couldn't know Sharra was up to this. You are not to blame," Ariel tried again.

Zoe smiled. "I held a council meeting last night and shared what I knew about the darkness and the realms." She shook her head sadly. "There are those on the council who don't believe I didn't know. They think I've been keeping secrets too."

"Then they don't know you at all," I said savagely. Knowing my mom would never keep something so important from the realms.

"As the queen I'm inclined to let those who wish to leave do so, but I'm worried for them too. Worried about what that evil vampire will do next." Zoe shrugged. "To all of us, really."

"I say we stick to the plan. Go Akuma hunting and hope one of them will talk." Troy was determined. The glint in his eyes told me he was beyond ready to kick some Sharra ass.

Laeddin appeared in the middle of the room, startling us all.

Ariel drew a small knife from a hiding spot on her pants.

"It's okay," I said, holding up my hands.

Ariel moved out of her fighting stance and went over to Snow.

"Laeddin," I said, relieved he was okay.

"I think I've figured out how to stop her," Laeddin said, searching the room, and taking us all in.

"Really," Ariel said, tucking her knife into a stealthy pocket.

"Who's this?" Laeddin asked, giving her a peculiar look.

"She's my mom," Zoe said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Hello. I'm Laeddin. A genie and Jasmine's servant."

He spoke so matter of fact; it was embarrassing, and I blushed.

"You - " I began but didn't finish. What would I say?

Ariel gave me a secret smile. It made me blush. "Well Laeddin, it's lovely to meet you," she said. "I didn't know genie's were a real thing. Thought that was one fairytale story that was completely fiction.

"Nope." He took Ariel's outstretched hand. "Good to meet you too." Laeddin turned to me, his aqua eyes sparkling with an emotion I hadn't seen in him in weeks. Hope. "And I think I found a way to get Jasmine her wings back."

My heart stopped. Was it possible?

"How?" Troy asked. I wasn't sure if he was upset it was Laeddin who found a way to help or that the genie was back.

"It isn't going to be easy, but if we all work together, we can do it." He gave Ariel a pointed look. "Including you."

"Whatever you need," Ariel said, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Together, I think we might have a chance at beating her." Laeddin took in my face and I bit my bottom lip.

If Laeddin had hope, then so would I.

For the next several hours we discussed a plan to defeat Sharra. Arguments sprung up. Troy mentioned he wished Pops was here, but he'd gone in search of Jesse and Troy didn't know when he'd be back. Mostly we discussed deep into the night our plan.

Only a small worry niggled through my veins. What would happen when they found out how I got my powers back?

OceanofPDF.com

TRIBAL TATTOO

THE fiRST STEP in our plan was to capture an Akuma. Alive. Everything else hinged on that. We would set up traps and hunt without killing. I didn't think it was possible, but we all agreed to try.

It was two in the morning. We were back at the Harmony Grove Cemetery since there were so many Akuma on our previous hunt. Ariel took the northwest corner. Peter had the northeast. Zoe kept eyes on the southeast. Troy had the southwest. And Laeddin and I had the center.

"What's going on with you and Troy?" Laeddin asked. We were standing near a fancy monument complete with concrete stairs leading up to it. To the right was a gothic style church built in nineteen hundred and five. At least that was what I was told.

The church had a tall, pointed spire that rose from the center, along with four smaller spires, one at each corner. The carvings were intricate. Some might call it gaudy, but I thought it was amazing.

"What do you mean?" I turned away from Laeddin, not sure how to talk to him about Troy.

He came around to face me. "Something's different." He ran a hand through his dark hair, and I caught a flash of his tribal tattoo. That was part of the plan too. I would use my second wish, but at the right time. A time Laeddin specified. It once again had to do with consequences.

"He asked me to go with him to a dance at school." I said, working to sound nonchalant and kicked at a tall chunk of grass.

"That's nice," Laeddin said quietly.

I looked up. His face was impassive. I couldn't read what was going on in his mind. "It should be fun. I've never been to a dance in the

human realm."

"Yeah, it definitely fits into your plan for a normal teenaged life, right?" His words were light but tinged with sarcasm.

I lifted my chin defiantly. Wasn't it okay to try to enjoy whatever I could? "Exactly," I snapped. He was the one who said we couldn't be any more than friends while I still had wishes. It made sense, I guess. But he knew I wanted more, yet we barely talked, except when he wanted to. That wasn't how a relationship worked. At least not for me.

Laeddin sighed. "Jasmine, I'm sorry."

I gritted my teeth. Sorry meant nothing if he didn't have the actions to back it up.

"Look at me. Please." He tilted my chin, so I had no choice. "I - " He stopped. "You have your vampire abilities back?" His eyes flicked back and forth as he used his magical abilities or whatever to decipher the truth.

"I do," I admitted, waiting for him to get upset.

"How?" He came in closer. "I can see it. On your skin. In your eyes. I can even smell the difference. You aren't quite the same as before. Something's different." He dropped his hand and stepped back and I knew he knew what I'd done. "Whose blood did you drink?"

I closed my eyes. "I had to," I said, crossing my arms, sad and feeling sorry for myself. I couldn't seem to do anything right.

"Did you?" He eyed me shrewdly. "Your mom had you drink from the different magics to fortify the magic within that blood. Elf blood enhances your eternal sight. Troll blood improves your strength and so on. That's why human blood, while satisfying, doesn't enhance your magics." Laeddin stopped talking and I opened my eyes. He was afraid. "But this. Whose blood did you drink, Jasmine?"

"I - "

A person walked out of the old church though he wasn't moving right. "Laeddin. Behind you."

Warily, he turned around.

"Is it one of them?" I asked.

"Yep." Laeddin move closer.

I took my phone from my back pocket and sent a group text. It was one word: Akuma.

Then I pocketed my phone and found my center. Facing the Akuma tonight would be different. This time I had fangs.

Laeddin took some rope from his pocket. I had some too and pulled it from my hoodie. Peter, Zoe, and Troy had the same kind of rope as well.

Before heading to the cemetery, Zoe infused some magic into each of the ropes. It was supposed to allow the cord to seize and hold any lower magical creature. Since we weren't sure what magic had been used to create the Akuma we didn't know whether it would work. But we would find out now.

"I'll go left. You take the right side," Laeddin hissed, our conversation forgotten.

"Got it." I moved, keeping my focus on demon creature. He didn't smell human. I realized that first thing. He smelled like a corpse covered in perfume or dried potpourri. That was it. He smelled like vanilla potpourri. It was so strong I wondered how I hadn't smelled it on the elf even without my vampire senses.

"Hey man," I said when I was close enough that I was sure he could hear.

"Hello," he sneered. "You're just the vampire I was looking for. Sharra would like to speak with you."

I tightened the rope. "Really? What does she want?" The others were coming. I could hear them and knew they were getting closer. The idea was that we would all go after one Akuma at the same time. Six against one put the odds in our favor.

The Akuma tilted his head as though listening, and I wondered if

he could hear the others moving as well. He smiled. "You're predictable," he sneered. "She said you would do this." He closed his eyes, lifted his arms and tilted back his head. Then just stood there. As though he knew what we intended and was waiting, accepting his fate.

I glanced at Laeddin. He seemed as confused as I felt.

Troy, Zoe, and Peter showed up.

"What's going on?" Troy asked. He glanced from the Akuma to Laeddin and then my way.

"I think the Akuma is waiting to be captured," I said, but it came out as a question.

"Excellent." Troy took a few steps forward. We were all waiting for the Akuma to pounce or do something, but it didn't. Troy wrapped the rope around the Akuma's neck. I took his waist. Zoe and Peter wrapped their ropes around each arm. Laeddin nodded as Ariel showed up.

"I should make my wish now?" I asked Laeddin.

"Yes," Laeddin answered, encouraging me.

My question seemed to wake the Akuma up. He opened his eyes. I saw his body shimmer and knew immediately he was getting ready to do whatever new power he possessed to vanish - just the way the elf had.

"I wish - " I began, but a whirring sound cruised past my ears and then the Akuma's head was unexpectedly gone. A small sword fell to the ground beside his body. The Akuma dissipated.

Zoe gasped, stepping back.

"Who did that?" Troy asked, searching the perimeter.

I turned as well, trying to find the offender. Whoever it was spoiled our plans.

"What happened?" Ariel asked. "One minute he was here and the next, poof." She used her hands to talk, which I found endearing.

I pointed at the sword. "Someone severed its head."

"Dammit," Troy hollered.

"It's okay," Laeddin began. "I'm sure there will be another."

There wasn't.

We spent several hours waiting for more, but none came.

Finally I went inside the church, looking for the spot where the Akuma came from. My mom couldn't sense any magic within either.

Finally, just before the sun began to rise, we called it a night.

OVER THE NEXT two weeks we went Akuma hunting. But they were gone. As quickly as the Akuma appeared they'd vanished. We found empty graves, so we knew Sharra was still creating Akuma, but we saw none of the demon creatures.

Sharra was planning something else. It was the calm before the storm and I was antsy.

My mom and dad were frustrated. Laeddin returned to his realm, certain he would find an answer if he kept searching his people's histories. As much as I wanted him to stay, I couldn't force him. He was trying to help and if that meant he had to be away for a time, then so be it. Ariel left too. She went back to Mizu to give her people an update.

My mom and dad were still around. I saw them in school and each night when we hunted, but they spent a lot of time in Sharra as well. A lot was happening there, and they needed to keep tabs on the realm. My mom explained she searched the Cave of Lost Souls and discovered dozens of vampires had been awakened.

And Troy? Well he was my sanity. We spent nearly every moment after school together. He helped with my homework, watched The Vampire Diaries with me, and even slept on the couch downstairs so I wouldn't be alone.

The President of the United States had declared martial law until

either the darkness took over or the problem was fixed. That meant Salem and every city in America had an influx of military keeping watch over the streets. A nationwide curfew of ten o'clock had gone into effect. Every store was guarded. Water and food were dispersed according to government specifications.

Despite all this Christopher continued to show up secretly every couple of days so I could feed from him. It wasn't anything sexual, though I had to admit I'd grown fond of him. Not in the same way I felt for Troy or even Laeddin, but I cared for him. I trusted him. Most importantly, I needed him. His blood.

No one knew I drank from Christopher though now that it was a regular occurrence, I began to notice slight changes. Like my hair growing again. It'd stopped when I turned twelve. And my fingernails and toenails were growing again too. There were other changes as well.

Like my cleavage.

At fourteen my body had fully developed, and I'd come to terms with my A cup bra size. But in the last two weeks "my girls" had grown to where I was filling out a B. My waist had tapered, and my face lost its babyish appearance. It was harder, sharper. My features seemed to be etched more deliberately into my face.

The biggest change though were my dreams. They weren't the same as my visions - the ones where I saw Sharra flying around with my wings.

These were different. Sensual in nature, if I were honest.

They left me feeling unsettled.

If anyone detected the changes, no one said anything. And I didn't know how to bring it up. My mom and dad hadn't questioned the return of my powers. Either they knew it was because of Christopher and didn't want to discuss it or they were just too involved in all that was going on to notice.

At school everyone seemed uptight and on edge, including the

teachers.

The one bright light was that the school was still holding the Winter Ball. Troy and I were still going.

And I was looking forward to it.

OceanofPDF.com

ABREA

SINCE MARTIAL LAW had been put into effect, I hadn't been able to go shopping. It would have been nice to buy a new dress and wear it to the dance, but I would be fine. At least we were having the dance. In Salem, for one night only, martial law didn't affect us.

I checked the time.

Troy would be by in two hours.

We were going to dinner first - at his house. Professor Pops had hired someone to cook for us. After that we would take a limo to the dance. Peter and Zoe planned to meet us there. When the dance was over, we'd been given special permission to take Professor Pops' boat out but not far and only until sunrise. Then we would be escorted off the water.

Overall it sounded like a blast and I was really looking forward to it.

"If I only had a dress," I said to my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"I might be able to help with that."

I jumped, grabbing hold of the sink before spinning around. My best friend fluttered in. "Abrea," I gasped.

"Hey traitor." Her arms were crossed, and her lip was out. Pouting.

"I know." I stuck out my hand so she could land on it. Her long violet hair that so perfectly matched my eyes had been put up in a bun.

"How could you?" Abrea's wings fluttered almost violently.

"I'm so sorry." I shook my head. "I was only thinking of myself when I made my wish." I walked into my bedroom. "But I did think of you since then. This would've been so much better if you were

around." I meant every word. I had missed her.

"You mean it?" She uncrossed her arms and her features softened.

"Of course I do. You're my best friend." I sat on my bed, crossing one leg over the other.

Abrea flung herself at me, putting her tiny arms on my neck. I carefully hugged her back. Tears rolled down my face. I really had missed her. Terribly. And I was so glad she was here.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

Abrea flew backward so she could see my face. "Your mom gave me the coordinates. She's letting anyone who wants to go to his or her own realm. As long as they stay out of the human one. But she made an exception and said I could come and see you."

"Well I'm glad she did. I'm glad you're here."

"So am I." She studied my face. "You seem different."

I lay back on the bed. "I am different. No wings. No magic. Up until two weeks ago I was without my vampire abilities too."

"That totally sucks." She fluttered over so I could see her from my new position of lying down.

"Yeah, it does. But it could be worse. Tonight I'm going to a dance with Troy."

Abrea studied me a moment, seeming to detect the changes in my body, but she didn't say more about it. "Who is this Troy?" She hovered above my head.

I sat up, excited to talk about him. "He works as an Academy recruiter. He has blondish hair. Gorgeous eyes. And, he's half dragon."

"A dragon?" She sat on my bedside table, crossing one leg over the other.

"His dragon form is so freaking cool. And he's really nice, too."

"Can't wait to meet him," she said, her voice sounding like tingling bells.

I smiled. Couldn't help it. Thinking about Troy put a smile on my

face. You'd think after spending so much time together we'd get sick of each other. But that hadn't happened. Instead I looked forward to seeing him. I talked to him about anything and everything. "You're gonna like him."

"Probably." She flicked a piece of lint off the table. "Talk to me about your dress. What do you want?"

I shrugged. "There hasn't been a lot of time to think about it. The dance's theme is A Sky Full of Enchanted Stars. And it's a winter formal," I said, hoping that helped.

Abrea tapped a finger to her lips. "Hmmmm, okay. Stand up, please."

I rolled onto my side before hefting myself off the bed.

She flew over and touched my nose then backed up as a violet dress appeared on my body in place of the clothes I already wore.

"What?" I went to the mirror and took in my reflection. The dress had spaghetti straps with see through sleeves that were reminiscent of butterfly wings. "It's so pretty, but you know black is my favorite."

She harrumphed. "You should wear this color just to appease me, you know. After all I've been through because of you. I was worried sick. And then when I knew you were okay, I was sad. Then I got mad. You owe me."

"That's true," I said with a sigh. "And I am really, really sorry."

She groaned. "Ugh, fine." She touched my nose again and a black dress appeared.

"Abrea! This is amazing and so - me." I turned back and forth in the mirror. The bodice was black, strapless and looked like butterfly lace. The skirt was teal, hit the middle of my calves and was made of tulle and cotton. It laced up the back with long black silk ties. On my feet were teal pumps. Crystals covered the five inch heels and along the sides.

When Abrea noticed I was checking them out, she smiled. "Those

are diamonds not crystals, in case you're wondering."

"I love them," I breathed, happily

She smiled. "I'm so glad."

I bent over and removed my heels. They were already pinching my toes. My combat boots would've been preferred, but then like Abrea said, I owed her.

After setting the shoes on the bed, I went back to the mirror. "What should I do with my hair?"

"Easy." She touched my hair and it lifted and shifted until it was swept up into a loose bun. Abrea had darkened the teal streak in my hair too so it was pronounced once again.

"Thanks, Abrea," I said, admiring her handiwork. Zenny had always helped me get ready in the past, but it was obvious Abrea had an eye for fashion.

"I'll do your makeup as well." She clasped her hands together and makeup appeared on my face. In that moment, I wondered why I ever wanted to be normal. My lashes were long and thick. Eye liner lined my upper and lower lid. Deep blue shadow made my eyes pop.

"Zenny would be proud," I said, touching my face.

"Hey, I take care of the seedlings around the castle. I know how to enhance beauty."

"Of course you do."

TROY SHOWED up in a large black limousine. He got out and came up the path, carrying something in his hand.

"Hi Troy," I said when I opened the door.

His mouth opened slightly. He seemed to realize it and snapped his lips shut. "You look amazing, Jack."

"Thanks," I said, stepping onto the porch.

"I brought you a flower bracelet." He opened the container. A lovely aroma wafted upward. They were real flowers in teal, white,

black, and a yellow. There were hydrangeas, daisies, roses, and forget-me-nots. He slid it on my wrist. "Hope you like it."

I brought it to my nose. "It's beautiful, Troy. Thank you."

He stuck out his elbow. I took it. "Let's go." We walked to the limo. Troy opened the door. I stepped inside followed by Troy.

"You look really handsome," I said, adjusting my dress.

Just before Troy closed the door, Abrea whooshed in. "Jasmine, I can't believe you." She was angry again and I couldn't blame her.

"Sorry. Sorry." I covered my eyes. "I was distracted."

Troy smirked. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Abrea looked at Troy for the first time. "Holy buckets of hot sauce. He is gorgeous."

I'd blushed at Troy's compliment. At Abrea's words though, I felt like a raging fire burned my cheeks.

"Oh, you like me, Jack, you really like me." He batted his lashes and rested his head on my shoulder.

"Yeah, I do," I laughed. "Maybe."

"So are you going to introduce us?" Abrea asked. She rocked back and forth in the air.

"Sure. Troy, this is Abrea, my dearest friend in Sharra. Abrea, meet Troy, the coolest guy in the human realm."

Troy stuck out his hand. "It's great to meet you."

"You too," Abrea said in a sing-songy voice. She landed on his hand and curtsied.

"Did you want to come to dinner with us? I know the cook made plenty." He winked.

"Sure. I mean, you know Jasmine won't eat anything. She likes blood. Unless?" Her eyes got big. "She might eat you." Abrea covered her face in her hands. "Sorry Jasmine."

"It's okay." I laughed. "He knows I'm a vampire." I gave Troy a

sideways look.

"I know she wants to taste my blood." He took my hand and squeezed it. "Tonight I might let her."

"Troy." I slapped him on the thigh. "I can't believe you said that."

He snorted. "Me either." It looked like he was turning red.

Abrea flew out of the limo, then poked her head back inside. "I'll be here when you get back, Jasmine."

"Kay. See ya. And thanks for the amazing dress, Abrea." I blew her a kiss. She plucked it out of the air and pressed it to her cheek, then flew off.

When she was gone, Troy closed the door. "I think I embarrassed her."

"You embarrassed me," I said softly, enjoying the blazing tension between us. My thoughts were still on his blood. I drank from Christopher a couple of days ago and was in need of more. Still, the hunger wasn't bad. So I pressed it down, forcing myself to concentrate on his handsome face instead. He always looked good, but there was something incredibly sexy about a guy in a tux. Especially one that fit as well as his fit him. Wow.

Troy tapped on the privacy glass. "We're ready."

The glass slid down and a man said, "Very good, sir." The glass slid back into place.

"You look really nice," I said, straightening the knot on his teal tie.

He clasped my hand between his and his warmth raced along my arm.

"So do you." He leaned in, pressing a kiss to my neck.

I shivered. Tingles rode on waves over every inch of my body. When he leaned back, I noticed his eyes were hooded, filled with desire.

Troy.

Gorgeous, incredibly sweet Troy. He wanted what? Us to kiss?

Definitely. I could sense it. And I wanted him to.

I scooted close, my eyes never leaving his, and tilted my head up, waiting for him.

"Jack." His thumb brushed across my lower lip. He tenderly kissed the spot he just touched.

The limo moved and we drove less than a minute before the limo stopped in front of Troy's house. The driver got out and held the door open for us. I didn't want to get out.

Troy took my hand and got out first. Then he held on, his eyes taking in my dress.

"We'll be ready to go to the dance in forty-five minutes," Troy said to the driver.

"I'll be waiting."

Troy held my hand as we went up the stairs and through the door into the entryway.

I wasn't cold, but as soon as we got inside, goose bumps prickled my skin.

"You're cold," he said.

"A little," I replied, unable to come up with a better excuse.

He took me down the hall and into the small library. It was cozy. Books lined the cherry wood shelves covering every inch of the walls not occupied by the fireplace, a door or a window. On the floor was a thick Persian rug. A few weeks ago Troy had shared that the carpet was a replica of a prayer rug. It was deep red with diamond shaped designs, and what looked like four cups in the very center. There were muted golds, greens, and natural colors as well as black.

On the far wall was a fireplace with a wooden mantle over the top. Next to it was a cast iron box full of chopped wood. And beside that were the fireplace tools. On the mantle were books, framed pictures, and a box of matches.

There were two high-back chairs in front of the fireplace. An end

table placed next to each chair and an ottoman in front of the chairs. They were the perfect chairs to sit in and read.

Usually they were the only furniture. Tonight though, a small table with two chairs had been placed in front of the window. A black tablecloth covered it. A centerpiece of flowers just like my wrist corsage decorated the center. One place setting of white china with black and gold trim had been set. A linen napkin wrapped one set of silverware. There were two wine glasses.

Interesting. What did he have planned? I thought.

"This is beautiful. Did you do this? Or did you have someone else?" I asked, walking over so I could touch the flowers.

"Thank you. And no, I set this up myself." He pulled out the chair and I sat.

He leaned down and kissed the place where my shoulder met my neck.

I swear my heart skipped several beats.

"I'm going to tell the cook we're ready."

"Do you want me to come?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder.

"Stay. Relax. I'll be right back."

Before he could go, I grabbed his arm, and tugged him down so we were at eye level. "You really didn't need to go to all this trouble." Then I turned his face so I could whisper in his ear. "You know I don't eat - " The vein in his neck beat rapidly. I was mesmerized.

Troy kissed my cheek, letting it linger. "I know what you need, Jack."

He left the room.

I glanced out the window.

The light in the room was low.

That along with my vampire vision made it possible to see into Pops' back yard, past the still green grass to the tennis courts, and beyond them to -

Something moved, at the tree line that separated my yard from Troy's.

I squinted, trying to make out exactly what it was. It could've been a deer.

We saw a lot of those.

But whatever moved was on two legs instead of four. Instinct took over. I needed to find out who it was. I opened the window and climbed out, pushing myself off the edge so that I wouldn't ruin my dress. Landing quietly, I kept to the shadows and made my way around the edge toward whoever it was. The closer I got, the easier it was to see. The person was squatted down between two butterfly bushes. He faced my house. I'd left my light on for Abrea.

Disgusting perv.

I grabbed him by the shoulders and whipped him around.

He gasped in surprise and then smiled.

It was Drake.

He'd come back.

Even in the low light I could see his eyes had changed. They were dark like the elf woman's had been. And he didn't smell human any longer. Instead the scent of vanilla potpourri surrounded him. He was an Akuma. Crap!

"Drake," I said, shocked.

"Yep. I came back for you, Jack."

"What do you want?" I stepped back at the realization that coming out here alone was a stupid idea.

"I want what Sharra wants. And she wants you." He reached out to grab me, but I sidestepped him.

I could've killed him, but the plan Zoe, Peter, Troy, Laeddin, Ariel and I had come up with demanded that we capture an Akuma. We wanted to talk to it.

Drake was the first one any of us had seen in two weeks. I didn't

know when I'd get the chance to see another and time was running out. If I could capture him and talk to him, maybe I could figure out how to stop the darkness. When the six of us had come up with the plan to capture the Akuma two weeks ago, it involved me making a wish.

"What does she want?" I asked, trying to stay calm. I needed to get the whole wish out before he disappeared. That had been what the enchanted ropes were for, but I didn't have mine.

Drake's crazy smile fell slightly. "She wants to capture you. If she has you, the - "

I heard the whistle of a soaring blade too late. Drake's head was severed from his body.

"No!" Drake disintegrated before my eyes. Anger boiled through my veins. "Whoever did that better come out and face me. Right. This. Minute." I was ticked. My one chance demolished.

Footsteps sounded in the crisp grass, but I couldn't see anyone, even with my vampire sight. Who or whatever it was kept coming but they were invisible.

"Show yourself," I whispered, hoping I wasn't losing my mind.

Christopher appeared, like he stepped from behind a curtain with exactly the same landscape painted on it as was Pop's yard.

"How the - "

He bowed. "I've come to feed you." He spoke softly, almost reverently.

Had he been invisible? I didn't know Hunters had that kind of magic. "I-I don't - I can't - Right now isn't a good time." The truth was I really wanted to feed. His blood rejuvenated my body like no other.

"You can. Here." He lifted his wrist to his mouth.

"No," I said. "Tomorrow." I was about to ask if he'd thrown the sword, but he bowed again and disappeared back behind the invisible curtain.

"Jack! Jack." Troy stuck his head out the window, looking around searching for me.

"I'm here," I called, walking back to the house.

"What are you doing?" He jumped out the window and ran toward me.

"I saw someone watching my house. It was Drake," I said, my disappointment evident.

"Did you capture him?" Troy was hopeful.

I sighed heavily. "I was about to when someone through a blade, severing his head."

"Dammit." He punched one hand into the other.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"No need to be," he said. "Where did it happen?"

I took him over and showed him. He touched the ground where Drake had been standing. Picked up some dirt and sniffed it. Then he reached into the bushes and pulled out the blade. It was short and gleamed in the moonlight.

"If we don't catch a break soon - " He let the words hang in the air.

I knew what he meant. Time was running out.

"Let's take this inside. Maybe Pops can tell us something about the sword."

I followed him around, wondering how much Pops knew about the situation. He hadn't been around when I told everyone about Sharra. Had Troy filled him in?

The front door was unlocked, and we went inside.

Pops was heading upstairs. "Where'd you two come from?" he asked, when Troy shut the door.

"We found this." Troy showed him the knife.

Pops took it, studied it. "I'll check my books tonight, but you two don't need to be here for that. Go to your dance."

Troy nodded. "Thanks, Pops." They clapped each other on the back in a bro hug. Pops moved away from the stairs and headed for his office. "Oh, and Jasmine, you've got something on your face." He touched his cheek.

"Oh, thank you, grandfather." I wiped at it. It looked like dirt, but it was probably Akuma dust.

"Sure thing, my dear." He went into the kitchen.

"Mind if I use your bathroom?" I asked Troy.

"Nah, come on." Troy let me hold his arm as he walked me up the stairs.

I was grateful. My heels were really high. "Thanks," I said when he turned on the bathroom light. "I can freshen up while you eat. I don't want you to be hungry at the dance."

He sidled up to me, wrapped his arms around my waist. His face was directly above mine. So close, I could smell his cologne and the minty freshness of his breath. "What about your hunger?" His voice was low and sexy.

"I'll be fine," I said, staring at his lips.

His head came down, his lips brushed against mine.

Freshening up was forgotten. The dance, the Akuma. Everything but his lips on mine scattered from my mind.

I ran my hands up his arms and into his hair. I loved his short hair, loved the feel of it between my fingers.

He pulled back a moment, removing his jacket and hanging it on the bathroom doorknob before his lips were back on mine again. I had the briefest thought that his lips belonged there before he groaned, lifting me into his arms. I wrapped my legs around his waist. His lips pushed mine opened and he explored my mouth as he carried me across the hall and over to his bed. When he sat, the bed squeaked, and we looked at each other. I didn't want to stop.

"I love kissing you," he said, and I knew he didn't want to stop

either. He lay back, pulling me on top of him.

I yanked at his tie and undid his shirt, longing to feel his skin next to mine, to taste his him on my lips. His blood in my mouth -

"Troy. Jasmine."

Pops stood in the doorway; his features contorted in irritation. "I have information about the knife. I'll meet you downstairs in the office," he said and was gone.

Troy swore. "Sorry," he said the words against my ear.

My cheeks got hot. What followed were ten of the longest, most awkward seconds of my life as I untangled myself from Troy and readjusted my dress. In the bathroom, I quickly fixed my hair as he pulled on his jacket.

Troy turned off the bathroom light. "That was fun," he said with a smile.

I blushed hotter. "Yeah, up until Pops caught us."

He chuckled. "Let's go see what he found out."

OceanofPDF.com

CAVE OF LOST SOULS

WE WALKED in and Pops looked up from the knife. He held the hilt in one hand and had the tip against one of his fingers. It wasn't a huge sword in length, but it was thick.

"Have a seat."

Troy took the one closest to the window and I took the one closest to the door.

"What'd you find?" Troy asked, leaning forward, picking up the knife.

"It's old. Dated back to the Crusades."

Pops handed over the knife when Troy held out his hand.

"The craftsmanship is exquisite," Pops continued. "Not many in that time possessed skill required to make something like this."

"Was this someone you knew?" Troy handed Pops back the blade.

"There is one who could have made it, but he's long gone. Sharra put him to rest."

I started at the sound of her name. "What's his name?" I asked.

"Arthur Pendragon." Professor Pops took the short sword from Troy and placed it in the top drawer of his desk.

My body began to shake.

"What's wrong?" Troy asked.

Professor Pops clasped his hands together. "Jasmine?"

"Was Arthur laid to rest in the Cave of Lost Souls?" I asked.

Troy caught on. "Could he be the same vampire?"

"What am I missing?" Pops asked, searching our faces. "Seems I've been away too long and need to get caught up." He clasped his fingers together, waiting, his eyes on me.

Between the two of us, we told him everything. When we finished, Pops sat back. "I don't know what Sharra is up to, but from experience I can tell you it will be worse than what you think you can imagine."

"Great," I said, feeling terrible and sinking down in the chair.

"I'm sorry, but it's true. After Silindra died, Sharra was basically alone. In time she had one regret. It wasn't that she killed her sister or that she bred out original vampire traits. It was that she lost her wings. But by the time she realized the error of her ways it was too late. I think it's why she went mad." He spoke softly, but was adamant.

I had no doubt Pops was telling the truth. With each word, I shrank further down, feeling guilty and full of my own regrets.

Professor Pops went on. "Only now there is you."

I gritted my teeth, sick inside about what his words meant. To me. To Sharra. And to the whole world.

"I think she's been planning this for quite some time. You gave her exactly what she wanted, Jasmine. And now that she has them back, she'll do anything in her power to keep them."

I wanted to lash out. Tell him he was wrong. Explain that even though he hadn't said everything was my fault, I knew it was true. And I wanted to fix it. Somehow. If I could.

"Pops," Troy said when the tension in the room had grown thick enough to bite, "I don't think there's anything more we can do about this tonight. We are going to the dance. Don't wait up." He stood and pulled me up with him.

The professor nodded. "Try to enjoy yourselves." He paused. "But not too much," he added.

I followed Troy down the hall. Lost in my thoughts. Nearly drowning in shame. If only I listened to Laeddin.

Sure I saved the genie, but at what cost? Now the whole world, and all of the other realms were in danger.

Troy helped me into the limo.

He sat down, keeping my hand in his. We didn't speak and I was grateful. I needed time to collect my thoughts and figure out what I was going to do.

THE WINTER FORMAL was a grand affair for the Salem Academy students. It was held at the Ritz in Boston, a thirty-minute drive from town.

I stared out the window, keeping my focus on the dark water and the twinkling lights. It was beautiful. Quiet. Peaceful even.

Once we reached the Boston city limits, we were met by a National Guard security unit. Our limo driver rolled down his window and handed the uniformed man some papers.

"Open the back," the soldier demanded.

Our driver got out and did as he was told.

The man in uniform stuck his head inside and gave us a smug glare. "You kids been drinking tonight?"

"No," Troy answered. I could hear his pulse racing, his heart pumping wildly. I knew he wasn't happy about being stopped.

"What about you?" the uniform asked.

"No," I said, pulling my hand from Troy's and glancing away.

"Should we do a breathalyzer? You seem a little unsure." The guy looked like he wanted to climb into the limo with us to check.

"I haven't been drinking." I looked directly in his eyes this time, not wanting to be the cause of more trouble for Troy.

The uniformed guy searched the vehicle, probably looking for alcohol or drugs. When he was satisfied, he closed the door. "They're clean. Let 'em through," he said, waving his hand.

The driver shifted the limo into gear and began driving again. I should've been excited. I tried, but I kept seeing Sharra flying around with my wings, kept hearing her laugh. She was ruining my night.

Troy took my hand back. Squeezed. But said nothing. That was one

of the main reasons I liked him so much. He knew what I needed, usually before I did.

At the hotel entrance, the driver let us out.

"We'll be done at midnight," Troy said.

"Yes, sir." The driver gave us a nod as he drove away.

Hand in hand we walked into the dance.

As soon as we entered the building, my spirits lifted. Techno dance music was easily heard coming from further down the hall.

The ballroom was exquisite. The ceiling had snowflakes and icicles hanging from it. To one side was a winter wonderland, complete with fake snow, a large red sleigh, and a photographer.

Several dozen couples were on the dance floor, including Cameron and a girl I'd never seen before. That surprised me. I thought he was gay. He and the girl seemed to be close though. They had their heads together and were talking about something.

There was a DJ and lights and a buffet table filled with all sorts of yummy-looking treats.

"Let's dance, Jack." Troy walked us onto the floor. The song playing was All of Me by John Legend. I put my arms around Troy's neck, and he put his arms around my waist. "The rest of the night is going to be about you and me and fun. Deal?"

I gave him a sweet smile. "I'd like that." I rested my cheek against his chest as we swayed back and forth. When the song ended, another started. It was also a slow song, so we kept dancing.

After that one ended, we checked out the buffet table. Troy got himself a drink. He'd missed dinner and I knew he was hungry because he kept shoving cubes of cheese in his mouth.

"Sorry you didn't get to eat. What did the cook prepare?"

He chewed quickly and then swallowed. "It was Beef Provencal with twice baked potatoes topped with sautéed mushrooms. For dessert the chef made chocolate mousse with sugared raspberries and

fresh whipped cream."

I could practically see his mouth watering. "That sounds yummy," I said even though it all tasted like ash to me now that I had my vampire powers back.

Troy laughed. "You're a terrible liar." He nuzzled my ear. "I know what you crave."

I got weak in the knees and my stomach fluttered.

"I'd be careful with her if I were you." It was Cameron. He stood beside Troy and picked up an olive. "Get too close and you might end up dead."

"You better watch your mouth," Troy said. I felt the tension rolling off him. It melted my heart that he wanted to defend me. Not that I needed his help, but it was still sweet.

Cameron chewed on an olive. Swallowed. "It's the truth. Being friends with her equals disaster. Just watch it." He walked away.

Troy started to go after him, but I held him back. "Don't bother. I get why he's scared. I would be too."

He shook his head. "That doesn't give him the right to be disrespectful."

I cupped Troy's face in my hands and smiled. "Wanna dance?"

His features softened. "I would love to."

We danced to slow songs and fast songs until a light sheen covered Troy's forehead. When we took breaks, people came over to talk to Troy. He knew everybody, not that I was surprised. He had an easygoing way about him. Kindly, he introduced me to everyone. Some were really nice. Others weren't. I tried not to focus on it since worrying wouldn't do any good.

Even Zoe and Peter showed up for a little while and it was fun seeing my mom and dad so happy, so carefree. But it was short-lived. They ended up leaving probably an hour after they got there.

"Enjoy yourself," my mom said right before she left.

I hugged her. "I will."

Troy and I danced some more. We had our picture taken on the sleigh and then one where we stood under the mistletoe. They turned out really cute. Troy really was movie star hot and the dress Abrea created was amazing. We looked good together, he and I.

At exactly midnight my first official school dance ended.

I hugged Troy. "Thank you so much for asking me to go with you. It was as amazing as I hoped."

He pulled my body close and I breathed him in.

"Thank you," Troy said. "I've been to a few of these over the years, but I've never had more fun than tonight. Probably because you didn't leave to go check your hair with your friends every five minutes."

"Oh no. I totally forgot about that. How does my hair look?" I giggled at the look on his face.

He smiled. "Gorgeous, like the rest of you."

"Thanks."

He took my hand and we walked outside. Some of the couples were standing at the elevator. Apparently, they had rooms. I didn't want to contemplate what that meant. Troy was older, but I'd just experienced kissing and my first dance. No way was I near ready for what getting a room at a hotel implied.

Outside our limo driver waited his turn and then pulled up in front of us. He got out and held open the door.

"You still intend to go to the yacht?" the driver asked Troy.

Troy looked over. "You still want to watch the sun rise from the water?"

"Most definitely," I said with eager anticipation. I definitely didn't want our date to be over.

"You heard the lady. Definitely."

"Excellent, sir."

He drove us to the pier where another National Guard unit

checked us in and then waved us through.

At the edge of a long dock, the driver stopped. The yacht was white and lit up like a Christmas tree. Fog had rolled in making the lights on the yacht glow like dozens of phantoms. We got out. Troy thanked the driver and gave him a large tip.

The air was thick and gave off the scent of brine and salt. Waves lapped against the boat. Without my vampire vision I doubted I would've been able to see the ocean.

Troy and I walked down to where the captain and several crewmembers welcomed us as we came aboard.

"There's shrimp cocktail in the dining area," the captain, whose name was Nick Bordeaux, said.

"Thank you, Nick." Troy took my hand.

The gesture put a smile on my lips. It seemed to be a thing with him, his need to be close. I didn't mind. The truth was I liked it.

We walked along the deck, came to a long set of stairs and climbed. The dining area was luxurious, complete with a chandelier and at least a dozen tables surrounded by four times as many chairs.

My eyes were drawn to the gleaming bar. The back wall was covered in mirrors. Alcohol and various types of glasses lined glass shelves. Black leather barstools were tucked under a U-shaped counter. On either side of the counter were double swinging doors with round windows in each. I guessed the kitchen was back there.

Troy dashed over to the shrimp cocktail. "I'm starving," he said, dunking an extra-large shrimp in cocktail sauce and tossing it in his mouth.

I smiled, watching him chew. The boy could eat.

The floor was a gleaming white and black leather sofas lined the windowed walls. A baby grand piano stood in one corner.

Troy ate more than half the shrimp before sighing and patting his stomach. "Much better."

"You full?"

"No, but I'm no longer ravenous." He chuckled and took a bottle of water chilling in an ice bucket, opened it and chugged it down. After tossing it in the trash, he took my hand. "Come on."

I swallowed, wishing I had taken Christopher up on his blood offer.

We walked out of the dining area, down the stairs, and then along the side of the boat until we came to another set of stairs. This time they went down.

"Where we going?" I asked.

He opened a door and flipped on a light. It was a bedroom complete with a bed and four walls. "You wanna change?"

"Into what?"

"I have sweats. Those will be comfy." He pulled open a drawer I hadn't noticed because it was flush with the wall.

"Cool."

He smiled, taking out a heather gray pair of sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt.

"You want me to look like a dirty cotton ball?" I asked, wrinkling my nose.

He burst out laughing. "As a matter of fact, yes. Yes, I do."

"Mmmm-kay." I grabbed them from his hands.

"You can change in the bathroom, right over there." I went inside and closed the door.

"Don't come out until I say. I'm going to change too."

"Fine." I took off my shoes and untied my dress. A quilted white hanger hung on the door and I used it to hang up my dress.

The bathroom was beautiful, like the rest of the incredible yacht. The bathroom floor consisted of peacock-colored tiles that also went halfway up the walls. The top half was painted white. The countertops were a sand color and had crushed seashells embedded in them as well as the double sinks. Next to them was a stand up shower with

frosted glass doors. Another door led to the toilet.

I put on the sweats, worried they would be too big, but was surprised to realize they fit. And they were comfy.

Leaning against the counter, I took the pins from my hair, letting the curls fall down around my shoulders.

"I'm done if you are," Troy hollered from the bedroom.

I opened the door.

"Wow. I think you might be sexier in sweats." His eyes roamed over my body.

"You're joking," I snorted, thinking he looked freaking amazing in sweats too.

He tilted my chin. "Am not. You're gorgeous." He touched the place between my breasts where my heart beat. "Inside and out."

My stomach quivered. "You're just saying that," I said trying to be funny, but his features were serious.

"No. I mean it. Jack, I - care about you. A lot." He brushed some hair off my face. "My best friend Jesse is missing. I don't know where he is. My father and Professor Pops are trying to find him, but not helping him was killing me. Until you. Getting to know you. Spending time with you." He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "It means so much to me."

I swallowed, nervous about the intensity of his words. "I care about you too."

He nodded. "Want to have a Vampire Diaries marathon until sunrise?"

"Heck yes."

"Cool. I need snacks. Be right back."

We were watching in his bedroom? I searched the room. "Where's the TV?"

He picked up a remote sitting on the bed and pressed a button. The wall across from his bed slid back revealing a large flat screen. "Make

yourself cozy." He ran up the stairs.

I climbed on the queen-sized bed and fluffed the pillows so I could lean against them while I watched TV. I kept one out and held it against my stomach. It smelled like Troy and I brought it to my nose.

He came down just as I was inhaling. "Oh, you got it bad, don't you?"

I hid behind the pillow, mortified. "No." I giggled.

He tossed a bag of licorice on the bed and then jumped on me, yanking the pillow from my hands. "Yes, you do." His nose touched my neck just below my ear. "You forget I'm part dragon. I can smell it on you." He slowly licked my neck. "Taste it." He let out a purring noise that caused my thighs to tremble. "Feel it," he said with a groan.

We were face to face. His eyes searched mine. I wondered what he was thinking. His body was on fire. Mine responded. All I could think about was that I wanted him.

"Isn't this a surprise? I thought you had a thing for the genie, vampire? I know he cares deeply about you." I recognized her voice from me dreams. It was Sharra.

Troy jumped to his feet, facing her. I sat up, my heart racing. "What are you doing here?" I asked, trying to cover up my trembling voice.

Sharra took a step toward us, but stopped, her gaze on Troy. "You aren't human." Her scrutiny turned maniacal.

"I'm half-human," Troy growled. I noticed his skin ripple, the dragon underneath itching to get out.

Sharra roared, angry. "I'll be back." She vanished.

"That was scary," I said, taking a deep breath, trying to calm the fear that had risen in me.

"Who was that?" Troy turned.

His question surprised me. "That was Sharra." Of course he didn't know what she looked like. "She wasn't happy to see you."

Troy sat and I scooted next to him. "If I'd been alone, she would've taken and killed me." I knew that for certain.

"I won't let that happen." He was in shock. She appeared and disappeared in less than twenty seconds.

I was reeling too. "I know," I whispered. Grabbing his shoulders I lay back, pulling him down.

His eyes searched mine. Silently I begged him to kiss me.

He answered my silent request, pressing his lips to mine.

We were already filled with adrenaline and it seemed to fuel our desires.

My kisses were no longer just kisses. They were gestures of gratitude. Promises. And hunger. I wanted him. All of him. I pushed his sweatshirt over his head, revealing in his tanned, rippled muscles. My hands roamed his chest, down his stomach, and around his back.

His hips pressed against mine and I gasped as my blood boiled and my fangs pressed against my lips. I wanted him. His body and his blood. "Take it," he said gruffly, pressing his neck against my mouth.

I didn't hesitate. My fangs extended, pricking his skin.

"Princess." Laeddin popped into the room.

Troy swore and roared with frustration.

I sat with him, readjusting my sweatshirt. It had risen up to my chest. "Laeddin. Get out!"

"I need to speak with you." He eyed Troy. "I'll wait upstairs."

I blinked several times, standing. "I should go see what he wants."

"Jack?" The way Troy said my name nearly broke my heart.

I went over to him, throwing my arms around his waist. "I'm not choosing him over you. But the way he popped in, it's obvious he has something important to say." I kissed him firmly on the mouth. He hugged me tighter. I didn't want to leave, but urgency forced me out of his arms. "Meet you up there?"

Troy examined my face, probably checking for the truthfulness of

my words. I knew what he would find. My heart, where it once rested with Laeddin was firmly planted. It knew where I belonged. And that was with Troy.

"I'll be right behind you." He shooed me out the door.

I nodded and ran barefoot up the steps.

OceanofPDF.com

KOMONI TREE

I FOUND Laeddin on the upper deck, staring out at the churning water. "Sorry about that," I said, coming to stand beside him. It wasn't that I was sorry about kissing Troy. Only sorry Laeddin had to see it.

He shrugged, running a hand through his thick hair. "It isn't your fault. I didn't think; I just came." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. Laeddin was wearing the same clothes he left in more than a week ago. He looked haggard, his face scruffy, and his dark hair mussed.

I touched his arm. "What's going on?"

Urgency returned to his face. "I found something. An artifact. A crown actually. Made of elven magic and the branches of their sacred komoni tree."

"Ko-mon-e?"

"Right. It's a tree that can only be found in their realm and there is only one." He didn't look at me but continued to watch the ocean.

"What's so special about this tree?" As the yacht tilted and swayed, I watched him, wondering what it would've been like if we just met without the whole genie and master scenario.

"It's special because there's only one and the elves consider it a deity. They believe the tree is the place where the seven magics originated. And when a creature of the seven dies, their soul is returned to that tree."

"Okay." From all I studied at the Seven Magics Academy, it was certainly a possibility.

"Some of the elder elves believe without the tree all elves would die."

"Okay, so what does this crown do?" I crossed my arms, wishing

for a jacket.

"It's said to possess the same power as the tree."

"So it - creates life? I don't understand." I rested my hands on the rail.

"And it can take life."

That wasn't creepy at all. "The crown can take life, but it can also create it?" I didn't see how that would help us.

"Yes," Laeddin said. "The story goes that thousands of years ago, the seven kings of the elven realm started a war with each other. The reason was each believed their kingdom should have guards protecting the komoni tree. Before and during the war only the high king's guards protected the tree and the other six heard rumors that the high king was secretly using the power of the tree for his personal gain. They thought the high king was the richest and most powerful because he took the power of the tree and harnessed it for his own selfish desires."

"Was he?" I asked.

"I don't know. The story didn't say. But after decades of fighting, the high king finally agreed to share protection of the tree. By then the other kingdoms weren't satisfied with that. They each wanted to be allowed to take possession of the tree for a period of fifty years.

"After several more years of discussion the high king came up with a plan. They would have the most powerful sorceress from each of the kingdoms come together to create a crown. Each king would be allowed to wear the crown for fifty years and during that time that king would be in charge of the tree's protection and privy to whatever power he could harness."

"I think I know where this is going." I sighed. It seemed power was at the root of all war. A person or a country believed they should have all of it and that everyone should be subjected to it.

"Maybe not." Laeddin shook his head. "The crown was created. The high king was given the right to it for the first fifty years and then he

passed it on to the next king, and the king after that, until finally the seventh king received the crown.

"He'd had three hundred years to debate what he would do when given the crown. He spoke with his sorceress, used torture on prisoners he secretly captured from the other kingdoms, until he gained a full understanding of the influence of the crown. And as soon as the crown was placed on his head, he began creating. But it wasn't treasures like gold or silver or gems. He formed more elves until his kingdom was great beyond measure. They all swore allegiance to him. If they refused, the king used the crown to destroy them. When his fifty years were up, he had an army of three million elven warriors.

"Instead of returning the crown to the high king, he sent his three million warriors into the high king's land and had everyone in the kingdom killed. Then he took possession of the dead king's land for himself.

"When the other kings heard what he'd done they realized the crown was too much power for any one person. After much discussion, the remaining five kingdoms sent five assassins foraged in magic. They were to destroy the king as well as the crown and return the power to the tree.

"The five succeeded, slaying the king. They did as ordered and took the crown to the tree, but the tree rejected it, ripping the crown into five pieces.

"The assassins didn't want to take the fragments back to their kings so they each decided to take their piece and hide it, agreeing they wouldn't tell the others where they were going or where their piece was hidden. They also agreed to tell the kings the crown had been destroyed.

"Over the centuries stories of the crown's existence began to surface. Folktales popped up saying that even just having part of the crown gave the owner great power. I checked human histories too." He snapped his fingers and a hologram of a crown appeared directly

in front of us.

"Impressive," I said, gripping the railing more tightly.

He smiled. "This is what the elves believe the crown looks like."

It was white with bright red berry-looking things randomly placed around it. At the front were five gems, representing five magics. The crown was simple. Unassuming. It certainly didn't look like it possessed any kind of power.

But I was confused. "It's in pieces, right?"

"Yes. And, look." A picture of Octavian Augustus, the first roman emperor appeared. Laeddin pointed to something on his robe. "It's a piece of the crown.

I peered closer. "It's possible."

Another person appeared. Laeddin pointed to what looked like a piece of the crown. "Look."

Another appeared. And another. And another. He showed more than twenty photos of men and women with what looked like the same piece of crown attached somewhere on their person.

I had to agree the thing he pointed out, whatever it was, did look the same in every picture.

"So a piece was hidden in the human realm? Or not so hidden since it seems lots of people have taken possession of it over the years."

"Right." He sent the hologram back into the ether where it came from. "Even in pieces, the crown has great power. Over the centuries kings and queens have used it." He faced me.

"Okay, but - " I shook my head. "Even if we find all the pieces, how can the crown stop Sharra? She was created first. Shouldn't her power be stronger?"

He flinched, perhaps taken aback that I didn't understand. "The wearer of the crown can create and destroy life. If you wear the crown, you would have the same power."

"I'll use it to destroy Sharra." I nodded my agreement.

He took my hands. "You were created by the power of all seven magics. And even though you don't have your wings, your DNA holds that magic. Plus you are an original vampire. As you said, they have more power. If you possessed the crown, you wouldn't only use it to destroy Sharra. You could use it to create more vampires. Just. Like. You."

The gravity of what he said pressed heavily against my chest. More vampires, with wings and powers, like mine. I wouldn't be alone. There would be others. I pressed my hands against my head. The prospect was both terrifying and exciting.

He took hold of my shoulders. "Alone you may be no match for Sharra but think if there were dozens or hundreds like you. She wouldn't stand a chance. Her power is strong, but not that strong. Not even close."

I nodded, feeling a little sick inside. "How do we find the pieces?"

"Are you out of your freaking mind?" Troy stood at the top of the stairs, his hands in fists. I didn't know how much of the story he heard but I guessed by the furiousness on his face, that it was most if not all of it.

"What? It seems like a good plan," I said moving over to him. "I can use the crown to destroy Sharra and create more vampires like me."

"Got any better ideas?" Laeddin growled out, shooting daggers at Troy with his gaze.

"I can tell you it isn't giving Jack a crown so she can create more original vampires. That's the craziest thing I've heard!" Troy was breathing heavily.

I stared; not sure I heard him correctly. Not sure I understood what he was saying. Because I thought he liked me for who and what I was.

"Why? What are you saying, Troy?" I tried to keep calm, but my body was reacting to the thoughts running through my mind.

He thinks you're a freak too.

He thinks you're a freak too.

He thinks you're a freak too.

"You think I'm a freak," I said, voicing my deepest fear.

He immediately backed down. "No. No. That's not it at all," he said, shaking his hands and his head. "It's just - you remember the stories of Silindra and Sharra. Life wasn't great for humans when the originals roamed the Earth." Like a knife, his words twisted. Cutting and slicing my heart into bright red ribbons.

"I - You - " I clamped my mouth shut and turned to Laeddin. "Can you get me out of here?"

"With pleasure." Laeddin took hold of my arms.

WHEN LAEDDIN LET GO we were back at my house. Upstairs in my room. Abrea wasn't in my room and I had a brief moment of panic. But I relaxed. She could take care of herself.

My phone beeped. A swift glance informed it was a text from Troy. I didn't even read the words before I sent back my reply.

Just leave me alone, Troy. I don't want to talk to you. There was nothing he could say or do that would make up for his hurtful words.

Sorry, he texted back.

Laeddin immediately began to pace.

"What is it?" I asked, trying not to think about Troy and my broken heart.

"I know where to find the first piece of the crown."

"You do?" I stood in front of him, making him stop.

"It's in Connecticut." His eyes seemed far away as though he were there already.

"That's an odd place to hide an elven relic." I put my phone on my bedside table.

He shrugged. "True. But there's a rock house in Guilford, Connecticut that was built in 1639 by Henry Whitfield - "

"I've heard about the house." My aunt Cindy mentioned it during our conversations about how witches came to the human realm. Witches were something of an enigma. One of the teachers even called them mutts. The reason was their magic was an infusion of several different types. Usually at the Academy ceremony, we discovered which of the seven magics gave a witches magic the most weight. Cindy's came from her father, Abernathy. Dragon magic. At the thought, I cringed. Stupid Troy!

"Did you know there are tunnels beneath the house? And within one of the tunnels a piece of the crown is buried." He crossed his arms, waiting.

"How did you find all of this out?" I wasn't fully focused on Laeddin or our conversation. I was still hurting from Troy.

He glared, blowing out a breath in frustration. "While you've been making out and who knows what else with Troy, I've been researching, hoping to stop all of this nonsense."

"I - "

But Laeddin wasn't done. "While you've been playing house, I've been trying to figure out a way to save you, to save everyone." Laeddin went over to the window and stared out. He seemed exhausted. "If I say it's there, it's there, Jasmine."

"Fine," I said through gritted teeth. "Shall I wish us there?"

"No. He shook his head. "We have to find all five pieces. And we have to hope we can still capture one of the Akuma. The only way to do that is with a wish. You need to save them." He went to the bedroom door.

"When do you want to leave?" I carefully sat on my bed.

"First thing tomorrow morning." Laeddin left my room and I heard him enter his and turn on the shower.

Moments later, Christopher showed up. "Busy night," he said, his eyes falling to my lips.

"Hey Chris." I rested my chin to my chest, feeling exhausted myself. But spending time with the Hunter was easy.

He sat beside me, putting an arm around my shoulders. "You're hungry."

"Yeah, I am. Starving, actually." The scent of him already had my mouth watering.

Today he wore a green long sleeved button down shirt and a tan pair of slacks. His blond hair was mussed, but it looked great. He kept flipping his bangs out of his eyes. They were hooded and - "Are you hungry?" I asked casually, not really thinking about it.

Christopher scooted closer. "Are you offering, Jasmine?" His fangs grew, scraping his bottom lip.

Was I? "Sure," I said. What would it hurt?

"Oh, Jasmine." He leaned in, his focus on my neck.

I tilted my head to the side, moving my hair out of the way with my hand. His hands tenderly gripped my arms and he sank his fangs into my shoulder near the curve of my neck. I immediately gasped as a bolt of desire rocked me. I fell back on the bed, taking Chris with me. He adjusted himself so that he wasn't squishing me. My hands roamed his chest and I unbuttoned his shirt, pushing it off. Christopher helped, without moving his fangs from my throat.

After several minutes, he removed his mouth from my neck. His eyes roamed my face. A drop of my blood stained one side of his mouth. "Feel better?" I whispered. I barely contained my need for his blood.

"I feel amazing, Jasmine."

I blushed, wondering if he knew he was the first to drink my blood. I had a feeling he did.

"Your turn." Christopher rolled on his side, tilting his head so I had easy access to the vein on his neck. In the past I only drank from his wrist. Tonight would be different. Tonight I would forget about Troy

and Laeddin and just let myself feel. I positioned myself above him. My fangs grew. I gave him a curious look, wondering if he minded. "Do it," he coaxed.

I sank my fangs into his throbbing throat and sucked. I tasted my blood mingled with his. It was amazing. Incredible. Delicious. It was all I could focus on. And I wanted more.

Chris wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling our bodies close. In that moment, with his body and blood mingling with mine, there was no one and no place else I wanted to be. Ever.

Everything made sense.

I knew who I was. Not a normal teenaged girl. I was a monster. A vampire. And most important of all, I was Christopher's and he was mine.

OceanofPDF.com

OLD HUNTERS

I WAS flYING AGAIN, and I carefully settled into the dream. Vision. Whatever it was. This time I knew I was inside Sharra's mind so I kept quiet, hoping she wouldn't notice I was there.

"It's easy to tell when you're with me, vampire." She clucked her tongue. "Now I just need to get a hold of your body." She laughed into the cool night air. "The dragon you were with was a surprise. I wasn't prepared for him. But no matter."

I didn't respond, hoping to get a glimpse of where she was and scanned our surroundings. The terrain was familiar. Not Sharra but Salem.

She circled Professor Pops' yacht.

Troy leaned against the railing, staring out at the agitated water.

Sadness caused me to wonder what he was thinking. I wanted it to be me, but there wasn't a point. How could I be with someone who didn't believe I should exist? Sure, I was stretching.

Troy seemed to sense Sharra even if he couldn't see her. "Get out of here." His features were confident as though he believed he could physically remove her if it came to that.

"Hello, son." Professor Pops climbed the steps and walked over to Troy.

"What's this?" Sharra asked. "One of my old hunters? How nice." There was joy in her. I felt it. She had cared for my grandfather at one point. At least in her own way.

Sharra flew us in closer. But Pops sensed us as well and looked directly at me - at us. His eyes appeared to pierce right into my soul.

Sharra shuddered. I remember you, her mind hissed.

Professor Pops threw out a spell with the wave of his hand and a

few whispered words. Then he turned his attention to Troy. "I have news and needed to share it right away," Pops said.

"What is it?" Troy was sullen, his eyes glazed over.

"Jesse." Professor Pops clapped Troy on the shoulder. "I know where he is."

That perked Troy up. He seemed to immediately forget what he'd been brooding over, his attention totally on Pops. "You do? Where? Let's go get him."

"That's why I came. Your father has agreed to let you come, but we must leave immediately. With the darkness spreading, I want Jesse home sooner rather than later. And the realm he's in?" Professor Pops shook his head. "I'm worried about him."

"I'm ready now." Troy walked toward the stairs.

"Did you want to say good-bye to Jasmine?" Professor Pops asked.

Troy's face softened. "I hurt her. I didn't mean to, but I - " He shook his head. "It's better if I give her some space. She'll understand. Let's go."

Troy, my heart whispered over and over.

"All right, son. Let's go get your brother back." He followed Troy down the stairs.

"That boy is truly amazing. If only he were the tiniest bit malevolent," Sharra said, breathing in through her nose like she could smell whether a person was good or evil. Then she flew us away from the yacht and headed inland.

I didn't respond, pondering Sharra's words. She was right. Troy wasn't bad or evil. He hadn't meant to hurt me either. Guilt filled my heart. Regret too. I jumped to the poorest possible conclusion with Troy. And it made the whole thing worse that it took someone as evil as Sharra to show me the error of my ways.

Sharra landed on one of the lower spires of the gothic church inside the Harmony Grove Cemetery. She turned in a circle, searching.

"Ah, there they are." She focused on a group sitting on the ground in a circle. They were kids from Salem Academy. Each had a lit candle placed in front of them. They were holding hands.

"It's so much fun to watch the wicked work. Especially when they have no idea what they're doing."

Fear spread like a thick blanket over my insides. "What are you going to do?"

"Watch, dear Jasmine. See what your wings, your magic, and my vision for the future can do."

She landed in the center of the circle, appearing like an apparition. "Hello, my pets."

"Holy crap," one of the girls said, crossing herself.

I realized it was the girl who went to the Winter Formal with Cameron.

"Witch," another said, standing. It was Cameron.

I wanted to shout at him to run.

"Oh, you know this one," Sharra said aloud even though she was speaking to me. She lifted Cameron off the ground by his neck.

"Who are you?" Cameron choked out, his feet swinging as he tried to get his feet on the ground.

"I am she whom you called while performing your ritual." She flicked her finger and made the flame on the candles flare up. "I am your Mistress."

There were seven who were in the circle. Two tried to run.

"Bup. Bup. Bup. Stay. Enjoy the fruits of your labors." Without touching them, the boy and girl turned back around and stood in the circle. They seemed to be fighting the movements, but Sharra's magic was stronger than their fear.

"How can we serve you?" Another girl asked. Her clear brown eyes were terrified.

Sharra cackled. "Oh, you humans are much too easy." She took a

deep breath and blew yellow smoke into Cameron's face. His eyes rolled back in his head and his body went limp. Then she twirled in a slow circle, blowing the smoke at each of the remaining six.

They crumpled to the ground. Sharra dropped Cameron and he landed in a heap.

"Are they dead?" I was horrified, praying they weren't dead.

"That depends on your idea of death."

Their bodies disintegrated.

Sharra pulled a silky red pouch from beneath her robes. The rope that held the bag shut looked like pixilette hair. She pulled the top of the bag open and took a pinch of deep red powder and sprinkled it over the soil where the bodies had been. As she scattered the powder, she spoke in a language I never heard before, but somehow felt familiar. Like I should know it. Like it sat on the edge of my memories.

After the powder seeped into the ground, we waited for several minutes. I wondered if Sharra had lost her mind. The ground was covered with red powder and her red pouch was totally empty.

"Sharra?" I asked, trying to gauge the soundness of her faculties.

"Patience," she answered.

She stood back.

The bodies of the kids from school began to reappear.

"What's happening?"

Sharra cackled and began to dance. The waltz, I think. Watching the bodies resurrect was like watching a flower grow in fast forward. The skeletons emerged first, the bones growing and connecting. Next came the muscles, veins, and skin. Then their insides seemed to fill up. With what, I didn't know.

Cameron's eyes opened first. They were black. And he smelled like vanilla potpourri.

"I'm so sorry, Cameron."

"Don't worry, unwanted vampire. You'll see him again really soon."

"JASMINE."

A tiny voice broke through the darkness and woke me.

My eyes blinked opened.

Abrea was hovering directly above my face.

"Hey," I said rolling onto my side.

"Laeddin is up already and he's downstairs wearing a path in the living room floor waiting for you."

Last night came back in a rush.

Abrea made an amazing dress.

Dancing with Troy.

Kissing Troy.

Going to the yacht.

Kissing Troy some more.

Laeddin appearing.

Hearing the story of the sacred crown.

Troy's words.

Coming home.

Letting Christopher drink from me, and I him - those thoughts sent my stomach fluttering. The experience was amazing. Had it been real?

And then there was the vision and what I experienced with Sharra.

"Cameron!"

I threw off the covers, sending Abrea tumbling backward. "Sorry," I said, rushing into the bathroom.

"Don't worry." She shook her head and flew in beside me.

I held out a hand and she landed on it. I leaned in and kissed the top of her head. "I'm so happy you're here."

"Me too," she said, flying over to the mirror.

"I need a shower. Be out in a few, Kay?" I asked, needing to hurry.

"Oh, fine. I'm going outside. I need some fresh air." Abrea flew out my window.

I closed the door and took a hurried shower then dressed in jeans, a red tee shirt, and my combat boots. My hair was still wet and since I wanted to hurry, I braided it before applying some gloss. Grabbing my phone, I ran downstairs.

Laeddin was in the kitchen eating an apple.

"Hi." I sat on a barstool. He looked better. Showered and shaved. He changed too. He wore clean jeans and a black button up shirt, the long sleeves rolled past the elbows. His hair was still slightly wet. He didn't say anything when I came in. Just kept chewing.

"What time did you want to leave? Are we flying by magic carpet?" I wouldn't mind that. Flying with him when we went to his realm the first time had been amazing.

Before he could answer, someone knocked on the door. I pulled it open and hid a groan. It was Officers Gand and Vick. Again. Could I wish them away?

"Should I start setting places for you at the table?" I asked, trying not to let my irritation show.

Officer Gand ignored my question. "Mind if we come in? We have a few questions."

I pushed the door wide. "Not at all." As I closed the door behind them, I noticed a military truck parked out front.

"Laeddin?" I pointed toward the driveway. He glanced out the window over the kitchen sink. I knew he'd seen the truck by the way his jaw clamped tight, but he didn't say anything. Just nodded.

I faced the officers. "Did you bring back-up?"

Officer Gand smiled. "They were there when we arrived."

He and officer Vick went over to the couch. Officer Vick pulled out his notepad and paper.

"Tell us about Cameron Anderson."

I sat in the oversized high back next to the glass cabinets. "He's a good guy. I met him my first day of school. He showed me around. Helped me find my way."

Officer Gand gave officer Vick a look. It sent my heart into my stomach. I knew they were asking about him because he was missing. As were six others.

"Right. And what about his date for last night's dance. A Gemini Felix?"

"I saw Cameron with her at the dance, but I don't know her." I twined my fingers together, resting my hands in my lap.

Officer Vick gritted his teeth. "What about Ashley Hood?"

"I don't know who that is." I felt bad. I wished there was a way to tell them what happened. But I knew without a doubt that if they didn't think I was a crazed teenager making stuff up they would think I killed them.

"David West. Steven Pollock. Hannah Coolridge. Trisha Zamora." Officer Gand's voice raised with each name and his face became red with rage.

Each name felt like a knife in my heart. Their parents. Their families would be devastated. "No. Sorry. I'm new to the school and don't know a lot of people."

"When's the last time you saw Cameron?" Officer Vick asked.

"At the dance. Last night." I swallowed but kept my eyes on him.

"What time was that?" Officer Gand continued.

"The dance ended right at midnight. I saw him and a girl get into a limo. I'm guessing the girl was Gemini, but I don't know for sure. Then they drove away." Looking directly in Officer Gand's eyes, I continued, "I haven't seen them since." I leaned forward. "Are they okay?"

"We don't know. They're missing." His eyes pierced through me.

"They are teenagers and they went to a dance. Jasmine saw them

at midnight. It's barely eight in the morning. What makes you think they're missing and not just holed up in a hotel room sleeping off last night's fun?" Laeddin asked, coming to stand next to my chair.

I appreciated his support.

"You have a point. And normally we wouldn't be worried. Except a groundskeeper found three purses with IDs inside and seven candles at the Harmony Grove Cemetery early this morning." Officer Vick's mouth formed a hard line.

"After calling the kids' parents and checking nearby hotels, we've verified they are in fact missing.

"That's terrible," I whispered, my pulse quickening.

"Yes, Jasmine. It is," Officer Vick agreed. "Any idea where they might've gone."

I shook my head. I honestly didn't know. "No. I don't."

Officer Vick sighed heavily. "For some reason I don't believe you."

"Are you accusing her of something?" Laeddin growled out.

"No sir. Of course not," Officer Gand said, but the words came out sarcastic.

"We will find out what happened and when we do, if it's discovered you had anything to do with it," Officer Vick pointed his pen at me, "we'll be sure to punish you to the full extent of the law."

Laeddin walked over to the door and yanked it open. "I'm going to have to ask you gentlemen to kindly – get out."

The policemen left. Officer Vick stomped down the stairs and to his car.

Officer Gand hesitated before getting into the squad car. "We just want to know what's going on and for some reason your name keeps coming up." He gave Laeddin a pointed look. "Sorry for any inconvenience."

"Fine," Laeddin said curtly.

We watched the officers drive away.

"Why do you think the National Guard is sitting in our front yard?" I asked.

OceanofPDF.com

CIRCUS TENT

LAEDDIN WENT out to speak with the uniformed men sitting in the green truck. They didn't say much except there was some "suspicious activity" in the area and advising us to "stay inside unless leaving was absolutely necessary". That was all the information they gave us.

I told Laeddin the truth about seeing the kids in the Harmony Grove Cemetery and I explained about Sharra. "What are we going to do?" I asked when he didn't say anything.

"You said she spoke and sprinkled red powder over the spots where they'd been?" Laeddin finally asked.

"Yes." I thought about what I'd seen and remembered another bit of information. "Also, before they disappeared, she blew yellow smoke in their faces."

"That sounds like something Sharra would do. She's always had a thing for the dramatic." He pulled a water bottle from the refrigerator and drank. Laeddin walked up the stairs. I didn't know where he was going but I followed.

When we reached his bedroom Laeddin opened the door and went inside. "When you talk to her, can you sense anything?"

"Sometimes," I said, unable to stop myself from checking out his room. It was neat as a pin and had been changed recently. It looked like his genie bottle after he'd revealed it to me all those weeks ago. It felt like a lifetime since I met him and made my first wish.

"Interesting." He picked up an old book from off a bedside table. "We need to go to Connecticut, but after what you told me, I want to make a quick trip back to my realm. I'm pretty sure I know exactly where to find the spell she placed on those kids. And if I can find out how she did it, perhaps I can reverse it."

"That's a great idea," I said, though I was sad he was leaving me again. "You think it's possible? Can you reverse the spell on Cameron and the others?" I forced myself not to hope.

"Perhaps. I'm going to check the histories. Find out. Okay?" He touched my shoulder kindly. "I'll be back soon and then we'll go by carpet to Connecticut." He smiled sweetly.

Why didn't he ask me to go with him? I sighed. "Please hurry."

"I will." He snapped his fingers and was gone.

I spun in a quick circle, knowing I should leave his room. His bed was made, the white comforter thick and billowy. The four-poster bed had mosquito netting draped across it, like a circus tent. Only the netting was white and easy to see through.

Without really thinking about what I was doing, I pushed back one of the curtains and climbed on his bed. His pillows smelled like him - oranges and exotic spices. I lay back, staring up at the ceiling.

My mind drifted. I went over what Laeddin had said. About the crown and how it could create life. I thought about what that meant. Generating new life from my DNA. Designing vampires like me. They would possess all seven magics and have wings. I wouldn't be alone. No longer a freak. No longer different.

I remembered the look on Troy's face when he heard. He'd been horrified. Terrified. Was I really that scary? Would dozens of original vampires really be that bad?

I really thought about it and tried to look at the question from his point of view.

They would possess a great deal of power, be nearly impossible to contain or kill or control.

And what if they chose evil? If Sharra got a hold of a vampire like I was and used it to do her bidding, well that would be really, really bad.

The skin on my arms prickled and my senses heightened. Someone

was here. I'd been so deep in my thoughts, I'd allowed myself to be caught off guard.

I opened my eyes, thinking Laeddin had returned. "Hey, sorr - "

It wasn't Laeddin and there wasn't just one person either. There were seven. The same seven Sharra turned into Akuma last night.

"Cameron?" I sat up, scooting close to him, hoping I could reason with him. I was strong. I had my vampire abilities once again. And if I had to tear his head from his body to free him from whatever Sharra had done to him, I would, but I didn't want to.

His dark eyes gleamed. "All alone?"

"How perfect," Gemini said.

"She was right," another of the boys said.

"The Mistress will see you now," Cameron added, reaching out for me.

"Please, Cam. Don't do this. Please." I scooted out of his grasp, and using my vampire speed rushed by them all and went to the door.

Laeddin was trying to find a way to fix Cameron, to reverse whatever spell Sharra had put on him and the others.

"Get her," Gemini screamed.

The seven Akuma came at me at once. They were as fast as me and had their arms on me before I could flee.

So I fought, growling as I kicked Gemini, sending her flying backward and into my mom's dresser. A guy and girl grabbed my feet, pulling me toward them. I grabbed the guy by the hair and twisted off his head. His body fell back. I tossed his head. It caught in the netting and rolled on the bed. His surprised features frozen in place, until he disintegrated.

The girl screamed as though she were in pain. She grabbed hold of one of my arms. With my other I yanked her long ponytail and wound it around her neck, choking her. Then used my feet to push her body away. Her head came off with a pop.

I threw the head.

Someone ripped the netting and used it to bind my arms. I snarled, flashing my teeth and putting his head into a vice grip. But it was Cameron. "Cam," I whispered. "Please."

That few seconds I was distracted was all they needed to bind my hands and feet. They were as strong as me too. And the five remaining Akuma held me fast.

Whatever magic they were given infiltrated my system. Like a poison, it leaked into my veins. It was familiar. Immediately I knew why. It was my magic. She'd used some of my magic to create the Akuma.

I choked on a sob, slashing at the netting with my fangs. I tore a hole in it, but the five Akuma wouldn't be deterred. "Laeddin," I shouted, trying to think of a wish. One that wouldn't have consequences. One where I could get out of this mess and not hurt anyone else. It was so frustrating.

By the time I had a wish formulated I was no longer in Laeddin's room. I was somewhere else altogether.

It was dark and hot and smelled of brimstone.

Had they taken me to Hell?

"Not Hell, Jasmine." It was Sharra. "Welcome to my home. It isn't much, but after your mother nearly killed me, this was where I went to hide and to heal. What do you think?"

I shuddered. "I wish - "

Invisible hands stronger than steel clamped over my mouth and held my tongue. "No. No. No wishing for you, pretend vampire. Laeddin will come, but it must be of his own choice and not because you wished him here."

I glared. There was still another way. I could wish with my mind. Maybe? Couldn't I?" It wouldn't hurt to try. I closed my eyes.

I wish, I thought.

But my mind inexplicably softened, like butter melting in the hot sun. I couldn't remember what I'd been about to wish for. I opened my eyes.

Sharra stood in front of me her dark eyes gleaming with evil mischief. Her lips red as blood. Her skin white as snow.

"No thinking for you either." She was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her for too long, but she was also aging. I saw the signs. Before my mom thought she destroyed Sharra, the vampire had wanted my mom's body for herself. To use for another hundred years.

Sharra stepped back and I noticed what she was wearing. It was made of velvet. The collar was high in the back and low in the front, exposing an immense amount of cleavage. The bodice was black and laced down to her waist. The sleeves were long as was the skirt. It was black and violet. Her black hair had been piled high on her head.

And my wings? My beautiful black wings cascaded down her back like inky waterfalls.

Tears stung my eyes. "Why are you doing this?" My head lolled to one side and I took in the room.

There wasn't much to it.

Large.

Black.

But it sparkled like diamonds.

What really caught my attention were the hundreds of Akuma packed inside. There were humans, elves, trolls, fairies, unicorns, and so many more.

"What do you intend to do with them all?" The words slurred out of my mouth.

"Whatever I want," she said slyly. "Why don't you sleep, false vampire?" She opened her mouth and blew. Yellow smoke drifted into my face. I tried to hold my breath, but it still went up my nose and penetrated my mouth. I felt it in my pores too. It smelled like sulfur

and vanilla, not a good combination. "When you wake, you'll be all mine."

OceanofPDF.com

UNSTOPPABLE

I WOKE to the sounds of hooting and hollering and stomping feet and whistling. It was like a stadium full of spectators at a football game. I kept my eyes closed, trying to figure out what was happening without giving away the fact that I was aware.

"Laeddin, so nice of you to come."

My heart raced and my mouth went dry. Laeddin was here. Sharra said he would come, and he did.

"Release Jasmine now, Sharra," Laeddin said.

"Of course, genie. I will. Just as soon as you give me what I want."

"And what is that?"

"Your power, of course," Sharra said matter-of-factly.

The room went wild again.

"Why would you want it? You have great power already. I can feel it." Laeddin whispered.

"Awwww, did you hear that?" Sharra glanced around at the Akuma who laughed and jeered. She went on, "While that may be true, I don't have enough. With your powers I'll be unstoppable."

Laeddin had incredible power. I knew that. And so much more. As quickly as it came, the fuzziness in my brain cleared up. As though my original vampire DNA fought and destroyed whatever magic she placed on me. My mind sharpened and I was myself once more. I would've sighed in relief, but it was too soon. I needed to figure out a way to save Laeddin and get us out of here.

"Fine," Laeddin said. "Take it. As long as you set Jasmine free."

The cheers in the room became louder than ever.

"That is my promise," Sharra said. The mocking grew.

I chanced a peek at the room and saw Laeddin. He had no emotion on his face. He was being led to an altar made of sparkling black stone by two Akuma.

I watched as several more Akuma forced him onto his back on the altar where black ropes appeared and bound his arms, legs, and head.

"He's ready," an Akuma said. It hurt to realize it was Cameron. He'd been right to stay away from me, but it hadn't done him any good. Even after all I sacrificed to save him, he still became a demon.

Sharra went over to the altar, her eyes focused on Laeddin. "I first realized you hid in that cave in Sharra around the same time Jasmine was born. It didn't take long to recognize the opportunity that had been laid in my path. Having the two of you together was fate. Not yours, but mine. At that moment I knew you would die and give me your power. And that you would do so willingly, in order to save her. How sweet that you love the little vampire, especially since she doesn't return it." Sharra glanced at me. Our eyes locked. Hers were filled with surprise. Mine I'm sure were full of fear.

I quickly closed my eyes. Too late.

"It seems Jasmine has wakened. Just in time. Bring her over."

Cameron and Gemini rolled my iron prison that looked like a lion's cage over next to Laeddin. Sharra smiled. It almost looked genuine.

"You will witness what it means to sacrifice for the one you love. Then I'll take your body and become the vampire I was before your idiot mother came along. What do you think?"

I opened my eyes, pretending my brain was still mush and forced myself to have an empty expression. One totally opposite of the way I was feeling." Oh, silly me. You can't think." She laughed. The Akuma joined in. Then her features became deadly serious. "Let's begin." A silver dagger with red markings appeared in Sharra's hand. She focused her attention on Laeddin, raising the dagger high above her head.

As she began to speak words in a language I didn't understand, the

dagger glowed red, vibrating and shaking almost like it wanted to be free of her grasp.

Sharra's words grew louder.

The red radiance on the blade got bigger so that it consumed her hands and arms up to her elbows.

I glanced at Laeddin. He was focused on my face, his features still empty of emotion.

The cheering and clapping of the Akuma found a rhythm, like a bass drum keeping time to a beat only they could hear. The room shook. Black sparkles rained down from the ceiling.

The end was coming. The very air crackled with its imminence. If Sharra took Laeddin's power, there would be nothing to stop her.

I wanted to give Laeddin some comfort, tell him everything was going to be okay, but I couldn't because it would've been a lie.

Sharra's chant rose over the roaring crowd. Her entire body was surrounded by the red light.

A sob tore through my chest and I babbled for her to stop. She didn't listen and I wasn't surprised. She had what she wanted and would take it without remorse.

"Jasmine." Laeddin said my name so quietly I was surprised I heard it. But I did, like he'd spoken it in my ear.

I gave him my full attention. Tears leaked onto my cheeks. I knew they would be red again, but I didn't care.

"I love you," he said. The words penetrated through the noise and deep into my soul.

A sob ripped from my throat. He wasn't saying the words out of fear or because he was sad. He meant them. I could see it. Feel it in my heart and soul.

"Laeddin." I loved him too, though it wasn't the kind of love like my parents possessed. Still, it was strong. I wanted to protect him and would do anything to keep him safe. But what?

Laeddin smiled. It was small, secret. Meant just for me. "It's okay. Everything will be fine."

I smiled back, appreciating the lies he spoke, wishing we could have more time.

And that's when the idea came.

There was an easy solution.

Make a wish, my mind whispered.

It was supposed to be saved and used for capturing an Akuma. That was what we all planned. But the plan wouldn't matter if Sharra killed Laeddin.

The idea of no longer having him in my life struck deep.

It was as though I was being asked to give up my wings for him again. A new opportunity. If I had the chance to do it again, would I make a different decision? Would I give up Laeddin and keep my wings?

The answer was a resounding no. I would make the same choice over and over.

Tonight I would save him - like I did before. He was worth it.

I would make a wish!

I didn't have time to debate how to word my wish. Nor did I have the option to ask Laeddin for help. There would be consequences, but I couldn't debate what they might be. My only option was to save Laeddin. The knife in Sharra's hands was on its descent. If I didn't act now, it would be too late.

"I wish Sharra would use the dagger on herself instead of Laeddin." My words cut through the Akuma's noise and went straight into Sharra.

Laeddin blinked, startled.

Sharra's mouth fell open as she faced me, death in her eyes.

Immediately the knife changed course. It no longer headed downward but angled and went straight into Sharra's chest. The

sound, like a blade forced into a honeydew melon, rang through the room.

An eerie hush fell over the Akuma.

Sharra gasped, shock permeating her features. "What - " She swallowed, looking down at the blade. It was buried deep in her chest. Her eyes filled with pain. " - have you done?"

The bands on Laeddin's wrists, ankles and neck loosened. He jumped off the altar.

The red light glimmering around Sharra grew bigger. I didn't know what I'd done exactly, and I didn't want to find out.

"You haven't seen the last of me Jasmine. You can bet on that!"

I swallowed, knowing I wounded her, but hadn't ended her.

"Let's get out of here." I held out my hands for Laeddin.

He took them, clutching them tightly. And we were no longer in Sharra's peculiar kingdom.

We were home.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

89 DAYS UNTIL TOTAL DARKNESS

FIVE DAYS ago I made my second wish.

It was that Sharra would use her magical dagger on herself instead of Laeddin.

She had to obey and Laeddin and I escaped her lair.

That's the thing about the genie's magic, it's more powerful than the most powerful vampire ever and that's why Sharra wanted it.

We returned to my home in the human realm and hoped she was dead.

It didn't take long to know that hope was in vain.

My wish didn't even destroy the Akuma.

The days continued getting darker.

Akuma kept coming.

On top of that was something else.

A pestilence had fallen over all realms.

To most creatures, they appeared to be nothing more than large grasshoppers, but with my eyes - original vampire eyes - I saw the truth.

Not only were the bugs eating their way through all the world's crops, they were eating their way through all creatures as well.

When bitten, regardless of gender or species, they became Akuma.

Sharra's lackeys.

The chayot got involved and tried to smite the pestilence away. It slowed the bugs down, but didn't kill them off.

My aunt Cindy as well as those at the Seven Magics Academy were working on a spell to rid the realms of the awful bugs. Nothing worked yet.

Abrea, my pixilette friend had returned to Sharra in order to help keep the realm from becoming a wasteland.

Since pixilettes were in charge of the changing seasons as well as plant life there, she had her hands full.

National news in the human realm, which continued to post the countdown to total darkness, was filled with reports of crazed animals and even more demented humans and supernaturals alike.

Several church groups believed the world was in the midst of the apocalypse. I could see their point.

It was my fault. Again.

The plethora of Akuma and the pestilence were consequences of my wish.

I saved Laeddin and pissed off the oldest and vilest vampire the world had ever known.

Of course Laeddin was angry with me.

Grateful too.

I felt that from him.

But mostly he was mad.

Could I blame him? No.

Would I make a different choice given the opportunity? Not in the slightest.

That left us at a stalemate, a barely talking or tolerating each other impasse. But at least we were working together.

We had to. Laeddin still believed that if I possessed all five pieces of the crown, I would have enough power to destroy Sharra once and for all and, most importantly, have my wings and my magic returned to me.

I wanted to believe he was right, but I wasn't sure.

My confidence was waning, and I felt alone.

I trudged on though.

At the moment, Laeddin and I were in Guilford, Connecticut, at the house of Henry Whitfield.

Well, more specifically, we were under the house, in one of the many tunnels used in the eighteen hundreds.

It was our third day searching and I wasn't thrilled about it. The tunnels were not sturdy. Quite the opposite, actually. They were crumbling. Some even caved in.

Laeddin used his genie magic to strengthen them, which helped, but I was still terrified to be so deep below the ground.

We learned rather quickly some of the tunnels led to rooms while others let to more tunnels. We hadn't travelled them all yet because we had to meticulously search every crevice, even dig.

Inside some rooms we found hidden treasures, including money, buttons, and even letters to loved ones.

I was in another of the seemingly endless rooms, sulking. I was tired. Worn out. And our search felt hopeless.

Laeddin had left me alone, sensing my frustration and went to search further down in another room.

I was on my knees, digging around the edges of a rusty box, knowing it was probably just another blasted button collection.

The room smelled like the others too - like wet dirt and mustiness.

"You love the genie, don't you?" I jumped at the sound of Christopher's voice cutting through the silence.

"Of course I do," I snapped, my heart racing.

The hunter had scared me.

"I understand. And what about me? And Troy? And - " He paused.

I brushed some hair that had fallen from my high ponytail out of my face and looked up.

"Have I missed anyone?" His hands rested on his hips as he studied me.

I glared before yanking the box from the ground, flinging damp

dirt everywhere, including my eyes.

They watered from the pain. "Damn it." I tried to wipe at them with a clean portion of my arms and finally resorted to flipping the under part of my shirt up and using it to dab my eyes.

Christopher knelt beside me. "I'm sorry. I'm being insensitive." His features softened. "And I sense you're thirsty. Go on. Take what you need. That's why I'm here."

I didn't say a word. Just yanked his black golf shirt away from his neck and sank my fangs in deep.

He gasped, grabbing hold of me under the arms and pulling me close.

I readjusted so I had a firm hold. His amazing blood flowed quick, filling my mouth and throat. I sighed at the instant rejuvenation.

Who needed a nap when there was hunter blood?

After several strong pulls, I sighed again, but I didn't want to let him go.

In his arms I felt safe, at peace even.

He seemed to sense that and wrapped his arms around me.

I retracted my fangs but didn't move my mouth. Just left it there in the crook of his warm neck.

"You're going to be fine, Jasmine. I promise," he cooed, rubbing my back.

It felt wonderful and a sense of relief simmered across my skin.

It was then I realized I was crying. His neck was wet, soaked with my tears. I couldn't respond though. Just sniffled and nodded.

"I mean it. You'll figure it out. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that the good guys always win."

"Thanks, Chris," I mumbled.

"Hey, Jasmine. I - "

I turned toward the sound of Laeddin's voice just as he walked in

the room.

In one hand he held what appeared to be dirty silk scarf. It fell from his hands when he saw me in Christopher's arms.

"What the jinn?" His features contorted in rage.

I untangled myself from the Hunter, watching him smirk before he vanished.

"What?" I asked, going back to the rusty box I found.

It was obvious Laeddin expected an explanation, but he wasn't going to get one, not unless he asked.

Laeddin pick up the dirty material he'd dropped.

"This is all I've found today." He sounded defeated, like he'd given up. And that wasn't good. He was always so hopeful.

"What is it?" I didn't look over but continued to work on opening the box made of thick, old metal.

"Someone's scarf," he returned, kneeling beside me. "What about you? What did you find?" His words came out soft.

I knew he loved me. He told Sharra as much. I loved him too, but our love though I wanted it to be romantic just wasn't.

Laeddin intended to ignore what he just witnessed.

I was okay with that. Actually more than okay. I didn't want to explain myself to him. Not again. I was tired of it.

The latch on the box had a small, corroded lock holding it in place. I crushed the metal in my fist and flipped the lid open.

A strange scent immediately struck my nose and I held my breath a moment.

The interior of the box was filled with jade-colored petals.

They were thicker than those of a regular bloom and felt like the shell of a pea pod.

"What is it?" I asked, reaching inside. They were soft, like the petals on a freshly picked flower.

"No, don't," Laeddin hissed, smacking my hand away, but it was too late. His movements caused several of the petals to sail out of the box and onto the ground.

My hand brushed against a piece of broken metal with a large gem encrusted at the top. It sparkled with red and white diamonds.

I thought.

"Don't touch it," Laeddin said, closing the box.

Before my eyes, the petals that'd fallen onto the dirt floor began to burrow down and disappear. In their place black smoke billowed up. It was thin at first but began to thicken and take shape.

Laeddin took hold of my arm and yanked me back against the farthest wall.

"What's happening?" The thick smoke touched the ceiling and started to fill out.

First a head and shoulders, followed by a torso, and legs. Hands and feet came after that. And finally features appeared on its face.

"It's a man?" I asked it like a question, squinting. Like that would allow me to understand what it was I looked at.

"I was stupid. I should've known they were real and not just a fairytale ploy meant to keep treasure hunters from searching." He blew out his breath. "We shouldn't be here. He is one of the legendary five assassins."

"Cool."

"Not cool if he tries to kill you."

I made a clucking noise with my mouth. Since I had my vampire powers back and drank from Christopher, I was stronger than ever. The assassin couldn't hurt me. Aside from that was the knowledge that if I wakened one of the elven assassins, then I'd found a piece of the crown.

OceanofPDF.com

VAMPIRE HUNTER DIET

THE CREATURE STOOD SO the top of his head nearly reached the ceiling.

He opened his eyes. They were the same color as the flower petals. "Who dares awaken me from my slumber?"

Strapped to his back were two swords. He was covered from head to toe in a uniform that reminded me of a ninja. The only part of him showing was his eyes. Even his head was covered in a thick black hood.

Remembering my upbringing, I cleared my throat. "Good sir, my name is Jasmine." I gave him a small curtsey.

If my mom could see me now, I thought.

"I've come to claim the piece of crown you guard," I went on.

His eyes started to glow. "That is not possible, Jasmine. If you try to take it, I'll be forced to destroy you."

Crap! I glanced back at Laeddin. He shook his head, took hold of my hand, and we were suddenly back at my house.

"Why?" I pulled out of his grasp. "What if he moves it? Or worse, actually destroys it?"

"He won't. He can't," Laeddin said, shaking his head.

"Are you sure?" I was so angry I wanted to punch something. Him, actually. I really wanted to punch him. Arrogant genie jerk.

"Of course I am." He went to the refrigerator and grabbed an apple. "Want one?"

"No."

"Oh, that's right. You're on a vampire Hunter diet." He slammed the door causing the condiment bottles to rattle. "How do you think your mom and dad are going to feel about that when they find out?"

I glared. "I'm not going to tell them. Are you?" The memory of the conversation I heard between my mom and dad while still out of it came to mind. Did they already know?

"I should, but no," Laeddin said. "I am your servant. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't." He sipped some water. "I'm going back to Debania. I need to find out how to kill the assassins."

"You don't know already?" I asked, my words dripping with sarcasm. Seemed like that should've been high on the priority list.

His shoulders dropped and he closed his eyes. "Not yet." His voice was barely above the whisper. "I have failed you."

"Laeddin." I was tired of fighting, tired of feeling on edge around him, and beyond tired of his anger.

He rubbed a hand over his face, and my eyes were drawn to the tattooed cuffs around his wrists. Proof he was still my servant. Not a man of the world, but a slave to my whims. That must be awful.

My soul pled with me to release him. Even the words, Laeddin, I wish you free, came into my mind. But I couldn't utter them. My mouth wouldn't open. Guilt washed over me as I realized what a selfish person I was. Death would probably be better than being tied to me. I sighed. "I'm so sorry. Can we start over? Can you forgive my choices and accept that I did what I thought was best?" Tears pressed against the back of my eyelids, but I held them at bay.

He opened his eyes. "There's nothing to forgive." As he spoke, he came over. "But understand this. I don't need saving. If I die, I die. You've already sacrificed enough. Okay?" His hands rested on my arms. "I'm sorry I've been so irritating, Princess."

I swallowed, forcing myself not to start sobbing. "Okay."

He seemed relieved and I was glad of that, but if it came right down to it, I would use my final wish to save him again. It seemed sacrificing for those I cared about was in my DNA.

"Good." He pulled me into a hug.

I resisted at first, but finally allowed myself to hug him back. He smelled delicious as usual, especially his blood. It wasn't nearly as tempting as it had been when we first met, but I still desired it.

Laeddin's chest was taut and warm. I snuggled in. He rested his cheek against the top of my head.

We stayed like that a long time. I allowed my thoughts to wander. My heart felt like a Ping-Pong ball or a yo-yo. I kept going back and forth between Troy and Laeddin. And don't forget Christopher, my mind whispered. What was wrong with me? Until a week ago I believed Troy was the guy for me.

But he was gone. Without even saying good-bye. The reason I knew where went was because of Sharra. I'd been with her and overheard Professor Pops telling Troy he found a lead. I understood why he left. Troy had told me about Jesse. The two of them were like brothers. And Jesse had been sucked into another realm. I got it, but he could've texted. Especially since the last time I'd seen him he was a jerk about me getting the crown. I intended to use it to destroy Sharra and get my wings back, but there was more. Laeddin had said I could use the crown to create more vampires like me - like I'd been. An original vampire possessed of wings and magic. Then I wouldn't be alone. But Troy thought that was a bad idea.

And then there was Laeddin. He granted me my most desired wish, became my friend, and I briefly thought even more. But since our kiss he'd been cold, and mostly angry.

I sighed, secretly wishing things could be different.

Laeddin cleared his throat. "Your hair smells like mildew," he said into my hair and we both laughed.

I stepped back and tucked my hands into my back pockets. "I guess I should shower."

He nodded. "Will you be okay while I'm gone?" He held me at arm's length and examined my face. "I shouldn't be long."

"Why don't I come with you?" I asked, hoping our moment of peace

could continue.

He shook his head. "You need a shower and some sleep."

At his words I was suddenly tired. Not physically, but mentally and emotionally. "Fine but hurry back."

He was gone before I finished speaking.

After I showered, I dressed in pajamas, climbed into bed, and fell asleep as soon as my eyes closed.

OceanofPDF.com

FOOLISH GIRL

"YOU DIDN'T LET me kill the genie and now you're going to suffer more than you believed possible. Even at this very moment Ariel is dying or dead. See?" Pictures of dozens of Akuma attacking Ariel in a strange city appeared and I watched while they ripped her apart.

"Noooooo!" I screamed and sat up, opening my eyes. I was in my room. Sweat dampened the sheets. I climbed out of bed and went to the window. How could I find out if what Sharra had shown me was the truth? Without my wings and my magic I couldn't just return to my land. A shadow crawled across the yard and I jumped back, frightened.

"Laeddin," I whispered and waited, my mind unable to let go of what I'd seen happening to Ariel.

It wasn't Laeddin, but Gatsby. The cat suddenly appeared outside my window. His yellow eyes stared through the glass.

"Let me in, vampire," he said, lifting his paw and patting at the window.

It was odd the cat could talk, even weirder that he seemed to know so much, but beyond that, he was adorable, a shorthaired gray cat with yellow eyes.

"Gatsby," I said, taking a deep breath to slow down my heart. After unlocking the clasp, I slid up the window.

"Hi yourself." He sounded grumpy.

"What's wrong?" The air had a slight chill, but there was no wind. It was crisp and smelled of roses. I stood back as the cat jumped off the sill, onto the floor and up onto my bed.

Once he was settled, I came over. "Gatsby." He hadn't been around much lately.

"Nothing." He closed his eyes. "Have you found the first piece of the crown yet?"

"We did," I said, and paused. It still irked me Laeddin hadn't let me at least try to claim it.

Gatsby opened one eye and stared. "And? Where is it?"

I clasped my hands together, frustrated. It seemed unlikely the cat could help, but still -

"Well?" he added, smacking his lips together.

"We weren't able to take it. There was an assassin sworn to protect the piece. He appeared and said he would have to kill me if I tried.

Gatsby snorted. "So why didn't you take the assassin out? He was created to protect it, but that doesn't mean you couldn't have destroyed him."

That was what I thought. "Well, Mr. Smarty Pants, I didn't know how. Neither did Laeddin. He's actually back in his realm right now trying to find a way." I sat on the bed beside him.

"It's easy," he said, licking one of his front paws.

"Really? How then?" I turned on the bed, crossing my arms and debated whether to share my dream about Ariel. He closed his eyes and I blew out my breath and decided just to blurt the information about my grandmother. "Ariel is in trouble. I think she might be dying."

That got the cat's attention. "Why would you say that?"

I explained what I'd seen from Sharra. Without a word he hopped off the bed and went to the window. "Come on." He jumped. Not down, like one would expect from a cat, but out, like he could fly.

"Gatsby." I ran over to make sure he was all right.

Instead of a cat there was a gigantic golden dragon. The force of his enormous wings beating against the air blew my hair back. He landed and then looked up, blowing smoke at me. "Well what are you waiting for?"

The smell of brimstone filled my nose and I guessed it came from the dragon. Something about his eyes was familiar. They reminded me a little of Troy's, but they were too bright and too yellow - like the cat's.

"What did you do with Gatsby?" I asked, thinking I already knew.

He shook his head, flapped his wings once before they settled at his side, and curled his tail around his body, the same way Gatsby did with his tail. "I am Gatsby, you foolish girl."

"No you aren't. Gatsby is a cat." He looked like Abernathy, the dragon. The same one who also happened to be my aunt Cindy's dad.

He opened his mouth. Fire built in the back of his throat before he roared. Then shook his head again. "In cat form I am called Gatsby, but I have many forms, including that of a dragon, in which case I am called Abernathy. Now get down here and let's go. We haven't much time if you want to save your grandmother."

"It is you." I studied him a moment longer, feeling only a little weird. Had my parents asked him to spy on me too?

"Hurry up." His head was bigger than my window, but he brought one eye down, so it was level with me. "Don't make me ask you again."

I could've tried to climb on his back from my window, but without my wings I didn't have the same confidence. The realization shocked me, but I pushed the thought aside and dashed down the stairs.

Outside, I locked the back door and took the steps down into the back yard.

"About time," he said, and lowered his head. "Climb on. You can use my tail."

As he spoke, I used my vampire abilities to traverse his tail and get on his back the same way I did with Troy. Situated in front of his wings, near his neck, I patted his head.

"You act like you've done this before." He stood and with one giant beat we were in the air.

"I have," I responded without thinking. "With your son, Troy."

"I can't believe it," he said with a growl.

Was he upset I took a ride on Troy? For some reason I thought of the dragon deep within the sea. The one who granted Sharra and Silindra a wish to see their parents. That thought sent me on a tangent. Were sea dragon and genie power connected? It made sense. "Why can't you believe it?" I asked, curious but also nervous. Had Troy broken a rule?

"Never mind." He clamped his mouth shut and I knew that was the end of our discussion about him and his son.

As we sailed through the air, my hair whipped back, out of my face. Flying was like a little piece of heaven.

"Jasmine, I'm not upset with you. It's just Troy isn't supposed to be revealing himself in the human realm. Period. Between the chayot helping the humans and their continued technological advances, I worry," he said.

"I guess," I said, not bothering to state the obvious. If it wasn't okay for Troy to shift here, then why was it okay for him?

He snorted, sending a large puff of smoke into the air. "Good. Now hang on." Abernathy jolted forward and upward and the same time. Like a rocket he soared higher and higher into the night sky. I held on to the tendrils of his thick mane and forced myself not to scream.

OceanofPDF.com

A GIANT WHALE

SO HIGH UP, the stars were bright and beautiful, and amazing.

A coil of sadness snuck its way around my heart. Even though I tried to push it away, the truth was I missed my wings, missed them more than I ever believed possible.

Like my pinky fingers, they seemed like nothing more than a small addition, one I could live without, maybe even do better without, but that wasn't the case.

My wings weren't just a small addition. They were a part of me.

Without them I didn't feel whole.

"How long will it take us to get there?" I shouted against the wind, knowing he was flying us to Mizu.

A deep rumble filled his throat. "No need to yell, vampire."

"Sorry," I hollered again.

Without warning, Abernathy dove. We were over an ocean and I realized we travelled a great distance in a very short amount of time. The dragon picked up speed and we went faster and faster.

"What are you doing?" I asked, suddenly terrified, bracing myself against the impending collision with the water.

"Hold on tight."

I didn't say anything, just closed my eyes and tightened my grip on Abernathy's mane like my life depended on it.

When Abernathy's head hit the water, I felt it. There was a whooshing sound and I opened my eyes. A bubble surrounded him, which included me. I knew I didn't need air to breathe and I figured it was highly unlikely Abernathy needed it either.

As a giant whale swam by, I realized the bubble had more to do with keeping away possible issues than anything else.

I'd never been underwater before. The experience was surreal. Abernathy took us deep and swam fast, but I caught sight of several schools of fish, dolphins, whales, and even and group of hammerhead sharks. In no time, the city of Mizu came into view. A gigantic bubble surrounded the structures. It was like a giant light up snow globe at the bottom of the ocean.

"This is Ariel's home?" I asked, curious about how far we'd come.

"It is. I thought that was obvious." Abernathy almost seemed like he was in a good mood.

"Which ocean are we in?" The answer might let me know where we were.

"Oh, interesting." He turned back and winked at me with one of his gigantic yellow eyes. "You are a curious girl."

I smiled at the almost compliment. "Are you going to tell me?"

He thought a moment. "I guess according to the current maps of the world it would be the Indian Ocean, about a hundred miles south of Africa."

"Cool." I wanted to be more excited about seeing the city under the sea, but I was nervous about my grandmother.

"Not really. It's actually quite warm this close to the Earth's core."

I knew he was being flippant and wasn't going to argue with him about the slang I used.

The closer we came, the easier it was to see something wasn't right about the city. "Hurry," I urged, jabbing my knees into his neck.

Under different circumstances I think Abernathy might have fought me on my comment, but his jovial spirits gave way to tension. I felt it within his scales. He lowered his head, said some words I couldn't understand, and we went through the bubble and into Mizu.

Orange, red, and yellow flames licked the sky and smoke swirled around us and pushed against the bubble. Like a deranged magical fire burned. The sky rained gray ash. Buildings crumbled, shaking the

world as the strange rocks crashed to the ground. If I'd ever stopped to consider what Hell might look like, I would've imagined the scenery around us, except it would be less of a reverse fishbowl and more a vast, endless wasteland.

"What should we do," I shouted. Different species and creatures screamed and ran in every direction. It was pandemonium. I didn't know where to look or who to help first.

"They're running from Akuma I can't believe her magic even reached here." He paused a moment in shock. Then continued, "We must find Ariel." He tilted his head as though listening, then circled until he landed on the roof of a building still mostly intact. "She's three floors down," he said. His weight caused the floor to shudder. I clung to him, my hands grasping at his warm golden scales.

When the building settled, I slid off Abernathy's back and landed on the shell-encrusted roof. The floor shook, sending bits everywhere and I put my hands out to steady myself and took a moment to search my surroundings.

From the building directly across from us I noticed a large shadow beginning to take shape. It reminded me of - "But that can't be," I whispered. Aquamarine eyes glowed from the wispy body and a double sword formed on his back. The assassin from the tunnels? "Not possible." I took a step toward it, squinting, unable to believe it was real, that it wasn't some trick of the thick smoke. "Abernathy?"

"I doubt this building will hold for long. Hurry up vampire!"

He was right. I didn't have time for what I thought I saw. Ignoring my fear, I rolled my shoulders and nodded. "Okay, but - the others." The citizens of Mizu were in agony; their cries seemed to crawl inside my head.

"Rescue Ariel and we'll go from there," Abernathy's voice boomed making the floor shake again.

"Got it." I ran to the shimmery door made of shells and tugged the handle. It was locked, but I crushed it in my hand, breaking it as I

yanked open the door. Darkness engulfed me and the smell of death was strong. Thankfully I didn't need light to see. I ran down the stairs, listening for signs of Akuma.

When I got to the correct floor, I opened the door and ran into a group of Akuma. I knew because of their scent. It was like death mixed in with formaldehyde trying to be covered by potpourri. Not pleasant, not at all.

"Hey, little girl." A male that looked like a cross between a human and a sea horse grabbed my arm. He drew back his lips to show me his teeth in a growl. I punched him in the throat and waited for him to collapse. When he was on the floor I jumped over his body. "Ariel!"

"In here. Please help."

Several other Akuma appeared in the hall. One had a head like an octopus with eight tentacles surrounding its neck. Another had a crab face with pinchers where the ears should be. I saw an eel and a shark Akuma too.

Never in my short life had I been more grateful for the training my parents put me through as a child. I went through them quickly, knocking them down, and whirling out of the way before they could get their hands on me. Then I kicked open the door to the room where I heard my grandmother's voice. She was tied to a spindly chair.

"Ariel." I just couldn't bring myself to call her Grandma. I didn't know her well enough. "Are you okay?" With my bare hands I shredded the rope the color of seaweed.

"I think so. As long as she doesn't come back." Ariel rubbed her wrists.

"She who?" I asked, hugging her when she stood.

"I'm not sure who she is." She buried her face in my neck. "How did you get here?"

"A dragon," I said.

She straightened. Tears stained her cheeks. "I'm glad you came,"

she said, swiping a piece of hair off my face.

"Me too."

"You two are so sweet." The voice was Sharra's. I'd know it anywhere.

Turning, I gritted my teeth. Angry fear shot through my gut. I had my vampire abilities, but I didn't have my wings. She'd stolen them from me. In fact she was wearing them. Flaunting them. Ugh. I wanted them back!

"Get behind me," Ariel whispered. Even though she didn't know me well, her protective instinct came out. A moment ago, she seemed weak. Now she looked like a warrior princess.

I shook my head. "No." My grandmother may look twenty, but she wouldn't stand a chance against Sharra. "Let me handle her." I wouldn't stand a chance either, but I had to try. So I faced her, pushing Ariel behind me. "Why are you here?" My eyes went to the place where I watched her stab herself with the silver dagger. If I hadn't watched it happen with my own eyes, I'd never be able to tell she'd been mortally wounded.

"All realms will be mine, including this little city. And I did promise I would destroy everything Snow White loves. That includes this one." She shrugged gracefully. "In a few hours there won't be anything left but my loyal Akuma." She raised her hand and opened it. Glittering red dust appeared on her fingers. She lowered her head, pursed her lips, preparing to blow it in my face.

There was no way I could move fast enough to get away. I'd almost resigned myself to what would happen. I would become Akuma as well. But suddenly the walls began to tremble and buckle. Debris rained from above.

"What?" Sharra glanced up.

I grabbed Ariel around the waist, picked her up like a rag doll, and ran her to the door. All around us it sounded as though something gigantic was tearing through the building. Suddenly, the roof

vanished, and I turned in time to see Abernathy's large head appear. Relieved, I took a breath.

"You!" Sharra's already pale face went deathly white.

Smoke curled out of his mouth and nose. "Guard your grandmother, Jasmine," Abernathy growled, focusing one golden eye on me.

"I will." I ran with her into the hallway just as Abernathy released a stream of fire. I didn't see it, but I felt the heat even from a distance.

"Stupid dragon! It's going to be fun watching Arthur destroy you," Sharra screamed. The air crackled with electricity.

Abernathy sent another wave of fire into the room. Flames licked the doorframe and I tucked Ariel into my chest.

The dragon's head appeared above me. "She's gone. Let's leave before she returns."

I ran with Ariel back into the room as Abernathy forced his body down far enough that we could climb on.

I stepped on his tail and shimmied up onto his back. Then held out my hand for Ariel to take. Once the two of us were situated, Abernathy jumped through the hole in the roof and out into the hazy sky.

OceanofPDF.com

DEATH HAPPENS

WE SCANNED the burning city of Mizu for survivors. If only there was a way to change them back.

"They've all been turned, but I know how to help them," Ariel shouted, seeming to read my mind.

I faced Ariel, pushing several pieces of hair out of my face. "You do?"

"Yes," she said, her blue eyes glistened with determination. "We need to get to my office. Head north, Abernathy. Go that way!"

"No, we must leave, Ariel. Once Sharra has turned a creature into an Akuma, there is no going back. The soul has been burned out of them, leaving only a shell. At this point they are nothing more than Sharra's puppets. They do her bidding without conscience, remorse, or understanding."

"That can't be true. I have a spell that can reverse even the most - " Ariel started, but Abernathy cut her off.

"I cannot allow you to remain here a moment longer," he growled, sending a stream of fire into the bubble protecting Mizu. The fire wasn't like the normal red and orange flames. It was gold, black, and blue and it melted an enormous hole that blackened and burned around the edges despite all the water that unexpectedly began pouring inside.

"What are you doing? You're going to kill everyone," Ariel shouted, trying to jump off Abernathy.

"No. You can't." I held her fast.

"They're already dead, Ariel. I swear it," Abernathy said with a loud roar.

I started to shiver. Not from the cold or being wet, but because of

all the death roaring in the city below.

It's my fault.

I did this.

It's my fault.

My grandmother cried behind me, her head resting against my back. I felt so bad and wished I could crunch myself up in a ball, become invisible, even disappear. Not from those around me, no. Then I would still be stuck with the memories of the consequences of my action, my stupid wish. No, I wanted to disappear from existence. Maybe then the world could heal and become whole again.

I peered over Abernathy's side. Mizu looked like a snow globe someone had shaken and dropped. "I'm so sorry," I said over and over, patting Ariel's hands.

Using his magic, he left Mizu another way. I turned back a moment, watching the water flood into the city. It was heartbreaking on many levels. Thousands of creatures were destroyed because of Sharra.

Guilt washed over me thick and heavy.

Abernathy had said their souls were burned out of them. An image of Camden came to mind. He'd been my friend. It seemed that befriending me was deadly, just as he said. My heart ached for him and for all creatures who became Akuma because of my wish.

How could I fix the mess I'd made? I didn't know, but somehow, I had to figure it out, and put the human realm back the way it once was.

His magic was strong. Stronger even than mine had been when I had my wings, maybe even stronger than Sharra's. If that were true, then why hadn't he done more to stop the evil in the world? The dragon seemed willing to help, but only to a certain degree and that bothered me. Could he destroy Sharra permanently? And if so, why hadn't he done it already?

It was several minutes before we exited the water and then another several more and we were back at my house, the house that'd once been my mom's.

Abernathy landed in the back yard.

Ariel climbed off and fell to the ground, crumbling into the fetal position. Her cries growing louder by the moment.

Abernathy glanced over at her, then at me. "If there was a way to save those citizens, I would've done it, but there wasn't. There isn't. Understand?"

I nodded, numb.

"Sharra wants to break you so you will give her your body willingly. She wants to rule all the realms. He shook his head. Smoke plumed from his nostrils. "Destroying Mizu accomplished two things. It showed you her power, and let you see her with your wings. She cares nothing for those she destroyed. All she cares about is power." He took a step toward me and lay down so I could see both golden eyes. "She means to kill your family and everyone you love. And she'll kill anyone who stands in her way."

I shook my head, even though I knew he was right. Of course he was.

Abernathy went on, "It's a sad shame, but there isn't time for you to give up or back down or start feeling sorry for yourself. Guilt has no place in you. Understand?

I tried to swallow. My eyes seemed dried open and they felt scratchy.

"You need to be strong," he went on. "You need to let Sharra see you aren't going away and you will not let her win without a fight." He snapped his jaws shut, sending spittle flying.

He seemed to know what I was feeling. "That city - " I began. "Do you know how many thousands were down there? And now they're all dead." It hurt to say the words aloud.

My fault.

All mine.

"I know." He gave me a serious look. "And now you know what is going to happen to your land, this land, and every other realm out there if you don't stop her. No one else has the power."

"I don't have any power. I'm a child without my magic or my wings. I can't stop her." Anger boiled through my veins and I clenched my hands into fists. "Why don't you do it? I know you can." I smacked him on the nose. One of his teeth, which was bigger than my head, sparkled in the moonlight, but he didn't flinch.

"What I can or cannot do doesn't matter. It isn't my place. Dragons aren't warriors. We are soul keepers. That's it," he said letting the words die in his throat. "Even Troy isn't cut out for fighting though he likes to think otherwise."

I knew Abernathy was Troy's real dad, but it was weird to have the dragon talk about his son. If he cared, then why wasn't he raising Troy? Why have Pops do it?

The dragon closed his eyes. "If I stepped in every time evil rose up, I'd never get any rest and quite frankly, my dear, I'm exhausted." He jumped into the air and circled so that we were still facing each other. "The reason it has to be you is because she chose you. You and she are the only original vampires left. She gave away her wings just as you did. If anyone knows what you're going through, it's her and she'll use that to her advantage."

"But - I - " I couldn't finish. He was right. I wanted to sulk, to wallow in the truth of what I was - a selfish, no good vampire.

"You are who you are, little vampire, and you're right where you're meant to be." He blew smoke in my face and then flew away.

OceanofPDF.com

ASH LINED HER FACE

"AR - GRANDMOTHER, let me help you inside." Now was as good a time as any to start calling her what she was. I helped her to her feet. My mom shared many stories with me about the sad woman in my arms. She'd made Ariel out to be tough. A fighter. After what Sharra had done to her city, she seemed tiny, not strong at all.

"Mizu," Ariel said between sobs. "All of my people."

"I know. I'm sorry." I helped her up the back stairs. She leaned heavily into me and I practically carried her inside and up to my room. "Lie down."

She did as I said, crawling across my bed and resting her head against the pillow. I took a blanket from the bottom of the bed and covered her.

Ariel was filthy. Black ash lined her face and clothes. She smelled like smoke. She appeared so insignificant. But she was more than that. She was my grandmother. My mom's mom. I would do anything for her.

"I'm just going to rest for a minute." She closed her eyes. Her shoulders relaxed and I knew exhaustion overtook her.

"Take as long as you need," I whispered, walking from the room and closing the door.

At the top of the stairs, I paused, allowing my eyes to rest shut a moment. The house was so quiet. Not for the first time since I'd been staying here, I tried to imagine what it had been like for my mom to grow up here, with her dad and step-mother. I couldn't quite do it. When I looked at my mom all I saw was Snow White, the Vampire Queen, the woman who ran the realm of Sharra with ease. It was hard to think of her as a girl my age. My dad said she'd been klutzy and a total tomboy at one time. That girl didn't exist in my memories and I

couldn't conjure her.

I took a deep breath and thought I could almost smell her shampoo. Had she laughed a lot? Aunt Cindy said they spent lots of nights in the room where Ariel now slept, having fun together. I tried to listen. Maybe the walls could tell me their secrets.

"Are you alright, Jasmine?"

"Mom." I opened my eyes.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, her hands on her hips. She didn't look like my mom but my friend, Zoe. "Are you okay?" she asked again.

I nodded, but I wasn't. My eyes stung with the need to shed tears that wouldn't come. My mom held out her arms and I ran down the steps and into them.

"What happened? Where have you been?" She cooed into my hair.

I swallowed, unsure how I could explain all I'd seen and how difficult it must've been for Ariel to watch her beloved city be destroyed. "It's Ariel. Uh, I mean your mom. She's upstairs."

"What? Why?" She ran up to what had at one time been her room.

I pushed past her. "She's sleeping. Don't wake her. She's been through a lot."

She opened the door silently and peeked inside. Once she saw that her mom was actually resting, she closed the door and I followed her back downstairs. "I say again, what happened?"

I started to sit on the couch but remembered I was covered in ash too. Instead I went over to one of the bar stools in the kitchen. "It was awful," I began, watching Zoe walk around the room, like a guest in her own house.

"Tell me." She took the barstool beside me.

As I shared, I cried. She held my hands, wiped my tears, and listened. I even told her about the shadow and what happened in the tunnels. It was one of the few times I felt truly close to my mom. But I

still couldn't tell her the real reason I cried. Because I knew I did this. I killed everyone. I started the darkness and brought the Akuma. I killed my friends. My selfishness would destroy the world and that was my burden to bear. Alone.

When I finished talking, my mom cleared her throat. "I can't even imagine how difficult that must've been. For you, and for her. I'm so sorry you had to be there for that. And I can't believe Abernathy admitted he could save us, if he were so inclined, but apparently the damned dragon isn't going to."

"Yeah, he's insufferable," I spat, staring at nothing as my mind held onto the scene of destruction in Mizu.

"Agreed."

"So what should we do?" I asked, blinking the carnage away.

She shrugged. "Quite honestly, I'm not sure."

That shocked me. My mom always had the answers.

"Of course I have ideas," Mom began. "Like we could - "

Laeddin appeared then. He looked tired. And even though I knew he was immortal; the genie was obviously in need of some rest. "I'm glad you're here, Queen Snow," he said to my mom, bowing slightly.

"What did you find?" I asked, jumping off the chair, clenching my hands together.

The smell of his blood sang to me and I realized how parched I was. I needed to feed, and soon.

Laeddin smiled, his eyes dropping to my lips.

My face warmed and butterflies danced in my belly. Did he want to kiss me? Before I could really think about that, he said, "I know how to stop the assassins, but we need some ingredients." He glanced at my mom. "I was hoping you'd be willing to help."

"Of course. Whatever you need, genie." She came over and rested her hands on our shoulders. "Tell me."

THE SPELL LAEDDIN talked of creating would be used to form a weapon. Complete, the weapon would bind with the user. The materials included the scale of a dragon, the eye of an elf, a piece of unicorn horn, the pinkie finger of a troll, a fairy heart, the essence of a vampire, and the blood of a slaughterer.

"Something from each of the seven magics," my mom said, giving me a sideways glance.

"But gross," I added. Pieces and parts of different creatures to create a spell. I knew we kept donated parts down beneath the Academy, but mostly I tried to forget about that.

"Can you collect them again?" Laeddin asked, ignoring my childish comment.

"Of course. It'll take some time, but I'll hurry." She kissed my cheek and disappeared before I had the chance to say good-bye.

"What should we do while we wait?" I asked, watching him. He seemed less stressed and that had me curious.

Laeddin gave me a once over, his eyes raised in question. "I think the first thing you should do is get cleaned up."

I glanced down at myself, noticing the dirty ash covering my clothes and skin. I'd momentarily forgotten I was a mess. "You're right." I climbed the steps and listened at my bedroom door to see if Ariel was awake.

There was a thump and I worried Ariel had fallen out of my bed. Quickly I opened the door. Sharra was there, standing over my grandmother. "Sharra!"

She held the silver dagger in one hand, the blade covered in blood. It was the same blade I wished she stab herself with. A wicked gleam shone in her eyes. "Too late, little vampire. Tell your mom," she said and vanished.

"No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No." I went over to Ariel and fell onto the floor beside her. Blood spread from the wound in her chest like spilled red ink. "Ariel! Grandmother!" Pain ripped from my throat.

"Laeddin, help!"

He was beside me instantly.

I knew what I wanted to do. There wasn't even another thought in my mind. "You have to save her. I wish it," I said, my voice hard.

Laeddin felt for a pulse. "It's too late." He swallowed, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Princess, but she's already gone."

"No, Laeddin." I pressed my hands against her wound, trying to hold in the blood, because if it stayed inside then she had to stay alive. "I order you! It's my final wish. And I want you to do it." I glared at Laeddin. He had the saddest look on his face, and that made me angrier.

"I can't. It isn't even an option."

I was crying so hard; my eyes were blurry. What would my mom do when she found out I'd gotten her mom killed?

Oh no. She'd never forgive me for that. If only I'd never been born. Laeddin had to fix this. "There must be something you can do. What if you took my life and gave it to her? Wouldn't that work?" I lifted my dirty tee shirt and wiped it across my face. I didn't care.

"That isn't how my magic works. I could wish you into her body, but she still wouldn't be there. The woman you knew as Ariel is gone, Jasmine. Her soul has moved on. And there isn't anything you can do to bring her back."

I didn't want to accept it, didn't want to believe. "She can't be!" I brushed the curtain of hair that covered her face, revealing her open eyes. "Mom's never going to forgive me," I whimpered. "I need to tell her." I so didn't want to, but there was no getting around it.

"I'll bring her back."

But he didn't need to. I still don't know how it happened, whether my mom and her mom were connected somehow or if it was coincidence, or something else entirely, but my mom appeared in my room.

"Mom?" Still on my knees, I held out my hands. They were covered in blood. Maybe she would end me. I had no doubt she could do it. Other than Abernathy and Sharra, I believed she was probably the most powerful magical being in all the realms.

"Mom! No. Mom!" She fell to her knees beside her mother and did what I'd just been doing, placing her hands over the injury. "How did this happen?"

She looked over at Laeddin.

"I believe Jasmine can answer your question," he said tenderly.

Mom turned and looked at me with such anguish, I fell back on my butt. "Jasmine?" she pleaded.

"It was - It's - " I crawled away from her, unable to remain so close to her pain.

"Are you hurt?" She came over.

"No. I'm fine. Just fine. I'm alive while everyone else seems to be dying. But me, I'm fine! I'm fine. I'm fine." I was losing it. There was no question.

"Jasmine. Sweetheart."

Great. She wasn't mad. That was worse. She felt bad. For me. The person responsible for killing her mom. "Don't try to make me feel better. I did this," I said. "She's dead because of me."

"Jasmine, that's not true. You know that's - " she tried.

But I couldn't listen and shook my head. "No! Don't try to make me feel better." I stood, feeling like I would be sick. "I can't be here." I ran out of my room, down the stairs, and out the front door.

OceanofPDF.com

NOT A MONSTER

AS SOON AS I hit the fresh air, I physically felt better, which made me feel worse.

"Hey, Jack. How's it going?" Troy stepped from the shadow of the tree in our front yard. He wore a plain black tee shirt and a dark pair of jeans. His sandy blond hair seemed to have grown longer since the dance.

At the memory of our last time together I cringed. He'd said that more creatures like me was a bad idea. He thought me a monster and he was right. "What do you want, Troy?" I bit the words out.

"Nothing. Hey," he said, taking my arms. "Talk to me about what's wrong."

"Get away from me, dragon boy." I pulled from his grasp.

"Dragon boy? Ouch." He took me by the wrist and held it up. Blood shone in the moonlight. No doubt he could smell it too.

I heard his heart pick up speed and watched his eyes grow big. I pulled away. "That's right, Troy. I'm a monster. You were right. Stay away from me." My fangs extended and I growled. I could've run. I was fast, but there was a part of me desperate for him, and I hated that about myself.

Troy held up his hands. "You're not a monster, Jack. I'm sorry for what I said before. On the boat. I didn't mean it." The sincerity of his words was evident, but I couldn't quite believe.

"You did and that's okay," I said, but my ferocity was running out of steam. "It's true. More like me would be a mistake." Without waiting for a response, I ran as fast as my vampire legs would take me. I didn't know where I was heading until I got there.

The one on Harmony Grove Street. "A vampire in a cemetery.

Perfect." I laughed because otherwise I would've cried or screamed or worse, ate someone. "Ugh."

"Jack. Jasmine."

"Go away, Troy. Get away from me while you still can." I didn't face him, too disgusted with myself to do anything.

"Damn, girl. I leave for a while and come back to find you having a full-blown pity party. It's a good thing I got here when I did." He came up behind me and touched my shoulders.

I couldn't bare his touch. I didn't deserve any comfort. I needed pain. If I could've blinked myself from existence I would have. Shrugging him off, I walked over to a bench near the quaint church and sat, tucking my feet underneath me and crossing my arms. "Did you find Jesse?" I asked, changing the focus from me to him.

He hung his head. "Not yet. We're getting closer. Pops thought he found him, but it was just another lost cause." He flung himself on the bench beside me. "The longer it takes though the more I worry we'll never find him."

"Hey," I say reaching out to pat his arm, noticing the dried blood on my fingers, and pulling back. "You'll find him. Unlike me, you aren't a monster."

"Oh, Jack. You really need to knock off whatever doubts you're having about yourself."

"It's not about me, it's about what happens when people are around me." I scooted to the other side of the bench. "People I care about keep dying." What if I let Sharra take my body? My soul would be gone. I would be gone.

"Come on, Jack." He took hold of my chin and forced me to look at him.

My eyes dampened and filled with tears. I pulled away. "It's true. Camden, Abby, and now my grandmother. It's only a matter of time before Sharra comes after my mom and dad. If you stick around, she'll come after you too." Now that I started spilling, I couldn't stop. "I

wished away my wings and my magic all for the chance to be someone I'm not." I hiccupped and covered my mouth a moment. "Now I know what a stupid wish that was, there isn't a thing I can do about it." I pulled my knees to my chest and rested my head against them. "If she took my body, at least I wouldn't be a problem for anyone anymore," I finished.

"Shut the freak up!"

I flinched at the heat behind his words but didn't move.

He went on, "So, what? You're just going to give up? Let the darkness take over. You're going to let Sharra win?" Determination lined his face. "You can do something about your problem. Are you going to face her or fail before you've given yourself the chance to try?"

"Troy. I don't - "

"Jack!" He stood and rubbed his hands through his hair, making it messy. I thought he never looked better. "Stop being such a child. Stop blaming yourself for stuff that's out of your control. Stop thinking you're a victim and start doing what you know is right." He knelt in front of me. "Jack. I believe in you. Whatever it takes, I know you can do it."

I tried to fake a smile, but it wasn't happening. "Thanks, Troy." I still didn't believe him. It was easier to believe the bad stuff. He thought I was a monster. Did Abernathy feel that way about me too? I shook the question away as Troy came in close, his stomach touching my legs.

Without realizing, I lowered my legs, so I straddled him. I couldn't help it.

"Jack," he whispered, his warm hands cupping my face. "You are the most infuriating person I've ever met." His hungry lips crashed into mine and I reciprocated, grabbing hold of his shoulders and gripping him close. His teeth grazed by bottom lip before he kissed me deeply.

I moaned, wishing I could be closer to him. It was the kind of kiss I

only ever dreamed about, the kind of kiss I always wished for, but figured I would never get. I panted eagerly, my breathing coming out in jagged gasps. And all sorts of feelings rushed to the surface, for him, for those who died, for my grandmother, for my mom, and for all that still needed to happen. They gurgled through me like molten lava.

And I knew what I needed to do.

Troy seemed to sense the change in me and pulled back. "You ready?" His hazel eyes flashed back and forth, searching mine.

I nodded.

"If I knew all it would take to get you fired up was another one of my awesome kisses, I would've done that first thing. Skipped all the apologies and headed straight for your mouth."

I grinned. "Never change, dragon boy." I kissed him quick.

He got to his feet and pulled me up with him. "You're done pouting?"

"Yes."

"You gonna kick some Sharra ass?"

"I am." I kept my focus on him, knowing with him in my life, I could do anything.

"Good." He kissed my cheek and then made a face. "Shower first, would ya?"

I laughed. Couldn't help it. "Okay, I will."

He let go and we started walking through the cemetery.

"What's your plan? You going to keep searching for Jesse?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't leave me again.

"Of course."

I took his hand, twined it with mine. "He's lucky to have a friend like you."

He smirked. "I'm your friend too, Jack."

Without knowing why, I sped up, desperate to get started.

He came up behind me and swatted my butt.

I gasped and turned. "Seriously?"

"Get it done, vampire girl."

Before I could say anymore, he ran past me and shifted, then shot into the sky. For the briefest moment he blocked out the moon. It made me think of Batman - except Troy was better. His big, bronze wings shone in the moonlight. One eye glanced down at me.

"Race you home?"

"Deal."

OceanofPDF.com

HANG ON PRINCESS

WHEN I ARRIVED BACK at the house, I waved goodbye to Troy and then went inside.

My mom was gone, as was my grandmother's body.

The room that was my mom's once upon a time was clean and the bed had been made with fresh linens. A strong scent of disinfectants lingered, burning the inside of my nose and making my stomach turn.

Mixed emotions swirled through my heart.

I was grateful my mom took Ariel with her, thankful I didn't have to talk to my mom right now since I didn't know what to say and devastated that I hadn't been able to say goodbye to my grandmother.

But mostly I was angry. Frustrated beyond belief that Sharra had killed my grandmother. Not hurt her but ended her life.

It was time to make Sharra pay.

I rapidly showered before dressing in jeans, my black combat boots, and a black hoodie. Brushed my hair, braided it, and wrapped it in a bun. Then I took a deep breath and went down the hall to Laeddin's room. Knocked softly. I didn't know for sure whether he was still in the house, but it seemed likely since his door was closed. So I waited.

There was rustling and the sound of his throat clearing.

He opened the door wearing only navy blue pajama bottoms. I couldn't help myself as I scanned his chest and torso. And the smell of his blood? It smelled divine. I almost couldn't resist grabbing him and drinking without permission. The hunger. It had come on suddenly and without notice. I needed Christopher, his blood.

"Are you all right, Jasmine?" His eyes were heavy with sleep.

I shook my head. "No. The only way I'm going to be able to stop

Sharra once and for all is by finding all the pieces of the crown and putting them together. So we need to get the ingredients and do the spell so that we can destroy the assassins."

One side of his mouth lifted in a small curve. "Glad to hear it." He opened his bedroom door all the way and indicated the overflowing desk near the window. "Your mother gathered them already. She said the hardest item would've been getting a dragon scale, but Troy gave it to her before she left."

I figured the hardest object for my mom to obtain would've been the Hunter's blood. I wondered if she had it on hand, if he was still giving her a supply, and it'd been in our storeroom. That was probably the case.

But I only thought about that for a moment and instead let my mind travel to Troy. He was always looking out for me, even when I didn't realize it. "Great. What do you do first?"

Laeddin glanced at his bedside clock. "It's late. Don't you want to get some rest? You look tired."

I shook my head. "Every second I waste with mundane things like sleep only gives Sharra more time to make her plans. I don't want to wait."

"Okay, let's get started then." In the blink of an eye, everything except the desk and the things on it were gone, leaving the wooden floor bare. He snapped his fingers and a black seven-point star surrounded by a circle appeared in the center of the room. "Place an ingredient on each of the points, keeping them inside the circle." He took the eyeball between his thumb and middle finger and gently set in on one of the points. I picked up Troy's dragon scale and squeezed it in my hand as I hugged it to my chest, sending out a silent thank you.

For the next several minutes, Laeddin and I worked quietly together, placing the ingredients until all seven were at the points, but within the circle.

When we finished, he said, "You must stand inside the star, in the center."

I carefully stepped inside and without touching the lines moved until I stood in the middle. "Here?" I asked, looking around me to make sure I wasn't on any of the lines.

"Perfect." He picked up a black book and turned the pages until he reached the one he wanted. Then he looked at me. "Stay still. Don't move."

His words didn't exactly fill me with courage, but I was in this until the end, no matter what. "I won't."

He cleared his throat. "Jasmine, before I start, I just want you to know that I think you're amazing. In every way. And I know you can do what has to be done." He nodded.

"Thank you, Laeddin." It was easy to see he meant his words and I really appreciated them, him, all that he'd done. None of what had happened was his fault.

His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Ready?"

"Yes." I clutched my hands into fists, unsure about what was going to happen, but trying to prepare myself.

Laeddin began speaking. His words were soft and foreign. I didn't understand what he was saying, but I immediately felt as if I was being tugged in seven directions, as though I was being pulled into the points. I felt my eyes grow wide with fear. What was happening? But I didn't move, staying still just as Laeddin asked.

The longer he went on, the stronger the pulling became, until I believed I would be ripped into pieces. Part of me wanted to run away, but that was the old me. I wasn't moving until Laeddin told me it was safe to do so.

After several minutes, I realized whatever he was saying, it was the same thing over and over, like a chant. I began to recognize the words and I focused on them, on the sound of his voice. It was soft and deep, like water. I closed my eyes, sinking into the sounds.

"Hang on, Princess."

I heard Laeddin speak, but couldn't answer, not even if I'd wanted to. The pulling from the seven ingredients seemed to have stopped. I no longer felt separated from them, but as though I'd become one with them.

I was still in the center of the star, but somehow within them as well.

Still holding still, I allowed the newness within me to shift and organize.

Before they fully settled, like a rubber band, each piece pulled away, taking the piece of me within them along.

They took me through the air and past the edges of the world into the infinite expanse that was the heavens, including all of the planets and stars.

I saw everything, felt everything, tasted, smelled, and became everything. It was darkness and light, and so many things in between, things I couldn't explain, but somehow had become a part of me, until the portion of myself I recognized was tiny in comparison to everything else.

Then as abruptly as they pulled away, they were back and it was just me standing in the middle of the seven pointed star.

"Princess?"

I opened my eyes at the sound of Laeddin's voice.

He gasped.

"What?" I asked, crossing my arms nervously.

"See for yourself."

"I can move?"

"Yes, as far as I can tell, the spell is complete."

Tentative, I glanced around, noticing that the seven objects were gone. Except that wasn't right. They weren't gone, just moved inside of me. I stepped from the circle and went to the full-length mirror.

The most noticeable difference was my eyes. The irises kept changing color. One second they were gold, the next they were green. The longer I stared in the mirror the more colors I saw, including blue, brown, red, silver, and indigo. "The seven magics," I whispered, understanding dawning on me.

"That's right." He stood so I could see his reflection in the mirror. "Not only that, but look." He turned me around so that I had to look over my shoulder to see my back.

"What?" At first, I didn't see anything, but then my eyes adjusted, and I was seeing with my vampire vision. And there they were, the transparent outline of a new pair of wings! "How is this possible?" They weren't feathery like my original pair, but more webbed, like that of a dragons. And then they were gone. "Where did they go?"

"I'm not sure. I'm guessing them appearing has to do with the way the incantation infused you with the seven magics. Even though Sharra took your wings and your magics, they are still a part of you." He gave me a big smile. "I mean you were created by the seven magics. You were already a part of them, and the spell just reawakened them within you - at least that's what I'm thinking."

I nodded. "That makes sense, I guess. But what about the weapon needed to kill the assassins. Did that part not work? Is it because I didn't have my magics to start with?"

"I don't think so, but I don't know. Maybe you have become the weapon." He shrugged. "The spell did say the user and the weapon would be bound."

"Was there anything else?" I was worried. Had my choices once again created a problem that couldn't be fixed?

Laeddin rested his middle finger on my forehead. "Close your eyes."

He closed his, so I went along with it.

A light seemed to dig its way around my mind, looking for something. I guessed the weapon.

After several long seconds, I noticed the light come upon something dark and powerful. It didn't seem to have a shape but was just a great stretch of nothingness.

Laeddin pulled back, dropping his hand to his side. "The weapon is in there, without a doubt, but it's being protected by a power not even my magic can penetrate."

"I saw it too." I crossed my arms, trying not to be afraid of whatever it was I'd seen. "Let's go back to the tunnels, find the box and the piece of the crown, and test the theory, see if the weapon will work.

"Now?" His face contorted in worry. "I really think you should rest."

I shook my head. "There isn't time. Let's go."

OceanofPDF.com

FROG IN MY THROAT

WE POPPED into the tunnel immediately. Even without a light I knew we were in the room where we left the container.

Laeddin produced a light as I knelt and then turned back the lid.

As before, I pushed past the jade petals that felt like pea pods and their sickly sweet smell.

And as before, the elven assassin appeared.

He stood until the top of his head nearly reached the ceiling and opened his eyes.

They were the same color as the flower petals.

"Who dares awaken me from my slumber?"

"It is I, Jasmine." I sounded like there was a frog in my throat and I cleared it. "I'm here to claim the piece of crown you guard."

His jade green eyes flashed in anger. "I cannot allow that." He crossed his arms over his shoulders and removed the swords. "Prepare yourself for destruction."

I wasn't sure how to respond. Laeddin and I saw that a weapon was inside of me. Whatever it was, I hoped it would appear as soon as possible. "I will not die. I can't. It's my destiny to take the crown and save the Earth." As I spoke the words, twin blades exactly like the assassin's appeared in my hands. Red lightning crackled all along them. Their emergence surprised the assassin. They surprised me too. And Laeddin. I could tell by the expression on his face.

"I see you have come prepared." The assassin lunged forward, sending his swords down as though he would destroy me with one blow.

I wasn't ready. Thankfully the swords seemed to know exactly what to do. They brought my hands up and crossed the blades, so the

assassin's came down on them.

He wasn't deterred but spun and attacked from below.

The swords in my hands parried, blocked, and then struck him in the thigh and across the stomach.

Shocked, his eyes widened.

The swords were comfortable in my hands now, and I took advantage of his moment of weakness, going in for the kill. With one movement, I crossed the blades through his neck and stepped back in time to see his head fall from his body, hit the dirt and roll. His face was fully fleshed out and revealed empty defeat.

The blades in my hands vaporized as though they knew they were no longer required. I stared at my fingers. "Did that seriously just happen?" Awed revulsion was evident in my voice.

"If I hadn't been here to witness it, I wouldn't have believed it." Laeddin came around and took my hands. They were warm, and I instantly relaxed. "You did it," he said shaking my fingers lightly.

"I did it," I repeated, blinking several times.

Laeddin released me and picked up the box. "Claim your crown," he said softly.

My hands shook in disbelief, but also hope. I reached out to touch the broken piece of crown. As my fingers caressed the metal, a white electric current surged from the crown and grabbed hold of my finger.

I tried to release it, but the current held me fast. And the crown piece moved out of the box on its own and crawled into my palm. "Whoa," I said, glancing at Laeddin.

His eyes were as big as mine felt. "Look."

The piece of crown burrowed into my skin, like an insect.

I screamed and tried to dig at it, afraid of what was happening. "What's it doing?"

Laeddin joined in helping me, but it was no use. Red and white electric currents bubbled and gurgled under my skin as the crown

creeped up my arm.

It wasn't necessarily pain I felt, but it was still odd, like cold water hitting my stomach when it was empty. I tried shaking my arm and even extended my fangs and tried to bite it out of me, but the piece of crown would not be deterred.

"Does it hurt? Are you okay?" Laeddin was especially distraught but was unable to do anything. He even used his magic to make it come out. It didn't work.

"It isn't painful, it's just freaky." By that time it reached my shoulder, I let out a haggard breath, accepting whatever would happen. It moved along my collarbone, up my neck, and past my cheekbone. When it reached my eye, there was a flash of red and white light, but only for the briefest second before it settled in the center of my forehead.

I touched the spot where it stopped and could feel it, but only for a moment before it seemed to melt into me and vanish.

"It's gone," Laeddin said, when I couldn't feel it anymore.

I removed my fingers and dropped them to my sides and then fell to my knees, suddenly so exhausted I couldn't move.

"Princess? Jasmine?"

"One down. Four more to go," I said, falling forward. My cheek smacked the wet, smelly dirt, but I didn't have the strength to move. I couldn't even keep my eyes open.

"I've got you," Laeddin said.

I tried to thank him, but nothing came out.

I DON'T KNOW for how long I slept, but when I woke it was light outside.

Birds sang happily in the trees beside my house. That wasn't the loudest noise though.

There was a purring and it seemed to be coming from inside my

head.

I opened my eyes and searched my room for the source.

Rather quickly I realized Gatsby was curled into a ball on my stomach.

I sat up and pushed him off.

The cat came awake with a start, his claws digging into my skin through the blankets as his hair raised straight and he yowled.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked, but the sudden fear dissipated as quickly as it came.

Fully recovered, he gave me an irritated look as he yawned and stretched. "Protecting you, ungrateful vampire." He jumped off the bed and then hopped up on the windowsill. "But I know when I'm not wanted. I'll go."

"Wait. Gatsby." I liked him better as a cat than a dragon.

He turned to study me. "You've been through a lot. I'm glad to see you're okay." He blinked and then jumped out the window.

I pushed the covers aside and went to the window, hoping to see him, but he was gone. Sighing, I went into the bathroom and saw that the crown piece hadn't disappeared completely. Smack in the middle of my eyebrows and about an inch up was a small diamond. It looked like someone had glued it there for decoration. I tried to force it off, but it wouldn't budge. "Great. That's going to difficult to explain."

After showering, dressing, and braiding my hair, I opened my bedroom door and listened for Laeddin.

"He's gone," Christopher said.

I jumped, my heart sticking in my throat. "Chris," I said, whirling around.

Standing in my bedroom, beside my window, he was breathtaking, and I realized quite similar in physical appearance to Troy.

"What do you want?" I grumbled, but my fangs pressed against the inside of my mouth. Because I was suddenly starved.

His eyes left my face and lingered on my throat. I let him drink from me before, but something told me not to let him again. Not while I had the weapon within.

"You startled me," I said, moving closer to him without realizing it. One thought drove all my instincts. Hunger. I needed to feed, and I wanted to feed on him.

His eyes locked on mine. "Why are you different?" He inhaled deeply through his nose. "Your blood doesn't smell the same."

I nodded, looking away, focusing on his neck. "A spell," I said, grabbing his shoulders, and standing on my tiptoes.

"What kind of spell?" His voice was hoarse with emotion.

"Laeddin found it." I opened my mouth, allowing my fangs to extend, but I wasn't quite tall enough.

"What's it for?" He lifted me into his arms and carried me over to my bed.

My breath hitched. I couldn't think of anything but his blood. "I need to defeat - " When he sat, I straddled him. He tilted his head, giving me easy access to his neck. I sank my fangs in deep and sucked from him like I hadn't eaten in years instead of days.

As soon as his blood hit the back of my throat something unexpected happened. I began to see his memories as I drank. At first it was disconcerting, like watching a movie backward and on fast-forward. Except I could hear everything too, including he'd been the one to tell my mom about Ariel's death.

When I got to his teenaged years and saw him carving the bear, I pulled away.

"Feel better? There's color in your cheeks again." His eyes sparkled with lust.

"Yes, thank you," I said, wiping the corner of my mouth. A flood of heat rushed through me at the thought of his memories. They lingered in my mind like his blood did in my throat.

He arched an eyebrow. "What's the matter?"

I thought about telling him what I saw, but I didn't want him to feel uncomfortable and I didn't want to stop drinking from him. His blood filled me better than any other ever had. "Nothing."

He wrapped his arms around me, and I let him, allowing him to hold me and comfort me. I needed it. After not very many seconds his head tilted to one side and he stood, taking me with him. "Laeddin's back. I must go." He vanished, sending me crashing to the floor.

OceanofPDF.com

YOU LOOK BETTER

LAEDDIN BURST INTO MY ROOM. "PRINCESS?"

I adjusted myself and stood. "I'm fine. I - uh, just fell."

His hands roamed my body as though he were feeling for broken bones, even though that wasn't possible. "What's this?" He touched the diamond on my forehead.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure but I'm guessing it has to do with the crown."

"You're probably right." He pursed his lips in a grim line. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yes. I'm good."

Laeddin stepped back. "You look better. Rested." He went over to the closet and opened the doors, then faced me. "Which is good because you need to go to your grandmother's funeral."

At hearing his words, my heart sank. "Is it today? Usually funerals take days and days to plan."

"You've been asleep for three." He took a dress from my closet and showed me.

I shook my head. "Three days?" I ran to the window, like the sky could tell me the date. In some ways it could, since the darkness was getting closer and closer. "Why did you let me sleep so long? We still have four more pieces to find." I turned to face him and crossed my arms.

He had another dress in his hands.

"No," I said, and he put it back.

As he flipped through my clothes, he spoke. "I know, but you needed to rest. And trust me, I tried to wake you up more than once, but you wouldn't have it. Your body needed the sleep."

"Okay."

He pulled a long, black dress from my closet. "Get dressed and I'll take you back to Sharra for the funeral."

"Actually," I moved toward him. "Is there any way you could take me now. I have a dress there I want to wear, and I need to see Zenny."

"Sure." He hung the dress back up before placing his hands on my waist. "Hold on."

"I wrapped my arms around his neck."

Instantly we were back in my room in the castle.

I was in Sharra. Home!

A bright happiness tingled through and over me. There was sadness, sure. I wasn't here for a good reason, but the familiarity of being in the place I'd grown up, with so many fond memories, warmed me in ways I hadn't thought possible.

Laeddin nodded. "Get dressed. The funeral starts in an hour. Your mom and dad are expecting you."

He vanished from my room. For a brief moment I wondered where he went and if he was upset, but I didn't have time to brood over Laeddin. I needed to get to work.

Running a hand along my bedspread and wall and anything else I could touch along the way; I went to my closet. Everything was just as I left it, everything in its place. I went to the dresses and dug through the black ones until I found the one I wanted. It was long with a tight, lace bodice that buttoned up in back and came up to just under my neck. I removed it from the hanger, held it against my body, and went to the mirror.

Zenny appeared in the bottom right corner of my mirror.

"Zenny," I said, bending down to his level. His eyes were puffy, and his nose was red. Normally he dressed in bright colors, but today he'd chosen a black suit, with a gray vest and bow tie. His usually flamboyant hair was now a soft white.

"It's so good to see you," he whimpered. "If only the circumstances were better."

"Agreed," I said and stood. "Hang in there, Zenny."

He sniffled and wiped his nose with a handkerchief. "Once you're dressed go to the powder room and I'll do your hair and makeup."

"Thanks, Zenny." When he left, I changed out of my jeans and into my dress. It was impossible to button and I didn't know how the magics I'd been given would respond to a simple request like buttoning a dress, so I didn't try to do them myself.

Instead I held it to my chest, went into the powder room, and sat in my chair. A sigh escaped my lips before I could stop it and I bit my bottom lip. I didn't know grandmother well, but I hurt for my mom.

Zenny clapped his hands as he walked into the mirror. "I've missed you." He came in close and peered at me over his thick, round glasses. "You're different. What happened to the violet in your eyes and," he gasped, covering his mouth with his hands. "Your wings. Oh, sweet pixilette pickle juice, where did they go?"

I forced myself not to cry or sob or throw a tantrum. "They're gone," was all I said.

"I can see that," he tut-tutted with the click of his tongue. "Poor, sweet thing, where did they go?"

While he worked on my hair and makeup, I caught him up. Sharing what happened with my wishes, and my wings, and Laeddin, and Troy - Everything except Christopher. I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone about him. Laeddin knew of course, but not because I told. He found out on accident.

While I talked, he worked his magic on my hair and makeup. When he finished, he clapped his hands. "Your story has inspired me. And my, but don't you look beautiful."

I peered at myself in the mirror. "Zenny," I breathed, turning back and forth.

"You like it?"

I barely recognized myself. I seemed older. Maybe it was my eye color or the shape of my face. Zenny had lined my eyes with black eyeliner, used a shimmery white eye shadow that sparkled like the diamond in the center of my forehead for the lid. Above it, in the crease he used a smoky brownish gray color followed by more of the shimmering white shadow. My lashes were thick and a dark black with tiny red rubies at the tip. He'd given my cheeks a little color and then darkened my lips, so they were blood red. My hair had been loosely curled and then swept up in a loose bun, leaving out my long, teal bangs.

"You've outdone yourself. Thank you." I got out of my chair and turned. "Can you help with the buttons?"

"Of course." They buttoned all at once and he went a step further and tied the bow at my waist.

I checked my reflection in the full-length mirror. "Amazing. Zenny, thank you so much."

"Anything for you, princess."

THE FUNERAL WAS BEING HELD in the largest ballroom.

The windows were covered with thick white draperies while the normally black and white checkered floor was changed to a white marble and the roof had been removed so the bright blue sky could be seen.

My grandmother's body rested on a blanket of blood red water lilies, which starkly contrasted against her white dress.

Her skin was pale, her eyes were shut, and her long black lashes made shadowy half-moons on her face. Her lips were stained red and curved up slightly, so she appeared to be smiling.

They placed her hands on her stomach, one on top of the other. And her feet were bare. Under the flowers she lay on was a pyre.

Aside from our immediate family, those select few who'd been invited to my grandmother's funeral included the leaders of the seven magics as well as my mom and dad's close friends and the Academy teaching staff.

Professor Pops and my dad's brothers were there, excluding Gabe, as were the members of their families who knew about the different realms.

Kenmei came as well as a young man I never met before.

They were both dressed in black and white suits.

Troy had come too.

He stood beside Professor Pops.

When he saw me, he nodded an acknowledgement, his face somber.

Having him at the funeral warmed my heart.

He looked especially handsome in his crisp button up white shirt, gray tie, and black suit. I also noticed he seemed especially sad and wondered if he was still worried about Jesse.

My best friend, the pixilette Abrea fluttered in wearing a lavender and black gown and hovered near my dad's ear.

Her eyes brimmed with sadness and she kept sniffling.

When she saw me, she flew over and snuggled against my cheek.

"Oh, Jasmine. I'm here if you need me." She dropped onto my outstretched finger.

"Thanks, Abrea. I do need you."

OceanofPDF.com

GOODBYE GRANDMOTHER

"WELL I'M HERE." She flew to my shoulder and landed there, settling in for the duration.

Aunt Cindy stood on my mom's right. She'd come with her assistant from Polonias, a giant talking leopard by the name of Violet.

She wore a short black dress without sleeves. The leopard's wiry glasses kept slipping down her nose until they sat so close to the edge, I wondered how they hadn't fallen off.

Cindy wore a black dress with iridescent blue gauze around the waist, cuffs, and hem. It came to the middle of her calves and she had on black high heels with a bow at the ankle, ever the most stylish person in the room.

My parents had taken the potion to change back into their rightful bodies.

Dad had on a white suit with a water lily pinned to his lapel and my mom wore a red dress, the color of her mom's hair.

"Come. Stand between us," my dad said, when he saw me. I slid into place and peered sideways at my mom. Was she mad? Could she stand me any longer? Or was I just a person to forget?

She gave me a brief smile and I returned it. I wanted to tell her I was sorry, and I would when the time was right.

It seemed everyone who mattered was there.

There were two noticeable absences: Laeddin and Christopher.

I figured since Christopher was on the council he would have to be here, but maybe my mom asked him not to come.

My heart ached a little at the thought. What did Christopher do when he wasn't around? What kind of life did he lead?

I didn't understand why Laeddin wasn't here. It saddened me to

think he didn't feel like family.

But I couldn't dwell on it more because my dad began to speak.

"Thank you all for coming. We're here to mourn a tragedy but I'm beyond grateful to see each of you. As we say goodbye to a mother, a sister, and a friend, I hope you'll take a moment to share a fond memory or two." As he spoke, he made eye contact with each person in the room.

I hadn't realized my grandmother knew everyone here.

A troll stepped forward first. "Ariel was an honorable woman, at least according to my mother, the great Esther. My mother spoke fondly of a time when she and Ariel had been sent on a scouting mission together many, many years ago. It was early morning and the mist lined the valley below so they couldn't see anything farther than a foot in front of them. They spotted a group of rogue trolls during the night and wanted to make sure they weren't causing trouble. So they were on edge.

"My mother said she closed her eyes for a moment and all of a sudden something thumped her on the nose. She screamed, which caused Ariel to scream and they both jumped to their feet. Turned out it was just a pixilette that'd gone to sleep in the air and had fallen from the sky and landed on my mother's nose. Instead of yelling at my mother, she patted her on the back and they both had a good laugh." He pressed a giant fist to his chest and tossed the water lily he held in his other hand onto the pyre in front of Ariel.

It went like that for the next hour as each of the seven leaders spoke. Then Cindy shared the experience she had in rescuing Ariel from Mizu. Professor Pops and Kenmei each told stories about her that I heard before.

By the time it was my dad's turn, we were all laughing and crying. He stepped forward. "Before I married Snow, I spoke to Ariel. It was the most terrifying moment of my life, even worse than when I saved Snow from the blade and the Unknowns."

I shuddered as I remembered the story.

"But I'll never forget what she told me." He swallowed down the emotion in his voice before going on. "She said, 'Dorian the secret to a great marriage is - ' and then she stopped. I waited, thinking maybe she forgot." Everyone in the room held their breaths until my dad went on, "I finally asked, 'What is the secret?' She gave me a sneaky look and then clucked her tongue. I thought maybe I missed something. But she punched me lightly on the arm and said, 'There is no secret, silly. It boils down to love. Make sure you give her all of yourself, all the time, every moment and every second. If Snow does the same for you, your marriage may be bumpy, there will most definitely be ups and downs, but love will never leave your lives and your marriage will only grow stronger.'" My dad stopped, unpinned the lily from his lapel and tossed it onto the pyre before stepping back in the circle. My mom reached across me, grabbed his hand and clung to it. I glanced at him and saw the tears on his face. I'd never seen my dad cry and my eyes misted at the sight.

Their sorrow is your fault, my mind whispered.

My mom took her turn. She spoke of the first time they met after thinking Ariel was dead, for years, and then of the day I was born.

"Jasmine was immediately smitten with my mom," she said. "It was by watching her I learned what it meant to not only tell a person you love them, but to show them. She carried Jasmine around everywhere those first two weeks and then when she had to leave - " A hard sob tore from my mom's throat and I lost it.

"I'm so sorry, Mom. I didn't mean for this to happen," I cried, not caring that my tears would ruin my makeup. "If there's anything I can do, just name it." I wrapped my arms around her waist, clinging to her. "Please forgive me."

My mom carefully spun in my arms and then lifted my chin. Her face was hard, and I steeled myself for the harsh words she would say.

"Jasmine, sweet girl, this isn't your fault." She wiped away my tears

and kissed each of my cheeks.

Her kindness only made me cry harder, because it was my fault. If I hadn't been so selfish, if I hadn't wished away my wings like they were nothing, my grandmother would still be alive.

"It's Sharra's fault," she went on. "If you want to direct your sadness or anger at anyone, point it at her." She kissed my forehead right on the spot where the diamond was. "You, my daughter, are not to blame."

She hugged me and I would've stayed like that until she pushed me away, even though I had a feeling she never would. My dad came up behind me and hugged me too. So did Troy and Cindy and others. I couldn't tell for sure, but it felt like everyone.

Finally the troll leader cleared his throat. "It's time, your highness."

We all untangled ourselves from the big group hug and I looked up. It was completely dark now and the moon shone full and bright in the night sky.

Fire appeared in my mom's hand. "In love and in fondest memories, we return your body to the ash from whence it came." She threw the fire onto the pyre. My father did the same. An orb of fire appeared in my hand without me even trying and I tossed it onto the pyre as well.

As everyone took their turn adding to the fire, the flames became enormous, consuming my grandmother's body.

In moments, she was ash, which then turned to small red rubies that floated out of the room and up into the night sky.

I watched until every last one had ascended. "Good-bye, Grandmother."

ONE BY ONE the others left. I listened as my mom and dad thanked those who came. Abrea still sat on my shoulder, crying, sniffling, and blowing her nose.

I hugged Professor Pops, my dad's brothers, Kenmei, and the others as they said their goodbyes, until the only people left were my mom and dad, Cindy, Gabe, Violet, and Troy.

He stood beside me and took my hand. "You doing all right?" he whispered in my ear.

I wasn't, but I nodded. "Fine. Thanks for coming. It means a lot to have you here."

"Hey." Troy turned me to face him. His eyes were intense and searched mine. "I'll see you soon. Hang in there." He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "By the way, I like the diamond addition." He winked, squeezed my hands, and kissed my cheek.

"Thanks," I said again, lamely.

He went to the entrance where I noticed Professor Pops still waited for him. They left together.

Cindy and Gabe said good-bye next. She promised to take me shopping soon. I smiled at that. It was one of the reasons I loved her so much. Even with all our worries about the darkness she wanted to make me smile.

Abrea left reluctantly after I told her to go, that I needed some time alone with my mom and dad.

When it was just the three of us, we held each other a moment. "Love you, my queen," my dad said sweetly, wrapping an arm around her.

She let go of me and pressed herself fully against him, stifling her sobs against his neck.

He held her close, pressing his cheek against the top of her head and letting her cry. My heart broke at seeing them like that, so sad, yet still so committed to each other.

My fault, my mind whispered.

Someone coughed behind me. I guessed it would be Laeddin, that he'd come to offer his condolences. Upon turning, I saw it was

Christopher. At the sight of him my mouth watered, his blood calling out, pushing away every semblance of decorum. Only that it was my mom and dad in the room did I resist.

"I know you asked me not to come, but I felt I would be remiss if I didn't offer my sympathies for the loss of your mother."

My dad's head lifted; his features turned furious. "Leave. Now. You're not welcome here. This is a private matter."

Christopher's shoulders fell. He looked so dejected. I wanted to reach out and comfort him. In some ways I understood his feelings. He betrayed those he cared for out of selfishness. As had I.

He glanced at me.

I gave him a small smile.

"I'll leave as soon as Jasmine asks me to go," he said gruffly.

I sucked in my breath. Was he seriously going to go against my dad? That seemed dangerous.

My dad let go of my mom. "I won't ask you again, Hunter." His strange eyes flashed heatedly.

I stepped between them, facing Christopher. "Thanks for coming, but I think you should go." I told him with my eyes how urgent it was he leave, but he just smiled.

"I'll go as soon as you tell your parents the truth about us," he said smugly, crossing his arms.

I nearly died of embarrassment. "Why are you doing this?" I asked, shocked.

My mom and dad were suddenly on either side of me, protecting me.

"What's he talking about?" my dad asked, glancing from me to Christopher.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it." I crossed my arms, keeping my eyes on the floor.

"How do you think she got her vampire abilities back after Sharra

took her wings?" He was angry and I couldn't blame him, but this didn't seem like the time. Not that there would ever be a good time to talk about it.

My mom gave me an incredulous look. "You didn't!"

"How dare you?" My dad was on Christopher in seconds and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "She's a child. My child. I told you once that I would kill you if you ever gave me a reason. The time has come. Touching my daughter is more than reason enough." His voice shook with anger and my knees quaked. Never had I heard my dad like that before. Energy seemed to pulse from my dad and into Christopher.

The Hunter's arrogant face became scared and his face turned gray, the color of ash. I hadn't believed it was possible, but whatever power my dad possessed, it was killing Christopher.

"Dad. Stop!" I shoved against his shoulder. Somehow, I was stronger than I realized, and my dad sailed to the floor. "Sorry." I went to him and stuck out my hand to help him up. "Sorry." Tears blurred my vision. "Please, no more death," I said adamantly.

My dad shook his head. Disappointment evident on his face. "What's gotten into you?" He got up without my help. "You're drinking from him?" He pointed at Christopher.

I glanced at the Hunter and saw he was on his hands and knees, panting.

"He betrayed your mom, tried to kill her. He worked for Sharra, the same evil vampire who stole your wings and killed your grandmother. How could you?" His eyes bored into me. "I'm beyond disappointed."

That was the worst. My dad's disappointment. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just - " What excuse could I give him? I didn't have one.

"Jasmine, there's a reason we never allowed you to drink Christopher's blood," my mom began. But she was unable to finish.

OceanofPDF.com

MOMENTARY FEAR

"AHHHHH, it's good to be here once again." Sharra appeared in the ballroom out of thin air, my glorious wings beating lightly at her back.

My dad didn't hesitate, but went after her, grabbing her by the throat. He was so quick, he shocked all of us.

"I had a feeling you'd show up." His fingers dug into her neck as he forced her to her knees. "You'll pay for the pain you've caused and when I finish with you, you'll be completely gone from this Earth."

Sharra blinked several times and then touched my dad with the tip of the staff she carried.

His body became stiff, like he was frozen. Sharra pulled from his grasp. "Stupid boy!"

"Dad!" I ran to him. Sharra sent a black current at me. It struck and I fell to the ground.

"That was too easy," she cackled, her wicked eyes scanning each of us. "How dare you lay your hands - " Sharra said.

Before she could finish, my mom had Sharra's neck in her mouth, her fangs biting down.

Sharra's eyes became wide with momentary fear, but she recovered when she touched my mom with her staff, and it rendered my mom immobile.

Christopher lunged at her as well, but she held up her hand. "If you don't stop right there, I'll kill you without thinking twice." She glanced at me and then continued speaking. "You wouldn't want that, would you, Hunter?"

Christopher shook his head.

"Very good. Run along then."

He stalked from the room, his footsteps echoing off the floor and

my heart fell. He was still a coward. Even after everything that happened.

Sharra laughed as she walked over to my dad and picked him and my mom up like they were nothing more than rag dolls. How could she do that? Why? What made her so powerful?

You gave her your wings and your magic. It's your fault.

"No," I called out. "Don't - hurt them." I tried to lift a hand in supplication but couldn't move.

She came over. "You think I'm going to make them Akuma like the others, but I'm not. Oh, no. What they're going to get is so much worse."

I wanted to make the swords appear, but they wouldn't come. Whatever Sharra had done, it'd made it so I couldn't call forth anything except fury.

"Toodles, Jasmine. Thanks for the wings. They're amazing, better than mine ever were," she said and disappeared, taking my parents with her.

I lay on the floor, wishing I could cry, but still partially paralyzed by whatever Sharra had done to make it happen.

It felt like hours or longer, but it was just minutes before Christopher returned.

"Get. Away. From. Me." The words came out choppy, but I heard them leave my mouth.

"Look, I'm sorry I acted like a coward, but how can I help you if I'm dead?" He ripped open a vein in his wrist and let the blood drip into my mouth.

I wanted to close my lips against his blood, but some went down my throat and sadly it helped. The paralysis began to subside, and I grabbed his hand, pulling his wrist further into my mouth, drinking deeply until I no longer felt the effects of whatever Sharra did to me.

Once again in control of my faculties, I pushed him away and

scooted back, smacking against something. I looked up and saw Laeddin.

His presence suddenly made me angry, like I-couldn't-contain-myself violent.

I jumped up and punched him in the face.

He took it without a word.

"How could you? Why weren't you here? You should've been here." I hit him again. "You could've saved them." I kept pounding on his chest, but no longer meaning it.

"I had a feeling something might happen, and I couldn't let you use your final wish," Laeddin said, his voice indulgent.

"Why? If it could've stopped Sharra, then why?"

"Because." He wrapped me in a bear hug.

"Because why? Tell me, damn you." I hit him again and again and again.

"Princess," he grabbed my wrists. "You know the rules. I can't kill anyone, and you aren't ready, not even close."

All the air seemed to go out of me. There was no fight left and I sank to my knees in front of him. "Fine, then find out where the next piece of the crown is so we can go get it."

"I already have. It's in the gargoyle realm."

"You're sure?" I asked, blinking back the tears.

"Yes." He released my hands. "I'll take you there as soon as you're ready."

"I'm going too," Christopher said, coming to stand beside me.

I'd forgotten he was still here.

"No, Hunter, you're not. The further you stay from her the better we'll all be." Laeddin's voice sounded adamant.

Christopher roared in frustration. "Stop keeping me from her. She's mine. She belongs with me and only me." He sounded like a child and

I felt sorry for him.

"Chris," I said, using his arm to stand.

He ran his hands through his hair. "You don't understand. I have to stay near you. We belong together."

"Then explain it. Why is it so important that we stay together?"

He shook his head and I noticed tears in his eyes. "I can't, not with the genie still around."

"Well I'm not going anywhere," Laeddin said.

Christopher glared at the genie like he wanted to kill him with his stare. "Take this." He yanked a carved bear from his wrist and placed it in my hand. "Please, don't ask questions, just do me this small favor."

I nodded. It was the least I could do. "Sure, where did you get it?" I knew the answer because I'd seen it in his memories, but I wanted to see if he'd tell me the truth.

Christopher tied the soft leather holding the bear around my wrist. "I made it. Before I became a Hunter, I enjoyed making things like this." Once it was secure, he sighed. "Thank you."

"Your wel - "

With a twinkle he vanished.

I studied the weathered wooden bear. A deep reddish brown stained parts of it and I knew it was blood. But whose, I wondered.

You'll get him killed too, I thought and then quickly pushed it away.

Laeddin came up behind me. "You aren't going to keep that thing on, are you?"

"I am," I said, acidly. "You got a problem with that?"

"No." He sighed heavily. "Let's go."

"To the gargoyle realm?" I asked as he took me in his arms. His exotic scent filled the air around me.

"Not yet. First there is something you need to see." He took me around the waist.

I knew we were travelling but it wasn't quick like usual. This time it took more than a few moments. When we stopped, I stepped away from him and looked around. "Where are we?"

"1428. France." Laeddin said.

"What are we doing here?" I was confused.

"It's time you see how Professor Pops became who he is. Hopefully it'll help you when you have to defeat Sharra." He came close, his eyes flicking back and forth as he studied me. "I'm going to touch your forehead. When you wake, you will be inside Joanna Reesa d'Arc's mind. Listen and learn." He reached up to touch my forehead.

"Wait," I said, grabbing his wrist. "Where will you be?"

"I will be inside Professor Pops' mind."

I swallowed, nervously. Even the air smelled different. "So this is France, huh?"

"Yes, it is during 1428, anyway." His eyes danced with amusement.

"And we're back in time?" I licked my lips, confused and scared.

"It's going to be alright. Just listen and learn." He touched my forehead and suddenly everything was different -

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

PROFESSOR POPS PART ONE

BEFORE I BECAME A VAMPIRE, I was just a man with simple needs and one desire. Her name was Joanna Reesa d'Arc. I called her Red because of her deep auburn hair. She always wore it down her back in a long braid.

Red was beautiful in every way. Strong. Courageous. Devoted to her country and family. To a stranger she might appear weak and helpless, but she was none of that.

She was five feet of fearlessness with deep convictions toward her visions of what God wanted France to become.

The first time I saw her she was in her eighth year.

In her tiny hands she carried a pail full of water.

A serious expression, one I would learn meant she was thinking, hung on her lovely face. She wore a white bonnet along with a hunter green frock the same color as her eyes.

Joanna was the daughter of the town constable. The d'Arc family was the closest thing to royalty the town had, and they acted like it too.

When I was young, I wanted to know her, to be near her.

By the time she was sixteen I knew I loved her and would follow her to the ends of the Earth if she asked.

Much later in life I would recognize it was her destiny to lead armies and it was mine to love her -

"Adam, stop taking it easy on me," Joanna said with irritation. "If I'm going to be any kind of swordswoman I mustn't be coddled."

"Very well, Red." I transferred my sword into my stronger hand.

She stuck out her tongue sarcastically. "Bon. Let's go again."

For the next thirty minutes she and I practiced.

She was so good, better even than I, but she always wanted to

learn more.

"Are you going to Chinon tomorrow?" I asked her the question even though I knew the answer. She would go and I would accompany her.

We were inseparable and I wouldn't leave her alone.

"Of course. The king needs me." She jabbed and parried.

"Are you sure?" I stepped forward and swung my sword.

She blocked and gave me a winning smile. "If I didn't listen to my God, what sort of servant would I be? Without me, the king cannot win. Unless you think Saint Michael is a liar?" She lifted her eyes in question curious about what I thought.

"More than anything, I believe you aren't a liar." That was the truth. She was many things. Beautiful. Fiery. Amazing. Definitely not a liar.

"I'm glad because it wouldn't do if the man I loved didn't trust in me."

"I do. With all my heart." I paused, placing my hand over my heart.

She came at me with her sword, a laugh on her lips.

I blocked, our swords clanging. In the distance a rooster crowed. It didn't matter the time of day, the thing crowed constantly.

"God is with us. Know that, Adam," she said, her eyes pinning me in place.

I beamed at her confidence. She wasn't arrogant. Joanna just knew without a doubt what needed to be done and nothing could deter her. "You're so full of yourself," I joked.

She spun around, sending her green dress ballooning out around her legs. "And you are a tease." Her face glowed.

"I can't help myself. I enjoy seeing you riled up." As I spoke, I pulled her against my chest. "It makes your green eyes sparkle like early morning dew kissing newly grown grass." I took in her subtle lips, hungry to taste her.

We were practicing behind my father's shop with the swords I recently made for the two of us.

The sun had been down for hours and the moonflowers scented the air in my mother's garden.

"What would my father say if he knew?" she asked but leaned into me and lifted her face so I could see her mischief.

Every night for the last fourteen months we met to train with swords - except for a few weeks ago when we took those strangers to Chinon.

Thoughts of that quest filled my mind and I cringed.

It was a time I mostly wanted to forget.

Except the parts with Joanna.

Her and I? I hoped we would never end.

She was the love of my life and I would do anything for her.

"I pray he'll agree to let you become Mrs. Joanna Reesa Henry," I finally said and winked, knowing my love for her would only increase.

She glanced away and I knew why.

Her father wanted her to marry another man.

"Don't worry. No matter what, I won't let Ansel lay a finger on you," I said softly, kissing each cheek.

She ran her free hand through my hair. "I believe you."

"My sweet Red. I am very glad."

She chewed on her lip, her face turning serious.

I brushed a strand of hay off her cheek. "God knows how much I love you. We will find a way to be together. That other man is nothing to us." I worked to keep the irritation out of my voice.

Ansel Grafton was an awful man. Sure he saved a little girl from being eaten by a bear one year, but he'd been the reason the bear was there in the first place.

The jackass killed the baby and mama bear wanted to exact her

revenge.

Joanna's father also didn't seem to care that Ansel spent way too much time drinking.

I kissed her lightly. "I promise, it's you and me forever."

"Good." She wrapped her hands around my neck. "Because you are the only man for me, mon cher."

I WAS up before dawn the next morning. Our small group would travel to Chinon so Joanna could speak to the king.

She no longer wore her lovely green dress, but sturdy armor over brown pants, a brown shirt, and a burgundy cape.

Even dressed like a man, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

"Let's get this over with," her uncle Durrand shouted.

He kicked the sides of his horse and it jolted forward.

The man made it known he wanted no part of her crusade but was doing what she asked out of respect for her father. That went for the rest of the convoy as well.

We rode for several hours, and I worked to stay calm, but it was difficult knowing the last time we traveled this way, there had been vampires, a dragon, and wolves to contend with.

Joanna and I discussed what had occurred on our last journey a few times.

With her, there was never a worry.

Me on the other hand? I worried all the time. But I kept it to myself.

The land was covered in mist and fog, making our traveling wet and uncomfortable.

Despite that, the men's spirits were light.

They joked and laughed until we stopped to stretch our legs and eat some bread and cheese. It was during that break I noticed

something off about the land around us.

Usually there were the sounds of animals rustling in the underbrush.

But the road and the surrounding forest were eerily quiet. Not even a bird twittered its warning song.

Something hunted us.

I had no idea what, but I needed to find out and destroy it.

"Durrand, I'm going to stay behind. Make sure all is well." I plopped the last bite of cheese in my mouth.

"Fine," he replied, without care. "Do whatever you must."

I knew I wasn't anything to him, but his opinion didn't concern me. Red meant everything, and I would do whatever it took to keep her safe.

"Adam," Joanna whispered.

She didn't want the others to see her feelings for me.

To her, those feelings were weakness. I was a disadvantage they could use against her.

"It'll be all right. I want to check out the surrounding area, make sure you're safe."

She gave me a look that said she'd rather I remain with her. "Be careful of the wolves and - " She paused and glanced around at the rest of the group. "Be wary of other creatures as well."

I knew exactly what she was thinking. "I'll return before nightfall, I promise." I smiled encouragingly.

"D'accord." She took a deep breath and climbed on her horse. "Until tonight."

"Move out," Durrand yelled.

I watched them ride away.

Had I known all that I know now, I might have made different choices.

As soon as she was out of sight, I knew my life would never be the same.

Felt it in my bones the way my father's twitchy knee felt a storm coming.

I mounted my horse and doubled back, listening for anything that might explain what pursued us.

My first thought was it was Ansel, that perhaps he believed himself being loyal by following after us.

But there were neither hoof prints nor footprints.

There were no tracks at all and that didn't sit right with me either.

"What is going on?" I whispered into the wind.

Nightfall came as I returned to camp.

Joanna and the men had pitched their tents.

They sat around a fire, the men laughing and talking loudly.

Joanna sat away from the others. She seemed miles away, lost in thoughts I couldn't even imagine.

"Bonjour." I hailed them. "It is I, Adam Henry."

As soon as Joanna saw me, she stood, and my favorite smile lit her face. "Adam," she said.

My heart raced at seeing her.

I could almost smell the honeysuckle scent of her hair.

Red. My beautiful Red. How I longed to sweep her up in my arms and kiss away her troubles.

Instead I just nodded.

She had a momentary lapse in decorum.

If I responded in kind to her words, she'd be upset with herself and me later. I wouldn't let that happen.

I loved her too much.

I climbed off my horse but kept my distance.

Until they appeared.

Like wraiths they stepped out of the darkness.

At least a dozen of them dressed in black hooded robes.

It wasn't wolves, but these characters looked worse. They were vampires.

"Run," I shouted.

Joanna started, alarm replacing the faraway look in her eyes.

Before she could move, a woman in a blood red cape appeared in front of her.

One moment she hadn't been there and the next she was.

Electricity filled with air, like just before a thunderstorm. It crackled and snapped.

"Are you an angel?" Joanna asked.

She showed no fear and I cried out in frustration. My Red didn't fear anything, not even a fire breathing dragon.

"I'm your angel," the woman answered. "My name is Sharra." She removed her hood, revealing long black hair and skin the color of un churned milk.

Joanna's hand found her sword, but the woman shook her head. "Your blade is of no use to you, Joanna Reesa d'Arc." She stepped closer. "I'm in need of your body. You are strong, beautiful, and powerful. If you allow me to merge with you, we can become the ruler of this country if that is your wish."

"Blasphemy," Joanna hissed. "I would sooner die."

A wounded growl ripped from my throat. "Be gone, bloodsucker," I shouted.

She turned to me. "You know what I am? How quaint," she said, appraising me. "Leave Joanna to me and I'll let you live." Her lips turned up in a sly smile.

"I cannot do that. Step away from her now." Anger boiled through every part of my body. I would stop the vampire or die trying.

"That is too bad." She touched Joanna's forehead and my love's eyes closed before she fell to the ground as though she were dead.

Anguish ripped from my throat and I lunged at Sharra. With the wave of her hands, I fell to the ground, unable to move.

"Do not touch him or the girl. I want both," Sharra said to the others.

The men of our convoy sprang into action, drawing their swords.

It didn't escape my notice that those under the hoods were all women.

Except one. His heritage was unknown to me, but his skin and eyes were dark as the night around us.

Without giving him another thought, I tried with all of my might to fight against my frozen limbs, but it was no use.

I watched in horror as the woman in the black robes fell on the men as though to embrace them, but the men screamed in pain.

"As for you." She looked me over. Lifted her hand and my sword yanked out of my grasp. "You cannot kill me." She flicked her wrist and I unwillingly rose to my knees. "I know you love the girl," she said, coming to stand directly in front of me.

I glanced around her, checking to make sure Joanna was still on the ground.

Sharra went on, "I saw you in her mind, you know. Joanna loves you, though she knows the two of you can never be. She believes her life is destined for so much more than becoming your wife and bearing you children. The girl intends to lead France's army against the English. To her death if needs be. She believes that is her divine calling." Sharra brushed a piece of my hair off my face. I shuddered at the chill in her fingers. "But I have greater plans for her."

"You. Will. Not. Touch. Her," I bit out, clenching my teeth.

"My dear, I'll do whatever I please." She opened her mouth and fangs, like the canines on a bear, grew in her mouth.

"Keep your filthy mouth away from me," I hissed.

"Oh no. I will taste you and the girl." She tilted my head and sank her teeth into my neck.

In that moment, as the edges of my vision faded into darkness, I believed my life was over. My only regret was that I hadn't saved my love, my Joanna.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

PROFESSOR POPS PART TWO

I CAME to and heard Sharra talking.

"I know you believe in your visions, but where is your God now, when you need him most. Don't you think if you were meant to lead your country to victory, he would rescue you?"

"You speak blasphemy against my Lord. It may not be today, but you will suffer for your irreverence." Joanna spoke with quiet certainty, without a shred of horror in her voice.

Sharra grabbed Joanna's face. "Highly unlikely, little one."

I opened my eyes and saw Joanna was chained to a wall. It appeared we were in a dungeon of some sort. It stank of rotting flesh and wet dirt.

"Release her. You can contend with me but leave Joanna alone," I tried to shout, my voice groggy and my throat parched.

Sharra sauntered over. The material of her dress rustled against her legs. "I wondered when you'd wake. You've been asleep a long time. Days in fact. I didn't take that much blood. Perhaps you're weaker than I first believed."

I ground my teeth together, but didn't respond.

"My love," Joanna said, reaching out to me. The cuffs around her wrists jangled.

My heart raced with desperation. That anyone would dare to treat Joanna so disrespectfully stormed through my body.

A quick look around revealed I was chained to a stone slab. "Either kill me or free me, but know if you do not kill me, I will find a way out of these chains and end you painfully." I strained against the bonds, but to no avail.

My clothes had been removed, except my trousers. Sweat streaked my hairline.

It was hot like the workshop when firing metal for a sword.

The smell of sulfur stifled the air, making it painful to breathe.

"You are a rare treat, Adam Henry." With one of her nails, she cut a shallow straight line down my chest, leaving a streak of blood in its wake. "If Joanna didn't need to drink your blood, I would drain all you myself."

"Leave Joanna out of this," I said, forcing my wrists against the chains until they cut into my skin.

She watched me breathing heavily several long minutes. "You discovered what Arthur was, didn't you? And that is how you know what I am?"

"You aren't that special, bloodsucker," I spat.

"Oh, but I am." She patted me on the cheek. "And bloodsucker is such a primitive name." She wiped her finger in my blood and tasted it.

I cringed. The man I'd seen earlier stepped toward Joanna, distracting me from Sharra. "Stay away from her. Don't lay a finger on her." I whipped my head from side to side, desperate for escape.

He ignored me and tilted Joanna's head. Fangs pierced Joanna's soft skin and a drop of blood ran down her neck.

Never in my life had I felt such helpless, hopeless agony. "Please," I begged. "Don't do this. Please." I knew I sounded pitiful, but I didn't care. If anyone was to die, it should be me, not my beautiful Joanna.

Joanna's head rolled back. She moaned, and pressed her neck further into the man's mouth.

"Joanna?" I couldn't believe what my eyes beheld.

"You see, Adam Henry, the bite of a vampire, especially that of a Hunter is sensual and irresistible." She bent and licked my chest. When she straightened, I saw my blood on her tongue. "If it makes you feel any better, Joanna cannot help herself. She longs for him the way a lion longs for the lamb."

"Stop. Please. Do not do this. Take me instead," I said, my words

came out in gasps. I didn't understand what was happening but I needed to stop it.

Sharra pushed my head to the side. "Your blood is all I need. All Joanna needs." Sharra glanced at her. "You'll live as long as it takes for Joanna to become a vampire and then she'll be mine. She'll do my bidding, fight for my causes, not the pitiful needs of a whiny king and his dreary country."

THE TORTURE WENT on for days as we remained chained in Sharra's dungeon. There were no windows, no light other than that of the candles around the room.

We were brought food at random times. After a while Joanna stopped eating and her eyes turned from their lovely green to a blood red.

"It won't be long now," Sharra said to Joanna when she appeared out of thin air. "If you don't feed soon, you'll die." She spoke to Joanna.

"I would rather die than drink the blood of my love," Joanna said, her words soft but firm.

Sharra growled. "Why must you be so stubborn? I will force you if I have to."

"You can try, vampire." Joanna's voice shook with emotion, but her body sagged against the chains that bound her.

I lifted my head. "Red?"

She turned toward me. "Do not worry, mi amour. The worst she can do is kill me and if I should leave this world, fear not, for I will see my Maker and there is nothing but joy in that." She took a deep breath and I realized how close to death she really was.

Sharra snapped her fingers and a golden cup appeared. She grabbed my hand with a strength I couldn't believe she possessed and cut my wrist with one of her nails. I watched my blood drain into the cup like water from a fall. "Perhaps you should tell her that death isn't

the worst I can do."

"What do you mean?" I asked the question, but I really didn't want to know.

"Kenmei," she hollered.

"Yes, my queen." He emerged wearing all black and dragging a woman beside him. There was a burlap bag over her head.

"No," I whispered.

Sharra smiled. "Oh, yes." To Kenmei she said, "Remove the bag and let our dear Joanna see whom I've brought for her to taste."

Kenmei removed the burlap sack and revealed what I already suspected. It was Joanna's mother.

The lady's eyes were wide with terror. "Joanna, what is going on? What is the meaning of - "

Sharra snapped her fingers and the woman stopped talking. "Quiet, old woman!"

"Mother," Joanna muttered. Pain etched her gaunt face and she cried in silence.

I understood that it didn't matter whether Sharra killed her mother, father, or even her little brother Gerard, Joanna would not break, she would not go against what she believed to be right.

There was no gray in Joanna's life, only right and wrong, and she considered what Sharra asked of her to be wrong.

In that moment I fell in love with her all the more.

Her convictions were as much a part of her as her lovely red hair.

"Will you drink your true love's blood now or will you watch as I kill your mother first followed by your brother and finally your father?"

Joanna looked down, her eyes on the dirty ground. "Wicked creature, as I've already explained, I will not. If my family dies, they will go to our Heavenly Father and there find peace."

She lifted her head. Her eyes burned with determination. "While

you will suffer everlasting pain and damnation for shedding innocent blood."

"I see." Sharra stuck a finger in the cup and put it to Joanna's lips. "Drink."

Joanna's eyes changed as the blood entered her mouth.

Sharra squealed with delight. "Don't you see? Can't you feel the power you'll possess?"

"Oh, yes. I feel it." Joanna licked her lips, taking the blood in her mouth. For the briefest moment the color returned to her face.

I took a deep breath, unsure whether I was relieved or disappointed.

But then she spat it out and my heart lurched with adoration. She would not give in. Not in the slightest. "But I do not want it, nor do I need it."

"Foolish girl!" Sharra chugged from the goblet all of my blood. When she finished, she threw the cup at the wall next to Joanna's head leaving a ringing in my ears. "Kill them. Kill them all. I'm finished with the lot," she said and left.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

PROFESSOR POPS PART THREE

BUT KENMEI DID NOT KILL us. I would later learn the Hunter didn't support Sharra the way some of the other vampires did.

Once the vampire queen was gone, he went to Joanna. "Let me get you out of these." With very little effort he yanked the chains from the wall. Joanna fell to her knees. "There. There, little bird." He lifted her and placed her on a throne made of rock. Then he bit into his wrist.

Blood immediately came to the surface. "I know you don't want to drink from Adam, but you're a revenant now, not quite human and not quite vampire. Blood is all that will keep you alive." He put his wrist to her mouth.

She resisted, but only for a moment.

"That's it."

I worried she would spit it out again, but she didn't. She drank.

Slowly at first, but then her hands came up and she took hold of his wrist. "Good girl, little bird. Take your fill."

Joanna's mother began to wail. In between cries she shouted, "Demon."

"Be still woman!" I fought against the chains wishing I could be free.

Finally, Joanna stopped drinking.

Glanced over at me. "Adam." She looked embarrassed as she wiped at the blood dribbling from her lips.

Her face was flushed and absolutely gorgeous.

"Red." I tried to sit up, but my bounds wouldn't allow it. "It's okay. I love you."

Kenmei came over, but Joanna stopped him and stepped in front of me. "Mi amour." She leaned down and pressed her lips to mine. "All is well." She freed me by crushing the chains between her hands.

I sat up, surprised by her candid affection and her superhuman strength.

"Your true love will need you by her side, but she can never drink from you. If she does, she will lose herself to the vampire queen. Understand?" Kenmei spoke the words quietly but with fervor.

"Non." I didn't understand in the least, but I was relieved Joanna would be all right.

Kenmei took my wrist. "Joanna will remain a revenant as she is because she didn't drink from you when you were human. But she does need to feed and sometimes humans are too easily killed," he said glancing at Joanna.

"You needed worry about Joanna," I said, knowing Joanna would sooner die than take the life of an innocent.

"To be safe and to keep Joanna alive, I must make you as I am," Kenmei said.

This world we were thrown into made no sense, but I would do whatever it took. "Do what you must."

He bit me and drank. When he finished, I felt woozy. "Now you must drink from Joanna."

"I will not." He couldn't make me hurt her.

"Then you will die. Drinking from her is the only way to complete the process."

Joanna helped me sit and tilted her neck. "Take some, Adam." I could hear her blood pumping through her veins.

"I - non. I cannot." My legs wobbled and I fell to the ground.

Joanna climbed on my lap. "You must. I insist, my love."

Her mother was sobbing. "Devil child. You are no longer my daughter." She wore a cross around her neck and pulled it from beneath her dress, crossed herself and kissed it.

Joanna's teeth extended. She touched them timidly. "Am I the devil?"

"No, definitely not. You are anything but evil." I ran a hand down her face.

"Then neither are you." She kissed my forehead. "Take what you must, my love."

I could smell her blood. It was sweet, like the honeysuckle scent of her hair. I tilted her head. Fangs extended and I bit into her neck.

Immediately I felt the power of her blood in my body.

It was sensual. More so than kissing had been.

I groaned and drank deeper.

Joanna grabbed my shoulders and pressed her neck into my mouth. "Adam."

"You must stop, or you'll kill her. She is still too weak." Kenmei grabbed my shoulder.

I didn't want to stop, and I sensed Joanna didn't want me to either.

But I suddenly knew that if I kept going, she would die. I would drain her dry. I quickly released her. "I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

Joanna took a deep breath.

Her eyes burned with a hungry passion I hadn't seen before.

"Good." She stood and helped me to my feet, lifted me like I was nothing more than a paper sack.

"Will Sharra come after us?" I asked Kenmei as we stepped into the sunlight.

It burned, but I was grateful to be alive, to be out of the dungeon.

Finally free. I realized I hadn't thought we'd escape. At least not in this life.

Packed horses waited for us.

The world was different now. Everything blazed brighter.

Sounds I couldn't yet comprehend filled my ears. It was as though I could taste the very air.

"No, she won't come after either of you. There's no point now that

you've been turned, Adam. You are Joanna's only true love. Without your blood Joanna can never become the next vessel for the vampire queen." Kenmei gave a serious smile. "Remember you must drink from Joanna at least once a day, otherwise you'll die." It looked like he wanted to say more, but he didn't.

"Why? That makes no sense." I was beyond exasperated with the whole situation.

"A Hunter must feed from the vampire queen or one of her chosen. Joanna is - a chosen. Feed from her." He clapped me on the back. "Now go." Kenmei glanced at Joanna. "Take your mother home."

"Non," Joanna said. "I will continue to Chinon. I now understand the changes that have been made to my physical body were part of God's plan. I can be the strength of France, until I'm no longer needed."

Joanna's mother crossed herself and ran away from them.

"Mon dieu," I said, watching her go.

"She will not escape here for we are in the land of Sharra, a realm outside the one you've known."

"Oh?" I took in my surroundings and realized the land did look different.

"But I will see her home," Kenmei continued.

Joanna hugged Kenmei. "Thank you for all of your help, Hunter."

He smiled at her. "I wish I could've done more." He clasped my arm. "You are a vampire now and can no longer be killed. As well, you are a Hunter since some of the vampire queen's magic resides in you. You can walk in the daylight, but be careful. You will begin to see others - possible chosen for the queen. Stay away. Learn your powers. I will seek you out when the time is right."

"Thank you, Kenmei." I patted him on the back.

He nodded. "I believe we will meet again, Adam Henry."

"Oui," I said in response, though I hoped I never saw Kenmei again.

"Good-bye." He snapped his fingers and the countryside changed. Snow fell from the sky and covered the ground.

"We are back in our land, at the place where we stopped the night we were taken," Joanna said turning in a circle.

After getting my bearings, I saw she was right. "Are you cold?" I held out my hand and let snowflakes fall onto my palm.

I could feel the snow touch my skin. It was cool but didn't bother me.

"I am filled with desire to accomplish the thing which God has commanded me to do." Her expression was serious. "Let's be off."

WE ARRIVED AT VAUCOULEURS, a city outside Chinon in record time. There we met a Robert de Baudricourt.

"Do not waste my time," he said when Joanna requested an audience with the king.

She was not to be deterred. "Your troops will perform a military reversal near Orleans. The strategy will win them the battle they fight."

He snorted. "Get out of my sight, child."

"I will take my leave, but when you learn the truthfulness of my words, come and find me. We will remain in Vaucouleurs until you come."

"Don't hold your breath." He laughed harshly and threw us out.

Joanna sighed. "He will not live much longer." She climbed on her horse.

"How do you know?" I asked, wondering if she intended to drink from him.

"Could you not smell the disease in his body?"

I had smelled a putrid stench, like rotting meat. "I hadn't realized it was his body I smelled."

We rode out of town to the place we were staying. It'd been more

than twenty-four hours since either she or I fed.

I needed more of her blood, but didn't want to partake until she fed.

"I'm hungry." Her eyes darted around the landscape. "Let's get ourselves some food. This way."

I followed Joanna, steering my horse toward the forest.

As we neared, her horse reared up and whinnied. She patted the horse and climbed off.

"Come on."

I swung off mine and tethered both mounts to a tree two hundred feet from the forest edge. Then I went after Joanna.

"What do you smell, Red?" It amazed me that she could already utilize her newly enhanced senses.

I was still trying to discern which was what.

She glanced back and gave me a dazzling smile. "Wolves. A whole pack of them."

My first instinct was to react the way the horses had, but then I remembered what we were and returned her grin. "Let's feast."

She took my hand and we ran together.

Ten feet into the forest the wolves surrounded us. They weren't like those we ran into a few weeks ago, but ordinary. They circled us their jaws snapping and dripping saliva. Joanna and I were back to back.

"I'll take the leader. You take the one next to him," I said.

"I want the leader." Joanna lowered her center of gravity just as the wolf came in.

Fear for her safety buzzed through me. But it was unfounded. The animals couldn't harm her.

Within minutes all seven wolves were dead. Joanna crawled over to the large one, pulled it into her arms and sank her fangs into its neck, her glorious green eyes on me.

I grabbed the one nearest to me and drank. The blood of the animal was warm and tasted tolerable, but it was nothing like drinking from Joanna.

When we finished all seven off, she came over to me and crawled into my lap. I stood and carried her to a nearby stream. We walked into the water clothes and all.

For the next several minutes we scrubbed the grime off our clothes and ourselves. Joanna smiled and then dove under the water.

I waited for her to reappear, but she didn't.

"Joanna! Joanna!"

She popped out of the water directly in front of me, splashing the cool water in my face.

"I'm here," she said and giggled.

My serious Joanna.

It was an unexpected emotion and I studied her face. Her eyes sparkled with happiness.

My body responded to her. I craved her, desired her. Before I realized what I did, I grabbed her and pulled her against my chest.

"Oh," she said and sighed, her lids hooded.

I tilted her head and kissed her. Hard. Allowing her to feel all the need I had for her. She wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my hips. We stayed like that for a long time. We couldn't get enough of each other.

Someone cleared their throat.

I reluctantly pulled my lips from Joanna's, keeping her close to me so the man could see nothing. It was one of Robert de Baudricourt soldiers.

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but the commander wishes to speak with Joan of Arc."

"It's Joanna," I corrected. "We'll be there straight away. Get!"

"Sorry, sir. Very good." He turned and ran.

"Soldier?"

He stopped and I heard his knees trembling "Yes?"

I released Joanna and stepped out of the water. A feeling of command overtook me and I knew I could make him do what I wanted. "Please be discreet when speaking of what you've seen here. Understand?"

He bowed. "Of course, sir." He jumped on his horse and rode away.

"HOW DID YOU KNOW," Robert de Baudricourt asked when we entered his military post. He stood behind a desk, studying maps of France.

Joanna was dry and clean and exceedingly beautiful.

Clearing her throat, she spoke, "I received a vision from God. He told me of the strategy."

Robert clasped his hands behind his back. "And what would God have you do when you meet the king? Make you his wife? Take you into his bed?"

A growl escaped my lips and my fangs pressed against my mouth.

Joanna touched my hand briefly before stepping forward. "Nothing of the sort. I am to serve the king. Assist him in winning the battle against the English. France will be free if I am beside the king."

He studied her a moment. "Very well. I will take you to the king. We leave on the morrow."

"Mais oui." She bowed and I followed her outside.

THAT NIGHT I sensed a change in her. The giggling girl from the river was gone.

As we lay under the stars, she rolled onto her side toward me. Her creamy skin shone in the moonlight. "You must promise me two things, Adam Henry."

"Whatever you want is yours," I answered, playing with the ends of

her hair.

"I've seen my destiny and after I go into battle and we win, I will be captured and killed."

I sat up. "No. I will not let that happen. Besides you heard Kenmei, we cannot be killed easily."

She took my hands. "It doesn't matter. If it is God's will, then I will die. Please, I beg of you, do not interfere. You must let me go." She kissed the tips of my fingers. "When the battle is won, I want to go to my God. My journey on Earth will be finished." Her eyes begged me to understand.

But I didn't want to. "I - " I stood, frustration rolling off me in waves.

I'd promised but I didn't think I could agree to that. "What's the second thing?" I asked, my chest heaving.

She rose and wrapped her arms around my waist.

She was a breathtaking vision. "You must find a way to return to Sharra. Find love or multiple loves. Live a long life."

My heart shredded. "You cannot comprehend what you are asking of me. Do not make me live without you." I cupped her face in my hands, pleading with my eyes and my heart.

"I do understand my love because I know I could not live without you. But you are much stronger than I ever will be. Please, Adam. Please. Live. Love. Promise me." Her eyes searched mine for reassurance.

I looked for a sign she didn't mean what she was saying. Finally, I exhaled, doubting it would be possible but wanting to appease her. "Very well."

"Bon." She lay back down and I lay next to her. "Now hold me like you will never let me go," she commanded.

"With pleasure." I kissed her hungrily, needing her near me. Knowing the depth of my love was unrequited, but not caring.

Because I loved her.

We stayed in each other's arms until the dark sky changed into hues of pink and blue and orange. When it was time to go, we stood, and she hugged me. "I do love you, Adam Henry. Forever and always."

"Je t'aime, ma Coeur."

OceanofPDF.com

47 DAYS UNTIL TOTAL DARKNESS

I, Jasmine was suddenly aware I was no longer inside Joanna's head, but back at my home. Without opening my eyes, I knew I was in my room in Salem, laying on the bed and covered in blankets. Laeddin was in his room, sleeping. I heard his even breathing and the rise and fall of his chest.

The trip back in time was enlightening. I now understood more about Pops and my heart broke for his loss even though it was hundreds of years ago. How that must've hurt. I also understood Laeddin's love for me a little better.

It didn't matter whether I loved him back or not. His love was strong and real and the driving force behind all he'd done and did for me. My heart softened toward him and I wished I could love him back the way he loved me. It would be so easy. But I wasn't sure whether it was because he was a genie and treated me like I was his master or what, but there was something keeping me from letting myself fall for him.

With Christopher, it was purely physical. He believed we belonged together - that I was his betrothed. After spending time with Joanna and Pops, I thought I understood why. A Hunter needed the blood of a chosen to live. Sharra had chosen me just as she chose my mom.

And that brought me to Sharra. Her whole existence she wanted what she couldn't have. A human body. Wings. In a lot of ways, she and I were alike. The time with Pops and Joanna showed me that. I would use my newfound knowledge to my advantage.

Blinking my eyes open, I glanced at the window. The curtains were open. It was raining. Droplets struck the pane and clung to it, beading down. "Laeddin," I whispered, though the words barely left my mouth.

I listened for changes in his breathing, but it continued

rhythmically. Taking a deep breath, I tried to relax.

Troy came to mind. My feelings for him were beyond strong, but I was still wary because of his words on the boat.

Patience. The word swirled through my mind and I swallowed, allowing the rain to lull me.

When I was a young girl, I had no patience. I wanted to get where I was going fast. I ate as quickly as possible and did my chores like I was in a race against time. There was no in between. I flew from one adventure to the next without bothering with anything else. Now we were literally in a race against time, and I felt motionless. Frozen like a snowflake on frosted glass. Back in Sharra I'd had my magic and my wings. I'd had everything even though I'd been too senseless to realize it. Now, because of a reckless wish I had neither, and my enemy had both. For a time, I lost my vampire abilities too and became exactly what I'd wished - a normal human.

And I'd hated every second of it.

Even though it had been a hard lesson to learn, I understood I didn't really want normality, but instead wanted to be me, whatever that meant. Thanks to Christopher and his blood, I regained my vampire abilities, including my lust for blood. But I still didn't have my wings or my magic. Maybe I never would. Sharra had them and she was using them to destroy the world. She also had my mom and dad, I hoped. Laeddin believed she wouldn't kill them while she might still use them against me. I longed to imagine he was right even as I tried not to think about what she might be doing with them or worse, to them.

It was a harsh reality, living with the consequences of my childish choices. Knowing that all that was wrong with the realms - the Akuma, the darkness, the deaths of so many innocent lives, and the taking of my parents - was my fault. It was a pain living in my chest like a bitter weed. It festered, producing jagged thorns and overripe fruit. I hadn't killed Abby, Camden, or my grandmother with my own

hand, but I might as well have. I was to blame. Attending Ariel's funeral had been one of the most difficult moments in my life, but at least I still had them. Moments. Those who'd died didn't have that luxury and the ache of that knowledge rested heavily in my bones.

"Jasmine, are you ready?" Laeddin was at my door, his voice soft.

"Yes." I said and threw back the covers. "I'll get dressed and be right down."

Dressing in jeans, sweatshirt, and my boots, I then threw my hair up and brushed my teeth. Downstairs, I watched as Laeddin ate. He would look over at me once in a while and I tried to smile.

"Look, I didn't take us back in time so you would feel sorry for me." He threw his finished apple in the trash. "I needed you to understand Sharra. She's doing the same thing now, only she's added revenge to her list."

"I understand." I took his hand. "Thank you, Laeddin." I hugged him tight, hoping he could feel how much I cared.

"You're welcome," he returned then released me. "While we were gone, much has happened. The chayot have mostly gotten rid of the pestilence or Sharra changed her plan." He gritted his teeth. "That is probably more likely."

"How long were we gone?" I asked. The only way I could possibly make amends to all I hurt was to destroy her. And that meant collecting all five pieces of an elven crown created thousands of years ago. As a whole, the crown was believed to have untold power. But five assassins had split the crown and hidden the pieces. Laeddin believed that if I restored it, I could destroy Sharra, return light to the world, and reverse the effects of the pestilence, as well as get my wings and magic back. That was my hope too and I clung to it with every fiber of my being.

"Too long," he said, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Ready for the gargoyle realm?"

I bit my bottom lip and raised my eyes to him. "Ready as I'll ever

be."

When we arrived, I moved out of his arms, taking in my surroundings. The countryside was stark with little to offer in terms of color, but was instead a kaleidoscope of various shades of somber. Even the clouds were overcast in gloominess. The sky gave no indication whether there was a sun or a moon.

No vegetation grew. Underfoot, there was nothing but gray rock reminiscent of gravel. My shoulders sagged as I understood the darkness had touched this realm too. It was strange but I almost felt it, like the weight of a thousand mists, soaking into my skin, determined to claim me as one of its own.

"Are we close to the crown piece?" I took a deep breath hoping I could smell the crown. Instead came a mustiness as well as the aroma of the sea. Similar in a lot of ways to Salem.

OceanofPDF.com

GARGOYLE REALM

"I HAVE AN IDEA WHERE IT IS." Laeddin hiked a short distance to the edge of the ridge.

"Where's that?" I hiked over to him. We stood on the top of a vast mountain. The crisp air whipped thin around us, nearly empty of oxygen. Had I still been human I would've had difficulty breathing at such a high altitude.

"Down there, probably within or below the palace," he said, pointing.

I followed his finger as I stroked the bear bracelet encircling my wrist. Christopher had given it to me. The little bear charm brought me comfort.

My eyes drifted down into an expansive city surrounded on three sides by mountains while the fourth opened to the sea.

Homes made of rock and sand lined the streets, standing in rows like soldiers waiting for battle. Two thirds of the way toward the castle was a large wall with a gate.

Two gargoyle sentries with matching brown wings stood guard on either side of it. The second rung of houses was similar to the first, though they were much bigger, and many had colorful flags sticking out from their roofs.

Some houses even had roofs made of different colors.

Another, much smaller rock wall with a gate guarded by two gargoyles with matching maroon wings separated those houses from the inner courtyard and the castle.

I found it strange that creatures born with the ability to fly would have need of walls, but I guessed they were there merely as a reminder of the separation between classes. It seemed no matter

which realm I came to there would always be the wealthy and the poor, the aristocrats and the commoners.

Even Sharra had an ordering system, though my mother was much more democratic.

My eyes slid past the wall and fell on the castle.

It stood like a peacock in a pen full of chickens and it was startlingly beautiful.

Tower after tower thrust up in the air, each one seemingly reaching higher than the next. It took up the whole width and breadth of the mountainside.

There were so many spires I lost count, but that wasn't even the most significant detail. Each spire was a different color, glistening brilliantly in emerald, ruby, daffodil, saffron, and periwinkle.

The castle's main walls weren't gray either but had been stained or whitewashed so that the stone was smooth and white as a newborn dove.

At least a hundred stairs cobbled in emerald led up to the entrance of the castle, which had two sentries standing guard, their wings white like the castle's walls.

Other than the guards, the city appeared deserted. Only the few fishing boats docked in the marina made any sort of movement.

"Why didn't you pop us inside the palace, then? Or at least down into the city?" It would be a long walk and that meant more wasted time.

"I would have, Jasmine, but it's protected by some very strong magic. I thought it best we check out our surroundings before diving into a situation that might get out of control." Laeddin squatted and picked up a handful of small rocks, rubbing them against each other in his hand.

"Why not? We aren't here to harm anyone. They might even be willing to help us, especially if we explain the reasons we are here."

"Why can't you believe in me? Have faith in me?" He turned his face up to meet mine.

"I do," I said, working to keep calm. Thoughts of my grandmother filled my mind, but I pushed them away. He did what he thought was best for me. Out of love. I needed to remember that.

He sighed resignedly. "All I've studied about gargoyles tells me they are a solitary group. They have no need for any but their own kind and aren't generally compassionate to outsiders. It would be preferable to keep our presence a secret."

"If you say so." I wanted to rush in there and demand their assistance, but it was a bad idea. I knew that. So I kept my thoughts to myself. "Where is everyone? The city looks deserted." I hoped the Akuma pestilence hadn't reached this realm. If the gargoyles became infected the situation would become extremely difficult.

"Gargoyles are nocturnal. I'm guessing they're still sleeping."

"Hmmm, that could be." The genie was probably right, but I was antsy and wanted to kill the assassin, get the crown piece and move the freak on.

"I'll make camp and once it's fully light we can check things out, see what we're dealing with." He dropped the gravel and stood. Lifted his arms and began to speak some sort of enchantment.

Before he could get a full sentence out, a puff of smoke burst from the castle. Laeddin stopped. I came to stand beside him once again. The smoke wasn't like any I'd seen before. It didn't linger like smoke should. Instead it separated and branched out. "What is that?"

"Gargoyles," Laeddin said, an edge in his voice.

As he spoke, the "smoke" opened its wings. It was as though the sky lit up. Their bodies were grim and ashy like the rest of the landscape, but their wings were magnificent, like the spires on the castle. Each set was a different color, including gold, stark white, sunset orange, and blood red. They dipped and spun languidly in the sky.

"They're amazing," I said, longing to be up there flying with them.

Laeddin mumbled something under his breath.

"What?" I asked, but he didn't respond. I kept my gaze on the gargoyles. Within moments it became clear they were heading our way. "Should we try to hide? Or fight?"

Laeddin snorted. "Where do you propose we go? I intended to provide us with invisible tents, but I don't have the time now." His tone was accusatory, like I'd done something to call the gargoyles toward us.

"Well then I guess we stand our ground and confront them." I straightened up, taking on the posture of a princess, the way I'd been taught.

"Be ready." Laeddin took a protective stance in front of me. "Like I said before, they don't take kindly to those who aren't like them."

"You be ready," I growled, pushing him out of the way.

He exhaled sharply. "As you say, Princess."

The gargoyles landed and encircled us, making incomprehensible noises. I guessed they were communicating. This group was intimidating, the tallest at least seven feet. His golden wings seemed to shimmer in the fading light.

All of the gargoyles had black eyes and black hair and skin the color of granite. I wondered if it felt like rock too. There were two males and two females. The males were shirtless, their smooth chests bare, and wearing black pants made out of a shiny fabric.

The females wore the same pants but were also wearing something similar to a bikini top. None of them wore shoes.

"What are they saying?" I asked Laeddin, frustrated.

He took my hand. I felt a surge of magic rush up my arm, and the gargoyles' garbled nonsense became clear. I squeezed his hand in gratitude.

"Looks tasty," the female with red wings said.

That was a terrifying prospect. "Hello." I raised a hand in salutation, hoping they would realize we weren't enemies. Or food. "My name is Jasmine, Princess of Sharra. My mother is Snow White, the Vampire Queen. Maybe you've heard of her?" Pretty much everyone knew my mother. "This is my friend, Laeddin." I pointed at the genie. "We are here to ask for your help."

The female who'd spoken poked my cheek. "I think it's trying to communicate."

I shoved her hand away and she growled, pushing me down.

"It's feisty," she said.

OceanofPDF.com

IT ISN'T AFRAID

"IT HAS to be to keep up with you, Rave," the largest gargoyle, the one I guessed was the leader, said.

Rave grunted and walked over to Laeddin, sniffing him. I couldn't help but wonder if his blood smelled as good to her as it did to me. "It stinks, Edge. I think we should kill them." Guess that answered my question.

"Or eat it," the male with sunset orange wings added.

The one the female called Edge shook his head. "We won't kill them or eat them. We will take them to the emperor and let him decide their fate." He made a point of looking at each of them, starting with the orange-winged male. "Scotch?"

"Yes, Liege."

"Skye?" Hers were the wings that reminded me of a cotton ball. They were brilliant white.

"Of course." She bowed, keeping her eyes on the ground.

"Rave?"

She shook her wings, seemingly irritated. "Whatever you say, boss." She spoke like she had a bad taste in her mouth. As though to prove my point, she spat. I watched it land on the ground and disappear into the gravel.

"That's what I like to hear." Edge said. "Rave, you and Scotch continue your duties. See if there are more about. The darkness is consuming the land too quickly, and we must find out why. Neither Graves nor Jagg seem to know, but perhaps these things," he pointed at Laeddin and me, "can give us some answers."

They left without a word, flying away from the city, heading off in the direction of taller mountains in the distance.

Edge's wings spread open and he lifted slightly off the ground. Flying over to me, he took hold of my shoulders. I tried to fight him off, but his grip was too strong. "Hold still or I might accidentally drop you." He smirked, looking at me like I was mitochondria under a microscope. "Skye, take the other and follow me." Edge swept into the air. We fell momentarily until his wings caught hold.

I tried speaking to him again. "Excuse me, but I would appre - "

"That one seems extra chatty," Skye said, coming up beside Edge. She had Laeddin in her arms. He faced outward like I did, his focus on the city below.

"Sounds like gibberish to me," Edge replied.

"Why can't they understand me?" I shouted at Laeddin over the rushing wind.

"The magic I gave you allows us to understand them, but they can't understand us. I thought it might be prudent for now, given we have no idea what's happening. We can speak to each other without worrying about being overheard." Laeddin shouted.

"Okay," I responded, thinking it would've been nice for the gargoyles to understand us as well. Frustrated, I faced forward, turning my attention to the city. A few more gargoyles had appeared. I focused on one in particular. She was holding a smaller gargoyle with indigo wings that matched her own in her arms. Two other children, one with lavender wings and another with periwinkle, walked quickly beside her, working to keep up. They wove through the streets, heading toward the water.

She must've noticed I was watching her because she looked up. I waved, giving her a bright smile. She looked away, pulling her children closer about her as she picked up speed.

I sighed, closing my eyes. And that's when I felt it, the wind in my hair and against my cheeks. My shirt was flapping around like a flag. In that moment, everything else was forgotten. I was flying! It didn't matter that I ought to be frightened about facing the gargoyles inside

the castle made of jewels and collecting the second piece of the crown. All I could do was raise my arms and revel.

"Look, it isn't even afraid," Skye said. "In fact I would go so far as to say it's enjoying itself."

Edge just grunted a response while my smile grew even bigger.

THE CASTLE LOOMED CLOSER and I realized just how enormous it actually was. It seemed to swallow us up with his expanse.

Ten feet below the tallest spire was a landing pad.

Two guards stood watch as Edge and Skye landed.

"What have we here?" one of the guards asked.

"We aren't sure, but we're taking them to the emperor," Edge said.

Something passed between the guards.

"What is it?" Skye asked.

"The emperor is busy at the moment." One of the guards winked. "He could be a while."

Skye growled. "Who is it this time? It better not be my sister again."

Edge placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure it isn't. Let's take these down to the dungeon."

Skye seemed to relax, and I wondered if they were mates. "Yes, Liege." She followed him past the landing strip into the castle. There wasn't a door, just a large, gaping hole, like the dark mouth of a toothless monster. I realized then that I hadn't seen a single bird, nor had I heard any of their calls.

I pondered the reasons behind the birds' absence, whether it had to do with the darkness; or maybe there just were no birds - because really, what would they eat? I hadn't seen any bugs either, nor grass, trees, or a single flower. That led me to wonder what sort of creatures swam in the sea, whether there were fish and krill, lobster and octopus, sharks and dolphins, whales and sea lions.

I turned, hoping I could see something of the water, but we were already within the castle. The inside wasn't as fine as the exterior.

At least not up here. The grey color of the walls reminded me of Gatsby, my mother's cat. They were rough to the touch and smelled slightly damp, like water on stone.

As we moved further down, I saw that the stairs broke off into corridors filled with scurrying maids carrying linens, or dirty dishes and empty bottles.

At first, I found it weird that a race of creatures with the ability to fly would have so many stairs, but quickly realized it was due to the close quarters. There wasn't enough room to spread their wings. Flying was completely out of the question in the corridors.

When we finally reached what I believed to be the main floor, the gargoyles walked us past a large banquet room.

Inside was more of the same.

The room was made up of nothing but grey rock, with the exception of the light fixtures. Enormous white rocks hung from the ceiling like a contemporary chandelier, giving off an almost heavenly glow.

I better studied my surroundings and saw that all along the walls and corridors were smaller versions of those same white, glowing rocks.

Probably fifty gargoyles crowded into the room.

No one noticed us, focused as they were on the buffet style food, which gave off a slightly sulfuric smell.

They were all speaking, like the buzzing of giant bees going about their work. One gargoyle walked past with a plate filled with gray slop.

What were they eating? I shuddered, hoping the gargoyles didn't really intend to eat Laeddin and me.

"Why does the emperor always send us out on missions during

mealtimes? I swear he wants us to starve," Skye said.

Edge grunted in response.

OceanofPDF.com

I MUST BE DREAMING

HE'S OBVIOUSLY a man of many words, I thought sarcastically.

We passed another room filled with dozens of carved statutes.

All were of gargoyles in various shapes and sizes - except one. She was female and appeared to be human, aside from the large black wings on her back.

They were different than gargoyles' wings, more bird-like.

That surprised me because the statue was placed high above the others and in a prominent location.

I wanted to ask who she was, but knew the gargoyles couldn't understand me, and so held my tongue.

We'd moved on anyway, into another stairwell, which led us down further into the depths of the castle. It became obvious very quickly that those with certain colored wings held different positions. If a gargoyle had bright wings in colors like those on the castle spires, they were the aristocrats while those with duller-colored wings were the servants.

Further down and I noticed the servants were no longer carrying linens, but some held weapons while others carried tools and baskets filled with more of the strange-looking food.

When we walked by, they stared.

More than once I smiled but doing so seemed to scare them because anyone who saw me dashed away quickly, using their wings to hurry themselves along.

As we continued to descend, the number of gargoyles dwindled. The air grew warmer too. When we reached the final landing on the staircase, Edge pulled open a thick door, causing a gust of putrid air to rush out.

I forced myself not to gag as we walked past door after door. Finally, we reached the end of the hall, a door carved into the dead end.

It had bars like a jail cell along the top and was thick, solid rock underneath.

Skye pulled on its hinges, and it screeched open, making my ears want to bleed. "In you go." She shoved Laeddin inside.

Edge paused, peeking into the dungeon before pushing me inside too. I stumbled to my knees, scraping them on the stone floor.

The door closed with another screech. One of the strange orbs of light glowed dimly above us and while I could see in the dark, I was thankful for the little light.

"Great," I said, rolling onto my butt.

A sound rustled behind me and I jumped to my feet, facing the noise in a defensive position. It was then that I noticed something huddled against the far wall. It appeared to be a person. Or more precisely, two persons.

"Hello?" I spoke softly so as not to startle them. If they were gargoyles, I didn't want to give them cause to try to crush me, though since they'd been imprisoned, anything was possible.

At the sound of my voice, one of them lifted its head. "You speak English?"

The voice was male, though garbled. I guessed from disuse.

"Yes." I crouched in front of him, able to see that he had black hair and eyes gray as an overcast sky. His skin was dark, his body covered in muscles, like a statue. "My name is Jasmine. And you are?"

He gasped, throwing his head back so that it hit the wall. "I must be dreaming. Oh no, no, no. Not again." He banged his head several more times, sending rubble and rock dust into the air. The tips of his hair began to change from black to white.

The person sitting beside him lifted its head then. A girl. "Hey, it's

okay. You're okay. Calm down," she cooed, running her hand down his arm like she was stroking a frightened fowl.

He stopped and opened his eyes.

Laeddin knelt beside me. "You aren't dreaming, young one. This is real." He stuck out his hand. "My name is Laeddin."

At the sound of the genie's voice, the boy glanced at the girl. She nodded encouragingly. "They're real. I see them too."

He tentatively reached out and touched my arm. Flinched. Poked me again. "You are real and you're kind of squishy. I can't believe it."

I decided there was no point taking offense. Compared to the gargoyles I was squishy. "It's true. I swear." I thought of smiling but doing so hadn't got me very far with the others, though he didn't look exactly like a gargoyle. Neither did the girl. As far as I could tell, neither of them had wings.

He ran his hands over his hair, brushing away some of the dust. "I thought I was dreaming. It's probably because I've seen you before. But not here."

"You have?" What a weird thing to say. The guy sounded delusional.

"Yes," he chuckled mirthlessly. "My father has a picture of you hanging in a room in his house." He took a deep, ragged breath and his eyes filled with tears.

"I see, and how long have you been down here?" Somehow, I knew I wasn't going to like the answer.

He rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes. "I don't know. It feels like forever."

"What's your name?" Laeddin asked. He moved his hand back when the male hadn't taken it, placing it in his lap.

"I'm Jesse." Jesse took the girl's hand. "And this is Rayne."

"Hello, Ray - " I stopped as the guy's name sank in. "You're Jesse?" I shouted. "As in Troy's brother Jesse?"

Jesse's eyes grew large with surprise. "You know Troy?" He sat up straight. "My father, brother, and I were - helping some friends when I was sucked into a vortex. It sent me here, to this realm. The gargoyles tried to talk to me, but since I couldn't understand them, they gave up and put me down here. After a week or so, maybe longer," he paused, grabbing hold of his hair. "I haven't been able to keep track of time."

"It's okay, Jesse." Rayne squeezed his arm.

He nodded and continued, "The guards threw Rayne down here with me. Rather quickly, we figured out we can understand each other. She can speak to and understand both the gargoyles and me, so I explained to her what happened. She, in turn, tried to tell the guards, but they wouldn't listen." He sighed heavily, frustrated. "I'm sure my dad and brother are freaking out."

"They are," I said, feeling his hope and allowing it to fuel my own. Troy told me what happened. Jesse's disappearance weighed heavily on Troy and Pops too. Both of them had been trying to find Jesse for months.

Jesse's eyes squinted shrewdly. "How do you know my dad and brother?"

"He's sort of my grandfather." I rested my hand on his knee.

"That's why a picture of you hangs in his house." He grinned, flashing his teeth.

"Yep. And I met Troy several weeks ago." I forced myself not to blush. "They've been looking for you. Troy's been having a really hard time. He misses you terribly."

Jesse's brows furrowed and he leaned forward. He gave me a half smile. "They're looking for me?"

"Of course. They haven't stopped since you vanished."

Jesse smiled bigger. "If only the gargoyles would let me explain. They might have a way of getting me home. Us home." He took another ragged breath and it sounded like rock grating against rock.

I wanted to reach out and hug him. It would be great if we could get him back to Troy, but first we needed to find the second piece of the fairy crown. "Why are you in here?" I asked Rayne.

OceanofPDF.com

RAUNCHY THING

INSTEAD OF ANSWERING, Rayne turned away, her back against Jesse's arm. That wasn't peculiar at all.

"She wouldn't tell me either," Jesse said, giving me a sorrowful look.

"Are you from this realm?" I tried again, leaning over and trying to get a glimpse of her face.

"I am," she whispered.

"But you don't look like the others."

"That's because I'm a mutt - only half gargoyle, like Jesse." She pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her head on them.

"Is that why you're down here then? Because you're a mutt?" I guessed there was more to the story than that, but thought it was a good jumping off point.

"Don't talk to me." She turned again so that her back faced me.

Jesse shrugged apologetically. "Can you give her some space?"

"Sure." I went over to the door, frustrated, and shook it. "Let's us out! Right now."

"Hey, it's okay," I heard Jesse whisper to Rayne in between my wasted shouts. "You don't have to talk. Not yet. It's okay."

"Maybe we should get some rest." Laeddin came over and put a hand on my arm.

"You could get us out of here, you know." I gave Laeddin a questioning look.

"True, if you wish it."

"Ugh, I don't wish it," I yelled, throwing up my hands. "Why can't you just do it so that we can find the piece of the crown?"

He went over and fell against the same wall Jesse and Rayne leaned against, without responding, which frustrated me even more. And the raunchy thing was we were stuck in the small cell. We would be stuck in this place for the foreseeable future.

"I swear it's like looking in a wonky mirror," Jesse said. He'd come over, his hands tucked into his front pockets.

"Why's that?" I asked, wrapping my fingers around the bars and sticking my face through the space between. Well, as much of my face as would fit, which wasn't a lot.

"I did the exact same thing for probably two days' straight." He shook his head, chuckling without mirth.

"What?" I asked.

"Exactly what you're doing." He laugh harder, but grabbed hold of the wall, stumbling backward. "Oh, man."

"What's wrong?"

He closed his eyes and planted his feet, trying to steady himself. "Nothing really, just hungry."

"Don't they feed you down here?"

"Not in a long while," he admitted.

"It's been weeks," Rayne chimed in, jumping up and coming to assist Jesse.

How were they not dead?

"Let me help." Laeddin waved his hand. It seemed Laeddin would use his magic on anyone but me. "Hang on." He tried again, waving his hand in a small swirling motion. I'd seen him do that same movement many times before in order to activate his magic, but this time nothing happened. He snapped his fingers, trying for a third time. The tattoos around his wrists sparked, but it was as though his magic had short-circuited.

"What's the matter with you?" I took his hands. They felt warm and my fingers tingled with the remnants of the magic he had been trying

to cast.

"My magic isn't working," Laeddin said. "It's like it wants to, but something is tamping it down. Peculiar." He spoke like a scientist methodically discovering different possible hypotheses. He gave me a wry look before glancing over at Rayne. "Any idea why, young one?"

"How should I know?" She looked away again, avoiding his gaze.

I watched their exchange, curious about why Laeddin had asked her. My fingers found the wooden bear charm and stroked it, absently. What did the genie know that I didn't? It occurred to me, not for the first time, that Laeddin knew so much more about our situation than he would ever reveal. With that realization came clarity. As much as I cared for Laeddin, even loved him, it wasn't the kind of love one built a relationship on. I believed he would keep me safe, but I couldn't entirely trust him. I took a deep breath, searching for the particular scent of his blood. It still smelled amazing, but no longer breathtaking, like when I'd first met him. Laeddin had been an infatuation, my first crush.

"Damn, I feel woozy. I'd better sit back down. Sorry." We helped Jesse back to his corner and into sitting position.

I felt terrible that I couldn't do anything to help him. "No need to apologize, Jesse. I promise you that when we leave this place, we're taking you with us." I glanced at Rayne. "Both of you."

"Thank you," Rayne mouthed, but didn't meet my gaze. I wasn't sure if her reluctance to speak to us came from the imprisonment or was part of her personality. She was either very shy or hiding something.

Jesse rested his head against his knees. Rayne rested beside him, rubbing his back in soothing circles, making it evident the two of them had grown fond of each other. Rayne had brown skin and stark white hair that hung long, like a curtain. Her eyes were the same color gray as Jesse's, but she was smaller, more petite in size. Jesse wore tattered dark jeans while Rayne wore clothing like that of the other

gargoyles we'd seen. I couldn't help but wonder what she must've done to end up in prison. That was sure to be a story.

"I'm going to get some rest," I said, and moved to curl up in the corner on the far side of the cell.

IT FELT like several hours later when I heard a commotion on the stairs, followed by shouting and more yelling.

Two of the voices sounded familiar and I ran over to the door, curious who it could be. Several gargoyles were holding two people captive.

Smoke swirled in front of them, looking like it came from one of the prisoners' noses. On top of that, his skin seemed to ripple like -

"Troy? Is that you?"

Both prisoners stopped fighting and looked in my direction.

"Pops?" I blinked several times and pinched myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Pops! Jesse was suddenly next to me. "Troy!"

"Jasmine." Troy was more surprised than me, his eyes big as saucers. "Who's that with you?"

A smile spread across my face like wildfire. "It's Jesse."

Pops and Troy looked at each other.

"Jesse," they said together. I'd never seen two people so happy.

My insides swelled with joy. They found each other. Finally.

A myriad of emotions swirled through me.

The initial reaction was happiness.

But there was still a wound.

He didn't want more like me around.

Still, I had time to recognize it probably could be a bad thing to have more original vampires. The way he spoke to me on the yacht still hurt though.

He apologized. More than once.

And kissed me the way everyone should be kissed. My knees turned to jelly at just the thought.

Pops and Troy no longer fought against the guards and allowed the gargoyles to toss them into the cell with us.

"Good riddance," one of them said.

"By the goddess, I hope we never have to lay eyes on them again," the other responded.

I gasped. Would they really leave us down here to die?

OceanofPDF.com

BEFORE THE DOOR SLAMMED SHUT, Pops hugged me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Go see your son."

Troy smiled at me quickly before he and Pops were hugging Jesse, clapping him on the back, and talking to each other all at once. I watched them with tears in my eyes, grateful the three of them had been reunited, even if it was in jail.

Rayne seemed unsure about what to do. I went and stood beside her and Laeddin, occasionally wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. Seeing men cry with joy was a sight I would never forget. The sheer happiness in that cell seemed to increase the light in the room.

Once the initial hugging and expressions of delight were over, they lowered their voices and talked, their words rushed as they tried to catch each other up on all that had happened. I didn't interrupt. Nor did I use my abilities to listen in. They deserved some private time together.

After a while, I sat down, pulling Laeddin with me. Rayne had already returned to her corner and appeared to be sleeping. She must've realized Jesse needed time with his family too. "Can you sense the crown?" I whispered, even though Laeddin had told me yesterday that he couldn't.

"No. My powers still don't work down here." He seemed impatient with me.

"Okay," I said with a sigh.

He turned his eyes on me. "I know your feelings for the boy are strong. Even without magic it's obvious, but I don't believe the two of you belong together." He pursed his lips like he wanted to say more.

Understanding over what he was feeling softened my words. "I

appreciate that, but our relationship status isn't your concern."

"You're right, Princess." He crossed his arms and turned away from me.

I closed my eyes, resting my head against the wall, trying to empty my mind. There was so much that needed to be done, and without a way out of this cell, it didn't seem likely we'd accomplish anything.

"Jazz," Troy shouted.

Startled, I opened my eyes just as Troy picked me up and swung me around, before encircling me with his arms. "Jazz," he said again, this time softer. He had a dazzling smile on his face. His lips found mine, kissing me soundly. I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him back, happy to see him, even if it was under these circumstances.

"I've missed you," he said after several minutes, letting me down, kissing my forehead when my feet touched the ground.

"Missed you too, Dragon Boy," I said shyly. Now that we were no longer kissing and my body was in control, I remembered the others in the room and looked around.

Thankfully Laeddin seemed to be asleep. At least faking it.

"He's a dragon?" Rayne asked, her dark eyes glinting with tired excitement.

"Half dragon," Troy corrected with his trademark smirk. I wanted to kiss it off his face. I allowed the bubbling excitement to tamp down the lingering feelings of hurt. He stuck out his hand and Rayne took it. Troy lifted her off the ground. "I'm Troy."

"Rayne," she said.

Pops came over. "I'm Adam Henry."

I couldn't help thinking about what he lost before he became a vampire. How many years had he suffered over the loss of his loved one? Or was Joanna really dead? Sure, she was burned at the stake, but last I checked, a vampire could survive that. A revenant though? I wasn't sure.

Pops took out his reading glasses and proceeded to clean them, probably in an effort to ignore Troy and me kissing. He put them back in his pocket without using them when we finished. He wore his usual attire: slacks, a sweater over a button-down shirt and loafers. His leathered face was handsome. The few wrinkles at the corners of his eyes made him appear grandfatherly, which made sense since he was my grandfather. Not by blood, but still. As a vampire who was turned more than five hundred years ago, he still looked exceedingly young.

"Rayne," Rayne said again, taking his outstretched hand.

As we made introductions and small talk, I thought about Laeddin, who didn't look a day over eighteen with his thick black hair and wrinkleless skin.

Jesse crossed his arms, his expression surly as he glanced between Troy and me. "You two are a thing?"

Troy and I peeked and each other uncomfortably, making it obvious we weren't sure what to say. Finally, I blurted, "We're friends."

"Right," Troy added. "Friends." His smirk turned into a half scowl, but it wasn't like he'd asked me to be his girlfriend. He pretty much made it clear I was too terrifying to exist, so "friends" was a good place to start. Didn't change the fact that he was as handsome as ever in his standard jeans and a dark green tee shirt, the short sleeves tight against his biceps.

Rayne pressed her teeth together. "Sure, if that's what you want to call it."

Jesse smacked Troy on the back. "You sure you aren't half dog instead of half dragon, you sly dog?"

Troy made a face, while Pops laughed. "All right, that's enough of that kind of talk." He playfully shoved Troy out of the way with little effort.

I hugged Pops again, enjoying the familiar smell of old books and peppermint that he was known for. "Grandfather." I squeezed him tightly. After a good long time, I pulled back. He looked at me fondly.

"I know why Troy and I are here. We came to rescue Jesse, of course. But what brings you and the genie here?" He indicated Laeddin with a nod.

We briefly explained our situation and asked if they'd be willing to help, if we ever got out of here.

They agreed whole-heartedly. We all sat again, this time in a circle so we could face each other. Jesse had Rayne's hand. And I noticed Pops kept glancing at her. He seemed curious to know more about her, which didn't surprise me since he was a professor by trade and also Jesse's surrogate father.

"I still can't believe you guys found me," Jesse said for probably the twentieth time. His expression was full of surprise and wonder, as though he half believed he might be dreaming.

"We never would've stopped looking," Professor Pops returned.

"Agreed," Troy added, smacking him on the knee.

Watching the three of them together made me long for my mom and dad. I shuddered, worried about them. Laeddin peered at me with a question in his gaze, but I shook my head. I didn't want to talk about it.

"How'd you do it?" Jesse asked. "Find me," he added to clarify.

Pops chuckled lightly, taking his handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his eyes. "You know me, I researched in a lot of books, went to speak with a lot of peculiar people and creatures." He looked at Troy. "I even tried to find your father and ask him if he knew of a way to locate Jesse with a spell, since the dragon pretty much knows everything, but I couldn't find him."

Troy raised an eyebrow but didn't look surprised.

Professor Pops continued, "Finally I went to Polonias and spoke with Cindy who recommended I talk to Gabe." His eyes filled with tears once again and it occurred to me how difficult it must be to live an immortal life, especially if you chose to care so deeply for those around you, as Professor Pops did. Gabe had given up his leadership

role in the chayot for a more simple life with Cindy and their children.

Pops cleared his throat. "Anyway, Gabe told me of a spell I could use that would allow me to find you, so here we are." Professor Pops hugged Jesse again.

"Yeah, man. You gave us quite the scare," Troy added.

Jesse smiled, but I noticed his dark face get ashy.

"What's wrong, son?" Professor Pops asked. He took hold of Jesse, helping him remain sitting.

"Nothing. Just a little hungry," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I got you, man." Troy opened his backpack. "It's jerky. That ought to help."

Jesse took the bag. "Thank you," he said between bites.

We watched him devour the dried meat in silence.

After several minutes, Jesse looked up, then at Rayne. "Hey, I'm so sorry. Here." Jesse handed her a piece."

She took it timidly, giving Jesse a small smile, refusing to meet anyone else's gaze.

Troy patted Rayne on the back. "So, what's your story? Why are you in this cell and how the hell do we get out?"

Rayne's smile vanished. "My story?" She growled. "My father promised me that if I would spend time in the cell with Jesse and get information from him, then he would tell me about my mother. Who she is and where she is."

Jesse had been about to put another piece of jerky in his mouth, but he stopped, shocked. "You're down here to spy for them?" He pointed in the direction of the door, but we all knew he meant the gargoyles. "You - " He let go of her hand. "I'm just a job to you?"

Pops seemed to already know that was the case. "Not to worry, son. I believe we can work this out. Right, Rayne?"

She seemed surprised. "You aren't angry?" she asked Pops.

"Anger won't solve anything." His eyes were full of sympathy as he spoke.

She gave him a small smile in response. "Thank you."

Troy looked angry.

Jesse had a wounded animal look on his face and I immediately felt sorry for him. His feelings for Rayne went deep. That much was obvious.

I wasn't surprised either. "Laeddin?" It appeared he'd already known she was up to something too.

"What? It was obvious," he said.

"Not to me," Jesse bellowed. The ends of his hair turned white and dark lines appeared on his face.

"Easy, son." Pops patted him on the shoulder.

But Jesse wasn't having it and stood, going over to the door and pounding on it. "I want out of here." He stopped, leaning against the wall.

"Rayne, why don't you tell us exactly what your errand is so we can help you accomplish it? Then we might be able to get out of here." Pops gave her a look that said he wasn't angry, but he wasn't to be trifled with either.

Rayne started to cry. "That's the thing. I've done what I was supposed to. I collected the information from Jesse, and I told the guards. That's all my father asked me to do." She sniffled. "I'm not sure whether the guards told my father or not, but he hasn't come down to see me or get me out."

"Your dad sounds like a real father of the year." Troy stood and went over to Jesse.

Professor Pops went on. "You are part gargoyle and part something else? Human?"

Rayne wiped her nose on her arm. "How'd you know?" She cleared her throat. "My father has refused to tell me who my mother is." She

rested her head on her knees. "I don't belong in this realm and I hoped that by finding out who my mother was, then maybe I could feel more like myself."

Professor Pops gave her a gentle look. "It's difficult not knowing where you come from. I can understand your need to find out." He glanced at Jesse and Troy, who were talking quietly in front of the door. "We all need connections. Without them we aren't really living."

She shrugged. "I guess. All I know is that the whole time I've lived here, I've felt like a misfit."

"Well, perhaps we can assist you in your endeavors as well as Jasmine and Laeddin." He pulled a book from his satchel and took his reading glasses from his pocket, putting them on.

"Do you even need those things?" I touched the frames and moved closer so that I could see the pages too.

He gave me a one-armed hug. "It's just these eyes. I need the glasses for the close up stuff."

I laughed, eyeing Troy. "Part of the old man syndrome, huh?"

"Right." Pops flipped the pages until he reached what he was looking for. The top of the left page read: A Spell to Break Spells.

"Your magic won't work down here," Laeddin said. "I've already tried."

Pops looked at Laeddin over the top of his glasses. "You sure?"

Laeddin snapped his fingers in answer. I hoped it would work for the briefest second, but that hope was dashed. Laeddin's tattoos tried to light up, but they only flickered.

"Ah, I see. Well, then that changes things." He gave Rayne a kindly look. "Rayne, we are really going to need your help. Are you with us?"

"Sure." She looked over at Jesse and continued, "I came down with the intention of getting information from you, Jesse, but after getting to know you, I've come to truly care about you." She stopped, sucking in a breath.

"It's understandable, dear. And I applaud your honesty." Pops said, putting away his book and his glasses. "Don't you agree, Jesse? I mean, I can see quite clearly that the girl has feelings for you. I can feel them too. Can't you?" He turned on his seat as he spoke so that he was facing Jesse.

Troy had his arm around Jesse's shoulders and they were still talking, though it looked like Troy was doing most of it.

Jesse looked up. The edges of his hair were still white. Whatever Troy was saying, it hadn't helped calm him down. "I guess." He glared at Rayne and it was obvious he was still angry.

"If she helps us, then all is forgiven, right bro?" Troy flashed his trademark smirk.

"We'll see." Jesse inhaled sharply before blowing it out. His shoulders relaxed and his hair changed back to black.

OceanofPDF.com

SUCKED TO BE ME

OVER THE NEXT TWO DAYS, we discussed numerous ways for all of us to get out of the cage. The plan was simple.

Pops and Troy would escape and take Jesse and Rayne home with them. After seeing the guards' reactions when bringing them in, we figured it would be best for Professor Pops and Troy to escape the castle immediately and come back for Jesse and Rayne when an opportunity presented itself.

Since Laeddin and I couldn't leave without the piece of crown, we didn't get involved beyond planning to escape itself. Truth be told, once we were out and away from whatever magic blocked Laeddin's power, Laeddin could just pop us home. Easy as that. But, of course nothing was ever as simple as it sounded.

Pops and Laeddin seemed to be fine without any basic human necessities, so what little food Pops and Troy had brought with them was divided between Troy, Jesse, and Rayne, and they finished everything within the first day.

They seemed okay, especially Jesse and Rayne. In fact, they looked great. Refreshed.

I was ravenous and getting hungrier by the second.

It didn't help that Laeddin and Troy both had blood that called to me.

If I were human it would have been as though I'd been starved for a month and someone brought in a roast with seasoned potatoes, creamed corn, rolls with butter and honey, and a chocolate cake, and then placed them down in front of me, but told me I wasn't allowed to eat any of it.

Not even a taste.

My fangs were in a continuous war with my better judgment. It sucked to be me.

In an effort to calm my hunger, I tried to focus on something else. Anything else. Jesse and Rayne had made up by the morning of the second day. She apologized profusely and they were back to talking secretly and holding hands.

Troy and I didn't have a lot of opportunities to talk after our kiss. Pops seemed to keep either one or the other of us engaged when we weren't sleeping. Finally, on the fourth day, we had a moment along. "How's it going?" My words were meant to be a whisper, but it was obvious everyone heard.

He ground his teeth and turned away.

Confused, I put an arm on his shoulder and spun him. He shoved me, his skin rippling as though he were fighting to contain the dragon within. He bared his teeth for the briefest moment before clamping them closed. They'd changed from those of a human to the sharp and pointy teeth of a dragon. And I finally got it. Troy was starving just like me. He was half dragon. From what I learned at the Seven Magics Academy, shifters of any kind needed to eat a lot and often in order to sustain themselves. "I'm sorry," I whispered, turning away.

We needed out of this cage, fast. All of us were predatory in nature, and supernatural as well. Sooner or later, if we remained stuck in this small and claustrophobic cell, we were going to start to look like food.

Rayne had already tried on multiple occasions to speak with the guards, but they ignored her pleas, calling her mutt and other words that didn't translate to English. I figured I should be grateful for that.

Jesse and Rayne were the most talkative now, probably because they'd grown more accustomed to their surroundings. During one of their conversations, Jesse began talking about his uncle Dorian and he blurted out, "Your mother is Snow White, the Vampire Queen, right?"

I appreciated his efforts to include me. When left on my own, I

kept remembering the moment Laeddin's spell had come over me, making me the weapon dedicated to destroying the assassins guarding the crown. My eyes had changed colors, flashing from one to the next. What affected me most were the gauzy wings I'd seen on my back right after the spell completed. They'd appeared just long enough to make me miss them even more when they vanished. "Yes." I gritted my teeth, fighting the hunger and depression eating away at my insides.

Jesse's eyes lit up and for the first time he really looked at me. "I thought so. I can see the resemblance." He ran his hands through his hair, leaning his head against the wall. "Troy and I have talked more than once about who could win in a one-on-one fight between him and the Vampire Queen."

Troy responded to that, giving Jesse a tiny smile. "At the moment, she'd kick my ass." He pressed his hands against his stomach.

"You're really hurting, aren't you, son?" Pops looked worriedly at Troy.

"I'm hungry enough to eat three entire cows," he grumbled. Somehow, I didn't think he was exaggerating.

Pops brushed a piece of hair off his forehead. "I'm sorry, son. Hang in there. You're stronger than your stomach."

Troy growled again and this time smoke came out of his nose. "I don't know about that."

"You are." Professor Pops wrapped an arm around Troy's shoulders. "Why don't you tell Jasmine about the huge crush you have on her mother?"

At that, Troy blushed a bright red. "I don't have a crush. I just think she's awesome."

I was mortified and couldn't help wondering if that was why he liked me, because I reminded him of my mom.

"Jasmine, I swear I don't like, like your mom. Okay?" He barely looked at me when he spoke.

"Whatever," I said, not convinced and too hungry to be kind.

"Ugh, but I am starving." He roared this time and the whole room shook, sending pieces of debris down on us.

"This is ridiculous. We have a genie, a half dragon, two half gargoyles, and an ex Hunter down here. Surely we can get out of this stinking cage." I yanked on the handle using all of my might. "Troy, come and help me."

He pushed himself off the floor and came over. As soon as his shoulder brushed mine, I realized my mistake. The scent of his blood sent my head spinning and my body began to sag. I literally felt faint.

"Hey," Troy caught me. "You're hungry too, aren't you?"

I tried to push out of his grasp, but he held me fast. I flashed my fangs, and he released me. "Does that answer your question?"

Rayne had been watching the exchange and gasped. "She's a vampire."

Jesse laughed. "Yep. She might kick your ass too, Troy."

Troy bent his head, rubbing his scruffy face. "That's why I've been staying away."

I nodded, still furious with hunger, and went over to the door, this time banging on the bars. "Hey! Hey! Let us out of here. You can't hold us. Do you hear me? We need to talk to you. We need to find - "

A large gargoyle with fawn brown wings and a patch over one eye rounded the corner and came down the hall like an angry bull. He looked ready to ram the door. But just as he reached me, he stopped. "Stop making that racket or I'll crush you under my foot, you filthy, stinking bug."

His words threw me off balance. "Don't be rude." I placed my hands on my hips.

"You can understand what he's saying?" Jesse's eyes were wide with surprise. Troy and Pops seemed surprised too.

"Sadly, yes."

Rayne perked up at that knowledge. "Can they understand you too?"

"No."

The gargoyle noticed my stance and chuckled. "You've got fire. Well that's something." He studied me more closely with his one eye. "It would be a shame, but I will still crush you if you don't stop your squawking." He glanced at Rayne. "Why don't you explain the way we work around here, mutt?" He laughed heartily.

I crossed my arms. "Rayne, talk to him."

"Vyne, these are good people. They mean us no harm. Tell my father and - "

The gargoyle roared with laughter. "Your father told us to leave you down here. He doesn't care about you, mutt, and neither do I. Now shut it." His eye roamed my body and I shuddered.

Rayne heaved a deep breath.

I'd had enough. "Let us out, you monster!"

The gargoyle licked his lips. Then he walked down the hall, turned the corner and was gone.

I stomped my foot in frustration. "Stubborn ox." Laeddin had a perplexed look on his face and I wondered what had him thinking. I turned my back on the door and leaned against it, then slid to the floor. Every second we sat in the cell was another wasted. Troy seemed eager to comfort me, but I knew why he resisted. He didn't want to eat me. "Ugh, thanks for trying, Rayne."

She shrugged. "Sure."

Moments later, I heard the gargoyle's heavy footsteps coming down the hall. He stopped at the door. I didn't look at him, determined not to lose my temper again. "Little bug, I've brought you some food."

Surprised, I looked up just as he dumped some rancid scraps of food on my head along with something that rolled toward Troy. I screamed like the gargoyle had killed me, furious at his trick.

Springing to my feet, I looked him in his one good eye and pushed the door with all of my might. Surprisingly, it began to shudder and buckle. Even with disgusting food dripping into my eyes, I could see the rock crumble beneath my fingers. That gave me the incentive I needed to push harder. "Try and stop me," I shouted, still staring at the gargoyle.

The smirk on his face turned to surprise. "You're stronger than you look."

"You're damn right, you stupid rock!" My hands had gone through several layers of stone. Bits of powder filled the air like smoke. I ignored it, concentrating on my anger. "Laeddin, why the hell did you make it so I can comprehend what they're saying, but they can't understand me? It's so freaking infuriating!" I pushed harder. If I had to guess, I'd say I was halfway through the thick, rock door.

"Stop that, bug," the gargoyle growled warningly.

"Vyne, what the goddess is going on?" Another gargoyle appeared at the end of the hall, a female with ochre wings.

"Nothing, Amber," he said turning his head in her direction. Then in a quieter voice, he said to me, "Don't make me come in there, little bug, because if I do, you won't like it. I promise you that." He licked his lips again.

The tone of his words terrified me. Worse was the way his eye roamed over my body. I stopped.

"Good." He turned away. "See, it's nothing," he said, speaking to the one called Amber.

I punched the wall beside the door, exasperated. Rock rained down, adding more smoke to the air. With the bottom of my shirt, I started to wipe off the mess, but Troy took my hands, stopping me. He pushed me into the corner, trapping me with his arms. I studied his face, trying to figure out what he intended to do.

"Troy," Pops said in warning.

"I'm fine," he growled, smoke wafting from his nose. "Hold still," he

whispered, leaning closer to me.

I held my breath as his face came nearer. But rather than kiss me, he began picking the food scraps out of my hair. Then instead of throwing the disgusting items out the cell door, he handed them to Jesse, who immediately began tossing them in his mouth. I was even more baffled when Troy leaned toward me . . . and licked my lips. Then I realized, he wanted the food on my face, even though I knew it had to be repulsive, especially now that it was also covered in rock dust and who knew what else. I closed my eyes against his nearness while tingles raced inside and outside of my body. The experience shouldn't have elicited such a lustful response, but by the time he finished, I was torn between pulling his lips to mine and kissing the daylights out of him and burying my fangs in his neck and drinking from him until my stomach burst. But I held still, forcing my lips and my fangs to stay put.

At last I opened my eyes. Troy seemed better and even had his usual smirk on his face.

"Your turn." He pressed his body against mine and tilted his neck. I wanted to drink from him desperately, but not in front of everyone, especially not Laeddin and Pops.

"Not now," I said, my throat scratchy.

Troy's expression became wounded until Laeddin shouted, "Leave her be. She obviously doesn't want you."

Troy growled. "Her body begs to differ. She's just polite enough not to want me in front of you." He stalked over to Laeddin, his skin rippling lightly as he got right in the genie's face. Laeddin held his ground.

They reminded me of two bulls stomping their feet and snorting at each other. It was ridiculous. "Knock it off, both of you." I stepped between them, putting up my hands, trying to push them apart.

"Troy," Pops said again.

They backed down at the same time, Laeddin going over to sit by

himself.

I turned to Troy. "You're disgusting," I said, but smiled to soften the blow.

"You taste like honey," he responded, causing crimson heat to burn through my body.

"You know what - " I began but was interrupted by a group of four gargoyles coming noisily down the hall toward us. I looked to see if they had another captive, but they didn't.

"Get the prisoners. The emperor will see them now."

Vyne came to the door along with Amber and another male I hadn't seen before. "I'm unlocking the door, little bug. Don't try anything funny."

I was feeling a bit snarky and wanted to crack a joke. Instead I moved out of the way and worked to control the need to high-five someone. We were finally getting out of this hellhole.

While Vyne held the door open, Amber and the other male came in. His wings were the color of tawny with striations of black throughout. Gargoyles entered one at a time, ducking their heads to fit beneath the opening. Amber took hold of Laeddin and me while the other grabbed Troy and Pops. "What about those two?" Amber pointed at Jesse and Rayne.

"Leave them. Graves wants his daughter to stay down here a while longer and the emperor isn't interested in seeing the other one yet."

That got my attention. What was her dad's problem? I wanted to ask Rayne but didn't get a chance."

"What are they saying?" Jesse asked.

"They're talking about you," I said, grinding my teeth in anger.

Troy and Professor Pops started fighting against their gargoyle. "No," Troy yelled.

"We aren't leaving without them," Professor Pops said, grinding his teeth.

"You must take us. Graves needs to hear what I have to say." Rayne pushed between two different gargoyles, trying to get to the door. Jesse helped, but not even the two of them together were a match for the brutish gargoyle prison guards.

Vyne lifted one eyebrow. "What more do you have to say, little mutt?"

"I don't have to tell you. I'll tell him." It was the most defiant I'd seen her.

"Fine. Let's go." He roughly grabbed Rayne and Jesse by their necks as he pushed them through the opening and past the rest of us, down the hall where we took a left and then started up the endless stairs.

Professor Pops and Troy relaxed. I nodded at them, glad they realized what was happening.

We were finally going to meet the emperor.

OceanofPDF.com

GARGOYLES

SEVERAL flIGHTS of dull stairs later, we reached the main floor.

Wide open with an enormous circular light in the center of the common area, it reminded me of the grand body of an octopus with its dimly lit tentacles going in every direction.

Male and female gargoyles, mostly with some shade of brown or dark red wings, bustled around, busy with their jobs. Troy looked at Professor Pops. He winked.

They intended to go through with the plan.

In an instant, Troy shuddered into his dragon form.

The gargoyle holding him jumped back in fear as Troy's body suddenly became very big and scaly. The gargoyles scrambled, looking to Vyne for instructions.

"Get after them," he shouted, taking hold of Laeddin and me before we could escape. Jesse and Rayne fought against the gargoyle holding them, but they couldn't break free.

Faster than I believed possible, Pops climbed on Troy's back and with one giant swoop of his wings, Troy launched himself toward the ceiling. It was probably a hundred feet up, but he continued to beat his wings, knocking into rocks and scraping his clawed feet on walls until he reached the top.

"Yes," I cheered, as Troy broke through the glass ceiling, sending fragments reigning down on all of us. Several pieces cut my cheek, but I felt the wounds heal almost immediately.

I watched as a guard took off in a desperate attempt to chase Troy, but it was apparent the gargoyle wasn't used to flying indoors - bouncing into walls and spinning nearly out of control before recovering and continuing until he was out in the open air.

Once he was gone, Vyne shouted, "Get this mess cleaned up."

Several servants immediately dropped what they had in their hands and got to work.

The gargoyle called Edge burst through opening to the statue room. "What the goddess is going on?"

Vyne growled. "Two of the prisoners escaped. I've sent Bayne after them." Vyne spoke with authority, but I sensed his nervousness.

Edge snorted. "He's useless." Edge looked around in astonishment. "How did they escape?"

Vyne pointed up sheepishly.

"Impossible. I thought you said they weren't gargoyles and none of them had wings."

"They aren't gargoyles. One of them," Vyne paused, looking down at his feet. "It seems one of the prisoners is at least part dragon."

Edge sputtered. "A dragon? How? What?" He leaned in. "All of the dragons are dead. Our emperor, Jagg the Dragon Slayer killed all of the dragons personally." He yanked Laeddin and me from Vyne's grasp. "Go after him. Kill them both. Jagg must never know. Understand?"

"Yes, Liege." Vyne spread his wings and jumped into the air. He flew with a lot more grace than the first gargoyle and was out through the ceiling in no time.

"Great. Just great," Edge mumbled, leading us into the room of statues. Upon entering, my forehead began to burn like someone had placed a lit match against it. I reached up to touch the area, feeling for the diamond residing there.

Laeddin noticed and gave me a questioning look but didn't speak.

I blinked against the pain. "Are you getting any vibes, because my head is throbbing?"

"I think so," he said softly, but didn't elaborate. The others glanced over at us, curious about why we dared to speak.

Against the far wall sat a large emerald throne flanked on either side by a pair of emerald dragons. It was the most color I'd seen in a room since I arrived, and it staggered me. Skye stood to the right of the throne; her arms clasped tightly behind her.

"Anything wrong, Edge?" the imposing gargoyle on the throne asked. His brooding features were the same as the others, but he appeared even bigger. His wings were green, the same color as the throne and the dragons. Atop his head lay an emerald crown. He was shirtless, just like the other males, but his pants were green instead of black. He had a ring on each of his fingers, all emerald as well. I got the feeling it might be the emperor's favorite color.

"Nothing of note, Sire."

"Very good." Dark eyes studied us a moment and suddenly I felt like a rat in a maze. "Bring the mutts closer," he bellowed.

The guard pushed Rayne and Jesse forward. Edge held us steady but shifted his feet uncomfortably. I kept my gaze on the emperor. "Is your magic working now?" I asked Laeddin barely above a whisper.

He didn't speak but snapped his fingers and abruptly my face didn't feel grimy any longer. He smiled and nodded.

I wriggled my nose gratefully. "Thank you," I mouthed.

Edge shook us. "Quiet," he hissed.

But I wasn't finished speaking to Laeddin. "Can you send Jesse some magic so he can understand the gargoyles?"

Edge bent my arm back at the elbow until I thought he would pop my shoulder out of joint.

I fought against the pain, knowing it would heal soon anyway. Laeddin nodded slightly and snapped his fingers again.

"Tell me what you've learned, Rayne, half-breed daughter of Graves," the emperor growled.

I hadn't seen Laeddin's wrists light up, but I had a feeling the magic worked because Jesse's head suddenly shot up like he was

listening more intently.

Rayne rolled her shoulders back and stood up straight. "As I've explained to the guards many times, Jesse was sent here by mistake. He knows nothing about our realm. The only parents he remembers are the ones he had as a child. When he was older, he was adopted by a man named Adam Henry." She paused a moment. "He isn't a spy from the other kingdoms nor is he here to claim the crown." She bowed. "I have answered all of your questions as my father commanded." She stayed bowed and waited.

It seemed that the emperor's face grew more lines. "I see." He studied her for a long moment. "Can you tell me anything of the others?"

"Only that they came seeking Jesse. I don't believe they have a desire to harm you or our realm." She continued to hold her position, her gray eyes staring at the floor. It shimmered with dozens of different colored gems.

"You have done well."

She lifted her head. "Thank you, Liege."

"Amber, take her to the wizard's chamber. Let her wait there for Graves. I believe he has some items he'd like to discuss with her."

The gargoyle bowed. Jesse, who'd been quiet until that point, began to fight. "No, wait!"

The emperor raised an eyebrow. "You can speak our language?" He gave Rayne a diminutive look, one that said she'd be in trouble for failing to mention that fact. But she looked as surprised as everyone else.

"Yes, Liege." Jesse tried to bow, though it was awkward as Amber held his arms in a vice-like grip. The emperor seemed unimpressed by the gesture.

Jesse straightened. "I need to make sure Rayne is safe."

The emperor laughed heartily, clapping his hands together.

"Rayne, I believe the boy's in love with you. It seems Graves underestimated your talents."

Rayne shifted uncomfortably.

The emperor's gaze suddenly turned hard. "Explain yourself!" As he spoke, his voice grew louder, until it shook the circular lights hanging from the ceiling.

Rayne's face paled. "I-I didn't teach him."

Jagg leaned back, staring at her. "Is that so? And how do you think he learned?" His voice was dangerously low now.

She cleared her throat, visibly shaking under the scrutiny. "I believe that one possesses magic." She gestured timidly toward Laeddin.

"I see." Jagg sat up at that and studied Laeddin. Then returned his focus to Jesse. "I can appreciate your desire to keep your woman safe, but I'm afraid that won't be possible. Graves has requested to speak to her, and it's unwise to anger our wizard without cause."

The emperor stood, waving them away. Jesse was still protesting loudly as Amber escorted a silent Rayne from the throne room. Eventually another guard was able to wrestle Jesse to the ground, threatening to rip out his throat if he didn't shut up.

In the commotion, Laeddin touched my finger with one of his and I knew he'd done more magic.

"Now that's settled, let's talk." Jagg paused in front of Laeddin and me before returning to his throne. He was the tallest gargoyle I'd seen, a giant. I shuddered to think what his wingspan would be. We'd never be able to escape if he came after us.

The emperor returned to his seat and went back to brooding. "Bring them closer." He waved his hands. "Who are you and why are you here?" His question was directed at Laeddin.

The genie cleared his throat. "We have come to your realm with the hope of locating a lost piece of a crown created thousands of years

ago by the elves."

The emperor seemed truly surprised he could understand Laeddin. He stood, crossing his arms. "Is it magic that allows you to understand and speak my language?"

Laeddin didn't meet the emperor's gaze. "As a humble genie, I have the ability to speak any language."

It occurred to me he could've talked to the gargoyles at any time. He'd regained the use of his magic as soon as we entered the throne room but hadn't used it.

The more time I spent in Laeddin's presence the more I became aware of his blatant unwillingness to use his powers unless he decided it was necessary.

Or I wished it. He said my wishes had consequences. Perhaps using his magic in any way had consequences as well.

OceanofPDF.com

MY PROPERTY

"A GENIE?" The emperor climbed down the steps, too excited to stay seated. "Fascinating! I've heard of your kind but believed you all dead. You must grant me three wishes."

Laeddin cleared his throat again. "Indeed, I am the last of my kind. My brothers have all gone." My irritation at Laeddin momentarily fled at the mention of his brothers.

"And the wishes?" The emperor towered over Laeddin now, but Laeddin didn't balk.

"I am Laeddin, genie of the lamp, and I can only serve one master at a time."

"So, someone else controls you." Disappointment softened the gargoyle's features. Well," he returned to his seat. "I am Jagg, high ruler of Garoth." He lifted his arms in the air as he spoke. "And I demand you accommodate me."

Unfazed as ever, Laeddin bowed deeply.

"Well, genie of the lamp, tell me who your master is," Jagg said, resting his elbows on the armrests.

I shuddered at the tone in his words. If Jagg knew I was Laeddin's master, he would have me killed. There was no doubt about it.

"No, Sire." Laeddin bowed again in an attempt to show respect. "That is not why I'm here."

Jagg roared ferociously. In that moment, he was truly terrifying. "My warriors have captured you, which makes you my property. You will do as I command!"

Laeddin seemed to carefully choose his next words. "Before you detained us, I already had a master and I've not yet granted them all three wishes. You are not my master and you never will be."

"We shall see about that. Any creature dumb enough to let you out of its sight doesn't deserve you."

I thought now was the time to step up and see if Laeddin had, in fact, given me the power to speak the gargoyle language. "Emperor Jagg." I paused, my fingers stroking the bear charm at my wrist, even as I recognized my words sounded different inside my mouth. "My name is Jasmine. I am the princess of Sharra, home to many creatures of the seven magics. As the genie said, we are in desperate need of your help." I bowed.

The emperor leaned back, focusing on me for the first time. "Desperate need." He studied me intently for a moment. "I see. And how do you know the genie? Are you his master?"

The question was calculated. I could see the gleam in his eyes, hoping for enough evidence to justify my murder.

Laeddin interrupted before I could respond. "Liege, I would propose a bargain. I will perform a task for you, similar to a wish, and in return you will help us locate the item we're looking for."

Jagg's eyes sparked with greed. "Interesting. I might consider it if you agree to three tasks instead of one."

Laeddin's wrists lit up. "We have an agreement." He bowed. "What would you have me do?"

Jagg rubbed his hands together. "Getting right to it. Very good." He tapped a finger against his chin. "First, you must give me untold riches."

"As you wish."

Laeddin wrists glowed bright as he turned his palms up. All along the edges of the room, piles and piles of gold pieces appeared. They tinkled as they slipped and fell from their stacks. Interspersed between the gold pieces were rubies, emeralds, pearl necklaces, other jewelry, and so much more. "Untold riches." Laeddin bowed slightly.

Surprised, Edge released Laeddin and me.

"What's the matter," I asked Laeddin under my breath.

"Nothing. Wait and stay quiet," he answered out of the corner of his mouth, trying not to draw attention to our conversation.

Jagg jumped up and flew over to the nearest mound, picking up handfuls of gems and letting them rain through his hands. "This is incredible! Stupendous! Astounding!" He laughed heartily.

"Now, make me the most powerful gargoyle in all of Garoth." He removed his emerald crown and replaced it with one made purely of diamonds.

Laeddin snapped his fingers. "Done."

"This is too easy." Jagg laughed. "Now I want - ," but Laeddin interrupted.

"No more. Not until you help Jasmine and me."

Jagg growled. "How dare you?" He landed, causing the stone floor to rumble, and stomped over, grabbing Laeddin by his shirt collar. "You will do what I say!"

I started toward them, but Laeddin held out a hand, telling me to stop. "What makes you think you are in any position to tell me what to do?" Laeddin's eyes began to glow as did the tattoos on his wrists. I'd never seen him do that before. In the past, he always allowed me to rescue him. "I've just given you untold riches, made you the most powerful gargoyle in the realm with barely the wave of my hand." He pulled from the gargoyle's grasp and lifted off the ground so that they were at eye level. "If I wanted, I could turn you and all of your people to powder and then simply take what I'm after." To prove his point, Laeddin seized the emperor around the neck and lifted him off the ground.

"Take him," Jagg choked out, flapping his wings and working to kick at Laeddin.

Laeddin flung Jagg against the wall above the throne and pinned him there. The emperor still made choking noises. His diamond crown fell from his head and hit the floor with a loud clang. Skye and Amber

rushed at Laeddin as did the others, but the genie swept out his other hand, restraining all the gargoyles against the same wall as their emperor. Each grabbed at their necks. I couldn't decide whether to cheer or back away slowly. I'd known Laeddin had untold power but had never seen him use it on such a grand and aggressive scale.

"Wait! Stop," Jagg choked. "You can't kill me."

"I don't want to kill you. I don't want to kill anyone. But I do require some help." Laeddin's voice was level, completely free of strain despite the fact that he was choking a dozen gargoyles simultaneously.

"Fine," Jagg choked, pulling at the invisible hands around his neck.

Laeddin shifted slightly and all the gargoyles began to breathe easier, though they still remained stuck high against the wall. "You'll help us?"

Jagg coughed. "Of course."

The gargoyle emperor said the words, but every fiber in my being told me not to trust him. It was apparent Laeddin didn't believe him either.

"Let me down and we'll discuss everything." Jagg continued.

"Give me your word as emperor, that you will help us."

"You have it," he said closing his eyes for the briefest moment.

Alarm shot through me. Laeddin had just made of fool of Jagg in front of his subjects. If someone had done that to my mother, she would be livid. Somehow, I doubted Jagg would be satisfied with anything short of murdering the pair of us as pay-back for the insult.

Laeddin released the gargoyles. He appeared to be thinking the same thoughts I had. "And as an apology for my incredible rudeness, I will still grant you a final favor."

Jagg picked up his diamond crown and went back over to his throne. "Excellent." He pondered a moment, his eyes closed, and his face tilted upward like he was asking the heavens to give him answers. Finally, he opened his eyes. "While you were choking me in

my castle I had a moment of clarity. And I've decided I want you to make me the most powerful being in the universe."

Laeddin sighed. "Very well."

"No!" I shouted seizing Laeddin's arm in an effort to prevent him from granting Jagg's request. Laeddin's expression was completely blank as he looked at me.

"I cannot go back on my promise, Jasmine." He gave me a look, begging me to trust him.

I swallowed and stepped back.

Laeddin's tattoos sparked to life.

Jagg leaned forward, laughing eagerly.

I didn't know what to do. It was already bad enough we had Sharra to contend with. Her power had become so strong that my only hope of stopping her was the fairy crown. If Laeddin fulfilled his promise, Jagg would become more powerful than Sharra. Then what would we do? I couldn't let it happen.

Without thought, I ran at the emperor, desperate to tear him to shreds. Surprised, Jagg stepped forward and backhanded me across the face. I sailed through the air and smashed into one of the statues. My neck broke, along with several dozen other bones in my body. I fell into a heap, unable to move until my body healed. "Anyone else?" As he spoke his voice grew deeper and he grew larger. His now-golden wings sparkled as the room shook, causing large chunks of the ceiling to fall.

One nearly landed on me, but Jesse appeared and pulled me out of the way at the last minute. "Stay in here." He'd found an opening at the base of one of the statues and tucked me inside. When he was gone, I had a full view of the roof disappearing. The other gargoyles had shifted to the entranceway, watching the scene in careful awe. A large crowd gathered outside.

"What's happening?" I heard one of them ask.

"Nothing good," another responded.

I had to agree. Why had Laeddin made such a stupid mistake? I didn't have time to ponder further because a small child dashed into the room and using his small but powerful bronze wings, he lifted off the ground in an effort to fly.

"Daddy! Daddy!" the child yelled. That startled me. I hadn't known the emperor had a son.

"Hex!" A female I guessed to be his mother screamed, starting after the child, but Edge grabbed her and held her back. I hadn't met the emperor's wife and had a feeling the reason was because the gargoyle wasn't monogamous.

I wanted to help, tried, but my body was still healing. Usually my injuries healed immediately because of my vampire origins, but Jagg's hit had really done a number on me. An instant later, Jesse came out of nowhere, grabbed the child by the arm, and pulled him out of the way just as a boulder crashed to the ground in the exact spot the child had been. Both Jesse and the child disappeared from my view.

The wind picked up and became a gale. It was so strong that it lifted anything not bolted down off the ground. Thankfully the statue I rested under remained miraculously intact and in place.

Laeddin stood in the midst of all the chaos, looking so small, yet obviously unharmed.

As suddenly as the wind picked up, it stopped. Jagg towered over all of us. His dark eyes glowed. "Such power," he yelled, clenching his fists together in victory. The noise caused an avalanche of debris to rain down, blocking the gargoyles in the entryway from view. Jagg watched it happen and laughed. "My eyes have been opened and oh, the wonders I see!" He bent down, picking up Laeddin between his thumb and first finger, the way one would pick up a bug. "How does it feel to no longer be the most powerful creature in the world?"

Jagg's question made me see that Laeddin really had the power to defeat Sharra, but each time he'd chosen not to. And I had to use a

wish to save him! Why? Why, when he had so much power, had he been forcing me to find the fracking elven crown? Consequences be damned. He could've used his own power to save all of us. Addy! My grandmother! Everyone!

"Remember, Jagg, now that you possess all the power, you must be prepared for the consequences." Laeddin's voice rang clear, but his words confused me.

"What sort of consequences?" He laughed and it shook the entire room.

Immediately, two large wisps of darkness appeared, swirling around Laeddin like phantoms.

"He knows us," I heard one say.

"You knew we'd come," the other said.

Laeddin nodded. "Yes, Great Ones." His voice held the same respect as when he'd first addressed the emperor on his emerald throne.

"What is this?" Jagg laughed, trying to shoo them away with his other hand. But the wisps moved out of reach, zigging and zagging, making it impossible for him to touch them. One circled his left wrist. The other circled his right. They repeated the movement several times before a bright light burst from his wrists, nearly blinding me. I had to close my eyes a moment before reopening them. Twin dark dots blocked my vision.

I heard Jagg scream out in pain.

The feeling was returning to my body and I rubbed my eyes, forcing the spots away in time to see Jagg drop Laeddin from his fingers. Laeddin landed on his feet and turned sideways so that he could watch what was happening to Jagg, and also search for me.

I waved awkwardly, my body still not working quite right. "Laeddin," I whispered.

As soon as he saw me, he sighed with relief and jogged over. "You're okay?"

"Getting there," I said roughly. "But what's happening to Jagg? What are those things?"

"They are identified by many different names, but my family called them the Great Ones. They aren't of this realm but are the creators of it - of all of the realms of Earth." He studied Jagg grimly as the gargoyle continued to wrestle with his penalties correlated with his wish. "Jagg has too much unchecked power now. I knew they wouldn't allow it." He paused and we both watched as a tattoo appeared on each of the emperor's wrists. On the floor at the tip of Jagg's biggest toe, a small gold lamp appeared.

I covered my mouth with my hands as understanding filled me.

Laeddin smiled. "All that power, but only a teeny tiny place to use it in."

While he spoke, the lamp seemed to suck Jagg in. He swirled like a leaking balloon, around and around the room, going faster and faster. "Noooooo!" he screamed, until he vanished with a pop.

"He's inside the lamp?" I asked, shocked by what happened.

"Yes.

"And you knew this would be his reward?"

"I hoped," Laeddin said.

"I'm so sorry I doubted you." I was trying not to do that, but it was hard. Except now I saw the significance of using so much power. It was terrifying.

"It's okay. I've done plenty to fill you with doubt lately."

I had to agree but didn't voice the thought. What he'd just done more than made up for it.

The Great Ones came down and swirled around the lamp until I could no longer see it. Moments later, the lamp and the Great Ones were gone.

I pushed myself into a sitting position just as a shower of rubble erupted from the blocked entryway. Edge appeared, his black hair,

golden wings, and body covered in gray powder. "What happened? Where's Jagg?"

"He's gone," Laeddin said, matter of fact.

The gargoyle seemed visibly relieved. "For how long?" His jaw flexed.

"For good." Laeddin walked over to him. "All of these riches are yours if you would be so kind as to help us find what we are looking for."

I watched the interchange with confusion. Surely the new emperor would protest Laeddin giving the fortune away to a mere guard.

Edge seemed visibly taken aback by Laeddin's generosity. "You have my word, but how did you know?"

"I'm a genie. It's my business to know. Also, you hold yourself with the same confidence as your father." He bowed slightly. "Your highness."

"Oh," I said, but that confused me even more. Why would the emperor make Edge a guard if he was his son? Shouldn't Jagg have been grooming him to rule in his stead? It was one of those questions I might not ever know. Well, unless I asked Laeddin. He probably knew.

Laeddin returned to me.

"Edge is Jagg's son?" I asked bluntly, still too dumbfounded to be polite.

"That's right." Laeddin helped me up. "And he's just become ruler over all the realm of the gargoyles."

OceanofPDF.com

SKYE APPEARED FOLLOWED by Scotch and Rave.

"Edge," Skye said, coming up behind him. "We have two mortally wounded. A dozen more have been taken to Avak. Where is the emperor?"

Edge turned to face them. "Jagg is no more."

"He's dead?" Rave pressed, searching the wreckage that'd once been the throne room. Most of the statues were only missing a chunk of rock here and there, but the statue of the woman with the bird-like wings was miraculously unscathed. She stared down at me kindly and I wondered if her statue was made of a stronger stone than the rest of the castle, or if it was protected by magic.

"He's gone," Edge clarified.

"So he isn't dead?" Her expression alternated between confusion and worry.

Edge shook his head. "No more questions, Skye. Not now." He spoke with finality.

Skye bowed her head. "Yes, Liege."

Amber burst through the rubble and immediately began organizing clean-up crews. Within minutes, dozens of gargoyles began clearing away the rocks and debris. At that pace, they could have the room rebuilt within hours. They'd have the place cleaned up in no time.

While they worked, Edge and Skye spoke quietly with Rave and Scotch at the foot of the throne.

Laeddin took hold of my arms, pulling me close as he whispered, "I believe the piece of the crown is in this room. The sensation is definitely strongest here. While everyone is distracted, we should look for it. Just remember, if you locate the box it's contained in, don't

open it until you're really ready."

He was right. Opening it would unleash the assassin. And when it materialized, twin blades would appear in my hands so I could do battle with it. "Sounds like a plan." Now was the perfect time to look, but I was worried about Jesse too. "Have you seen Jesse?"

"I'm sure he's fine. Get looking." As Laeddin took off toward the farthest statue, I decided I'd look for the crown piece and Jesse at the same time. The last I saw him he rescued the child and rushed out of sight. I went in that direction, weaving between the statues. The stone gargoyles were huge and after a few minutes I got the feeling they were watching me. I looked up, searching the rock faces around me. Empty eyes stared back, making me feel foolish for worrying.

Jesse appeared suddenly, his hair and skin the color of granite and his stormy eyes big as twin moons. It scared the hell out of me.

"Jesse?" I was so relieved to see him in one piece; I could hardly speak. "Where's the child you saved?" I looked around but couldn't spot him.

"The boy is with his mother," he said, as his hair and eyes changed back to their normal color. He brushed a piece of rubble out of my hair. "What are you doing?"

Before I could answer, someone shouted, "All hail Emperor Edge," over and over again.

Jesse and I turned to the throne where Skye pumped her fist in the air. Laeddin appeared in front of them and bowed slightly. I stiffened, wondering whether he found the piece already. It appeared that he hadn't, so why wasn't he still looking?

All of the gargoyles stopped what they were doing and approached the throne.

Questions and accusations began to fly.

"Where's Jagg?"

"Where is the emperor?"

"Edge has killed our ruler!"

"Death to the traitor!"

The group grew until more than a hundred gargoyles were crammed into the throne room. Several gargoyles stood in front of us and I couldn't see Laeddin any longer. More shoved us around like rag dolls, working to get a closer view of their new emperor. If the crowd continued clamoring, Jesse and I would be crushed.

"This doesn't look good," I said, trying to find the quickest way out of the room.

"You're right." Jesse and I somehow managed to end up with our backs to the far wall as we continued to search for an exit.

In the center of the room, gargoyles began shouting and shoving each other. It became apparent there were those for and against the new emperor. One group sided with Edge while the others believed Graves should be crowned. Rather quickly the shoving turned to full out fighting and within seconds the entire throne room became a chaotic mishmash of swinging arms and legs. It sounded like a thunderstorm had erupted as rock smashed against rock. The tang of dust hung in the air, leaving an acrid smell, almost like burning trees. I kept my mouth closed, desperate to keep it out of my mouth, but it was impossible. Like smoke, it even invaded my pores.

I caught a glimpse of Skye, Rave, and Scotch standing in front of Edge, acting as bodyguards as the situation intensified. I still couldn't see Laeddin.

Where had he gone?

"Why aren't they doing anything?" I asked, elbowing aside a gargoyle who had been pushed my way and pointing to the bodyguards. "Why aren't they helping Edge's other supporters beat out the opposition?" I asked the questions out loud, but with all the shouting, no one could hear me. At least I hadn't thought so until Jesse responded.

"Maybe this is their custom?" A gargoyle stepped on his foot and

Jesse snarled, shoving the culprit out of the way. "Give a guy some space, would ya?"

The gargoyle didn't even turn around.

"You okay?" I asked, though I could tell he wasn't because his hair had turned mostly white.

He looked down and I followed his gaze curious whether all of his toes would still be intact. His foot appeared to be fine. "Great," he said through gritted teeth. "Never better."

"Does it hurt?" I continued, wondering if there was internal damage.

"Not really." He crossed his arms, fighting to gain control of his emotions.

"Good." I turned in every direction. "I need to find Laeddin," I said, giving up on the idea of locating the crown piece for now. It was frustrating, but there was no way I could keep searching through all the chaos surrounding us. More and more gargoyles piled in and took sides. The fighting continued to escalate until a gargoyle wearing deep emerald robes held together by a gold and emerald clasp flew in through the gaping hole in the roof. His wings were the inkiest black I'd ever seen. Like a dark cloud, he circled the room several times. Something like dust fell from his hands and onto the gargoyles, before he landed next to Edge.

"Settle down, everyone!" The gargoyle's voice was soft but piercing. He wasn't quite as tall or as wide as Edge, but still made a menacing figure. It seemed his presence and whatever he'd sprinkled on the crowd settled the gargoyles, but something about him made my skin crawl.

Someone shouted, "It's Graves. He's back!"

"Why should we care about him?"

Many of the gargoyles were pointing. Some were staring. Others whispered curses under their breath.

"He looks like a jackass." I had to agree with that one. He really did.

Someone else scoffed, "What's up with the fancy robes?"

"It's been fifteen years since we've seen our wizard," another said.

That got my attention. If Graves knew how to use magic, he could be very useful. Or dangerous.

Within minutes everyone stopped fighting and turned their gazes toward him, almost like puppets on a string.

From what I could see, most of the gargoyles appeared unwounded. Since they were made of rock, some had been chipped and cracked, but not much else, except for one poor soul who'd had one of his violet wings torn. It dangled haphazardly from the middle of his back. Thick black goo oozed from the damaged area. At the sight, phantom pain ran down and across my back and I flinched, remembering how it felt when Sharra tore my wings from me.

"A wizard?" Jesse took me by the elbow and ducked me around a corner and into the crowd.

OceanofPDF.com

"YEAH, GREAT, MORE MAGIC," I said. Jesse laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Why are you taking me into this horrible mess?"

"Because you said you wanted to find Laeddin. I saw him. Come on." He took my hand, leading me after him.

Together, we maneuvered through the crowd while Graves spoke with Edge. Then the green-clad man addressed the crowd. "I have I had a vision!"

The room grew quieter still until only the occasional child could be heard.

"In my vision, I watched Edge ascend the throne. He is meant to be the next high ruler of our realm."

The group began talking at once.

"Can it be?"

"The wizard cannot lie."

Graves weaved his fingers together while he spoke. "Our people will be unified once again. All hail Edge the Courageous!"

Just then I saw the genie climb the steps and take his place to the right of the throne. "Laeddin." I waved, trying to get his attention. He inclined his head, letting me know he saw me.

Gargoyles who'd been fighting only moments before raised their fists in the air and cheered.

"All hail Edge the Courageous!"

"Now, my children," Graves continued. "Please, go to your homes. Tell your friends and family to prepare for the inauguration ceremony. It will begin at tomorrow's evening meal. Go!"

The gargoyles continued to cheer and clap each other on the back as they went away. Everyone spoke with excitement now, as if their

anger had never existed.

It was freaking surreal.

ONCE NEARLY EVERYONE CLEARED OUT, Graves, Edge, Laeddin, and the others began talking. Using my vampire hearing I caught pieces of the conversation and heard Graves mention Rayne but couldn't hear exactly what was said.

Finally, Edge turned his attention to us. "Come," he said, taking his seat on the throne. "We need to discuss your future within the gargoyle realm."

That seemed to surprise Jesse, and everyone else. Who was Jesse to Edge?

Skye climbed the steps and stood on Edge's right while Scotch and Rave stood on the left. Graves stayed where he was, just to the left and below.

"Be cautious. The wizard is radiating large quantities of great magic," Laeddin whispered, coming to stand beside me. "That's why I've been staying close to him. I'm trying to figure out what he's playing at.

"Will do," I said.

Edge clasped his hands together and met Laeddin's gaze. "What you did to Jagg, it was genius."

Laeddin bowed. "Thank you, Sire."

"You gave him exactly what he wanted, but still used the moment to trap him in a place where he won't be able to hurt anyone. Brilliant." He chuckled lightly. "And what were those things that took the lamp away?"

"They are the Great Ones," Laeddin said. "Or sometimes called the Unknowns."

That snapped me to attention. My mom told me about them. They were Sharra and Silindra's parents.

"The Great Ones? Seems ominous." At first glance Edge appeared comfortable and completely at ease with his new position as emperor, but I noticed that his fingers were tapping on the armrest. And it looked like he might be sweating. I realized he was putting on a show. It was understandable. He'd just been thrust into a very prominent position without any time to prepare.

"They are the creators."

Graves faced Edge. "I believe they are the beings we call the Overcasts."

"Ah, that makes sense." Edge leaned back. "And will these Overcasts keep Jagg safe? Or more appropriately, will they keep the rest of us safe from him? He isn't going to be happy if they ever let him out of that lamp."

"If time has taught us anything, it's that we will see Jagg again," Graves said as he came toward me. "I sense you have some of the Overcasts in you, my child." He touched my cheek and I felt a cold chill run the length of my body.

"Do I?" I fought the urge to take a large step away from him. Something about this gargoyle really creeped me out.

"Would you mind sharing your story?" He rotated, giving me some room.

I forced myself not to shudder at his nearness. He wasn't someone I would ever share my secrets with. "There isn't much to tell. I was created by the ones you call Overcasts, but it took my parents' blood and their love to bring me to life."

"Interesting. I wonder - " He paused, studying me intently. Then he seemed to change his mind. "Whatever your fate, it must be very important."

I wanted to shrug and explain I had no idea why I'd been created.

Laeddin saved me. "It's her fate to save us all from a wicked sorceress called Sharra, the one who created the darkness and sent the pestilence across all the realms." Laeddin paused, glancing at Edge.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, some of your people could be changing."

"Actually, we have," Edge said. "That's why we were out on patrol when we found you." He sat forward.

Graves stepped in before Laeddin could continue. "That is the other reason I've returned, Liege. I've seen a vision of the darkness consuming our land. Your reign will be a short one if we do not stop it. It's my opinion that this girl should be given every ounce of help we can spare so she can find what she's looking for."

"Very well." Edge crossed his arms. "And I would like to apologize to both of you for your treatment when you first arrived. Jagg commanded it. I think he hoped that if he left you down there long enough, we would forget about you and your demise would end any discussion."

Graves nodded his agreement, but I got the feeling he knew more of the story than he let on.

"It's okay," I said, finally stepping away from Graves.

"Thank you." Edge brought my hand to his lips and brushed his lips against it.

"Rave. Scotch. Settle the genie and the princess into a guest room so they can clean up and rest in preparation for the inauguration."

"Yes, Liege." Rave gave me a sardonic smile. She didn't seem thrilled about the change in my social standing.

I returned her glare with one of my own.

Edge continued, "The people need the inauguration to go forward as quickly as possible so there's no question I'm the one in charge. Once the ceremony is over, I will help you in any way that I can." This time when he spoke, he spoke directly to me.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." If only we could just search the blasted room now. Instead of waiting for the inauguration. It was a waste of time.

"Very good. Well then, if you will excuse me, I have a castle that needs to be repaired and a kingdom that needs to be codified." He waved a hand and I knew we were being dismissed.

"This way," Rave said.

Laeddin and I followed her until we reached the doorway. Then I remembered Jesse. He still stood like a statue on the sidelines, his feet spread apart like he couldn't decide what to do.

"Jesse?" I called.

He looked at me.

Edge noticed him and his face softened. He and Graves exchanged a look. "Jesse, if you wouldn't mind, I'd appreciate it if you could stay here a few minutes longer. There is something you and I need to discuss."

Jesse's fists clenched together tightly. "Okay." He shuffled his feet, looking like a nervous teenager about to be scolded.

"You'll be fine, Jesse," I called out.

His hair began turning white, and the expression on his face told a different story.

OceanofPDF.com

BLOOD BOND

"THIS IS RIDICULOUS," I said throwing myself into a chair.

I was completely stressed out.

So many emotions skittered through me, I didn't know which direction to turn. "We don't have time to be hanging out and attending celebrations. It's already been four days. We need to find that piece of the crown and get out of here."

The world would become completely dark in a little over a month and we still needed four more pieces of the crown.

On top of that, I needed to find out what happened once we had all of the pieces together.

My worst fear was that I'd get the crown and it wouldn't do any good.

I'd go against Sharra and she'd finally succeed in taking over my body.

If I failed, the world would go dark and everyone I loved would be destroyed.

The thought terrified me.

I took a deep breath.

The first piece of the crown had entered my body after I destroyed the assassin.

Now, the only reminder that the crown existed came in the form of a single small diamond in the center of my forehead, just above my eyebrows.

"Agreed. I don't believe we need their help to find it. It's in the throne room, probably at the base of one of the statues." Laeddin sat beside me. "I believe you sensed it too." He touched the diamond on my forehead.

It didn't burn as much now as it had when we first entered the throne room, which made me suspect Laeddin's guess was correct. "I did."

"So all we need to do is find a time when the room is empty and get in there. What concerns me is that the gargoyles may have somehow combined the crown with the rock of one of the statues. I need to return to my realm and see if I can find any research on where exactly the piece might be." He seemed distracted by the books he would be researching, like he was already within his library in his realm of Debania.

"No!" I shouted. "Laeddin, you can't leave me again." I didn't want to remain in this realm. I didn't like it. Not one bit.

"It won't be for long." He brushed some of my hair off my face before he continued. "It's strange though. This piece feels stronger than the first. Almost as though it's bigger or more powerful."

"Oh?" That I hadn't noticed.

"I need to find out why. I want to be prepared in case it means the assassin will be stronger as well. I don't want you vulnerable." His hand cupped my face. "I could never forgive myself if something happened to you."

"Fine. Go." I tried to smile, but it wouldn't come. "Hurry back, though."

"I will." He disappeared immediately, and I felt a strong pang of emptiness. I took a deep breath then another. Then I got a whiff of myself. I really needed to clean up, and now seemed like the best time for it.

The bathroom held a makeshift shower that consisted of a hose and a large tub filled with water. At least it was warm.

I took a cloth and a bar of something I hoped was soap and quickly scrubbed myself clean. The clothing wasn't much better.

Shiny pants and a selection of bikini tops in three different colors, including turquoise blue, which is the one I put on.

Dressed, I braided my long hair down my back.

There weren't any shoes, so I resigned myself to bare feet.

I tried to remember if any of the gargoyles I'd seen had been wearing shoes. I didn't think so.

When I came out of the bathroom, two plates of steaming hot food were sitting on a table. More out of habit than anything, I went over to check it out. I was hungry, but not for food. I needed blood.

Christopher appeared around the corner, as casually as if he'd been there all along.

Caught completely off guard, I jumped about three feet in the air.

"Frack, Christopher. What are you doing here?"

The Hunter chuckled.

I tried to convince my pulse to settle down before I had a heart attack.

"Our blood bond and this bear," he touched the little wooden bear charm on the bracelet still encircling my wrist, "allow me to find you anywhere, especially when you're hungry." He came closer, and I felt my pulse pick right back up again. Seriously, this guy was going to be the death of me.

He took hold of the end of my wet braid and tugged. "And you are hungry?"

I nearly fell onto his neck at his invitation. "Starved."

He held his arms open and tilted his head. I pounced, nearly knocking the both of us to the floor as I crashed into him. My fangs lengthened and pierced his skin. His blood hit the back of my throat an instant later and I immediately felt better, more like myself. The one I was meant to be.

Christopher held me while I drank my fill.

"Thank you," I said, pulling away at last, filled with euphoria. I wiped the edges of my mouth.

He walked over to the table and sat in a chair, studying me

intently. "I know I'm not the person you want in your life. I've done things, hurt people, including your mother. If I could take those things back, I would."

I sat across from him, pushing the food out of the way. Maybe Jesse would come by later and finish it off. "Some things can't be repaired, Christopher." With all I'd done, I wanted to be wrong.

"I know." He ran his hands through his hair. "But I can still help you. And you need me, my blood. With it you're a stronger, better version of yourself."

I grabbed his hands, which startled him. "You're right and I really appreciate you coming to help me." I shook his hands playfully. "Thank you, Hunter."

"You're welcome." He scooted closer to me. "I'm here for you, whatever you need."

I quickly stood. "Look, I know you think we're meant to be together or whatever, but I don't feel that way about you." I knelt in front of him. "I don't want to hurt you, but please." I grabbed his knees, begging with my eyes for him to understand. "Tell me you understand and will continue to support me, even if things don't work out between us the way you want them to. Please." Memories of Pops and Joanna came to mind.

Christopher stood and moved toward the door. I thought he would leave without another word, but he stopped. "I'm here for you, Jasmine. In whatever way you need me." He was gone before I had a chance to stand.

I went over to the bed and fell on it, rolling onto my back. It still felt weird, lying on my back without my wings to get in the way. "I'm an idiot."

"Why do you say that? It isn't your fault you're a bloodsucker." Jesse knocked on the door as he came in.

I sat up. "I never said it was," I snapped and then immediately regretted it. "Sorry."

"Hey, don't be. It's been a crazy few days. Weeks. Months." He shook his head and sat beside me. "So, who was that guy?" he asked, pointing at the empty doorway. "I thought about punching the smug grin off his face, but didn't want to hurt your feelings or something, so I held back. But I thought you and Troy are a thing?"

I laughed. "He's a - " I shook my head. "A friend."

"Oh?" He didn't look convinced. "Not the same as you and Troy are friends though, right?"

"Definitely not the same. Not even close."

His shoulders relaxed. "Good."

I faced him. "You look better," I said, hoping he'd let me change the subject. "Not quite so hungry."

"Yeah, you look better too, not quite so stinky." He waved a hand in front of his nose. Then he grinned. "Love the outfit. You're totally hot."

I playfully punched his chest. "Your outfit isn't any better than mine. At least I have a shirt. Sort of."

He glanced down at his bare chest. "They don't have much need for clothing in Garoth, do they?"

"Apparently not." I adjusted my top, grateful that at least the essentials were covered.

Jesse laughed.

I rolled my eyes and flopped back on the bed. "Thanks for saying I'm hot." I felt my cheeks heat up.

"You're welcome." He lay beside me. "Where's the genie?"

"Gone." I rolled onto my side, facing him. "Have you seen Pops and Troy?"

"No, but I hope they're all right." He cleared his throat. "I need to see them again."

I realized just how lonely he must've been without them. Edge had mentioned that Jagg killed off all of the dragons in this realm. I didn't

say anything, but I hoped Troy wasn't being hunted. "You will," I said, knowing I would make it happen, no matter what.

He nodded, placing his hands behind his head. "I wondered if you'd do me a favor."

"Sure. What?" I rose up on my elbow.

"I need you to help me find Rayne." He swallowed and I sensed his worry.

"You still haven't seen her? Did you ask Graves where the wizard's chamber is located?"

"Edge told me Graves sent two warriors to check on her after the commotion, but when they got there, Rayne had already gone."

I sat up, grateful for the opportunity to be doing something other than lying around, waiting. "Well then, let's get a move on. We need to find out where the wizard's Chamber is located."

OceanofPDF.com

WIZARD'S CHAMBER

THE CASTLE BUZZED with gargoyles moving about, getting ready for Edge's inauguration ceremony.

"Excuse me," I stopped one of the gargoyles rushing by.

"Yes?" She was a small female, and she looked frightened by me.

"Can you tell me where the wizard's chamber is?" I tried to keep my voice gentle so I wouldn't scare her any more than I already had.

Her eyes grew large. She pulled out of my grasp and pointed up. "Top floor."

"Thank you." Jesse and I headed for the staircase she indicated and began to climb. On our way up, I asked, "So what's the story? Why did Edge want to talk to you?" We came to a landing and paused.

Jesse went past me and continued up. As the silence lengthened, it became obvious he was having a tough time talking about whatever it was.

I made a face before running after him. When we reached the top of the second landing, I tried again. "So?"

"What?" He feigned ignorance.

"The new emperor. Edge. What did he tell you?"

Jesse went over to a nearby window, hopping up on the ledge before sitting and letting his feet dangle over the edge. The space was large enough for even the biggest gargoyles to fly out. At the top, directly in the center, a dragonhead had been carved into the rock. I reached out to touch it and was surprised by how warm and smooth the stone felt against my fingertips. Nervous, because I knew how high up we were, I carefully climbed onto the ledge beside him.

"It's strange," he said, looking out over the vast gray landscape. It didn't seem to be any lighter or darker than the last time I'd seen the

outside. It was as though the sky remained constant, never changing. And it was still cloudy. I couldn't tell where the sun was or if there even was one.

"What's strange?" I prompted when he hesitated.

"Edge claimed to be my father." The news didn't surprise me. Jesse was half gargoyle. What better place to discover the truth about his parentage than in the gargoyle realm?

Jesse closed his eyes and I studied his dark features. As a vampire I had smooth skin, but his appeared even smoother.

"Do you believe him," I whispered, trying to gauge how he was taking the revelation.

He shrugged, not opening his eyes. "I don't see why he'd lie." As he spoke, he stood, reaching out a hand to steady himself on the top of the window frame. I followed, swallowing anxiously. "My whole life I've felt different." He laughed bitterly and continued, his eyes flashing when he opened them. "Hell, I am different, and it turns out no matter where I am, in the human realm or here, I will never fully belong."

"That's not true." I tried to comfort him.

He turned and jumped back into the stairway.

"Hard like a rock so I'm unable to be with a human and here?" He glanced at his back. "No wings." He laughed harshly. "I'm half gargoyle and half human. Neither place will ever fully fit me." He started up the stairs.

I followed, thinking about what he said. I could relate. If anyone didn't belong somewhere, it was me. My parents had brought me to life, but I didn't come from them. I came from the Unknowns. There wasn't another being in all the universe like me. I was truly alone, but perhaps I needed to look at it another way. Instead of focusing on my differences, I needed to understand my similarities. There was a reason I needed blood from each of the seven magics. I was a part of all of them. The realization lifted a heavy burden from my shoulders, one I hadn't realized I carried until that moment. I wasn't alone.

Different, yes. But weren't we all? "Or, maybe because of your heritage, you can fit more fully into both."

Jesse paused on the steps, and I continued. "You are human and gargoyle. That doesn't make you less like each side of yourself, but more. You are more human and more gargoyle than the others because you possess both of their qualities."

He smiled, flashing his white teeth. "I suppose that's one way to look at it."

I punched him in the arm. "It is. Now let's go find your friend."

When we reached the top floor, I was surprised by how open it all was. There was a roof, but it was thin and only covered the middle section. At least a dozen windows lined each wall and they were twice the size of those on the lower levels. The windows came to a point, folding inward. Even the rock on this level was different. Where the rest of the interior of the castle was dull and gray, the rock here was white and smooth. It reminded me of the outer walls of the castle but wasn't exactly the same.

"Wow, I feel like we're no longer in Kansas, Toto."

Jesse laughed quietly. "Agreed, but in a good way. It's beautiful up here. I love the breeze." He lifted his face slightly and I frowned. Jesse was meant to fly just as I was. It made me wonder why he didn't have wings.

I remembered Rayne didn't have wings either.

"Me too," I said, my eyes roaming the vast expanse of landscape. There was water on one side and mountains on the other. Then I gave myself a little shake. There would be time enough to admire the view after we found Rayne.

Our bare feet made little sound against the smooth floor. It looked like marble and was so shiny I could see my reflection in it. More statues lined the hallway, but these were different than the ones downstairs. Some of them had wings, some didn't. A few had some gargoyle traits, but one had floppy dog ears. Another had the head of

a dragon with the body of a gargoyle. Still another had the face of a gargoyle and the body of a large cat.

"What do you think Pops and Troy are doing?" Jesse said out of the blue.

His voice startled me, and I missed a step, falling forward in surprise. Catching myself, I shrugged. "Knowing them, something smart. They'll figure out a way to get back to you."

He nodded. "Have you drunk from Troy?"

"Like sucked his blood?" Color flooded my cheeks at the question. Jesse burst out laughing and I snickered. "Well, I am a vampire."

"Yeah, I noticed." He clasped his hands behind his back.

I debated whether to tell him the truth. Finally, I said, "No."

That surprised him. "What about me? Would you drink my blood?"

I wrinkled my nose.

"I guess dragon blood smells better than gargoyle blood." I couldn't tell if the thought bothered him.

"It's more that your skin is like a rock. I might break my teeth if I tried to bite you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Makes sense." He shook his head. "When we get back home, we need to go a few rounds in a fight."

"Why fight?" Now I was totally confused. I'd believed we were getting along well together.

"Not really fight, more like sparring. Troy and I always talk about who would win in a battle between a half gargoyle and a vampire, or a half dragon and a vampire. We've all sparred with Pops, of course, but it's not the same when you're fighting against your mentor."

It was my turn to shake my head. "Okay." Sometimes guys were weird.

"Sorry." He shrugged his shoulders, trying to release some tension. "But wouldn't you love to find out who would win? A while ago I fought a Vaktare, and she nearly kicked my ass."

"Really." Vaktare were like werecats and Locanis were werewolves. We studied them at the Seven Magics Academy. "It might be fun," I hedged.

He laughed. "It's a thing Troy and I do. But, never mind, you're obviously distracted."

"Yeah, sorry." I hadn't really been distracted, but I decided it was best not to argue. Then I gave him my best smile. "Still, I'll fight you anytime. I might win, especially if I get my wings and my magic back." It was wishful thinking, but a girl could hope.

He stopped. "You have wings?"

I looked down a moment, forcing back the tears. "Had them. Sharra took them from me."

Jesse crossed his arms. "Wow, I've really been out of it. What's going on in the human realm?"

"It's happening everywhere, including here. Maybe even especially here." I walked over to a window that looked out over the water. When Jesse joined me, I explained about Sharra, the Akuma, and the reason I was in the gargoyle realm.

"And the genie?" Jesse raised his eyebrows in expectation.

"It's complicated," was all I said.

Jesse barked out a laugh. "Another friend?"

I looked out over the ledge, trying to see the ground below. "Something like that. Now - " I shrugged.

"You have a lot of friends, don't you?" He smirked, reminding me of Troy.

"I'm not so sure." The scent of brine wafted through the window on the breeze, blowing at the edges of my hair. I closed my eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"I get that."

"You do?" Somehow that surprised me. Jesse didn't strike me as the type of guy who dated a lot.

He hopped up onto the sill. "I thought I'd fallen for someone too, but she didn't reciprocate. It hurt and I was confused for a while, but then I met Rayne." He got a faraway look in his eyes. "She's amazing."

"She might be." I wasn't sure about her yet.

"What? I can tell you have something to say." He sat, crossing his legs.

"I don't know her well enough yet. I'm withholding judgement." I clasped my hands together and leaned against the window pane.

"It doesn't matter. I know Rayne cares for me." He climbed off the ledge. "That's why I need to find her." He waited while I came over to him. "And if it was all an act? Well, then at least I'll know and have closure."

I was still worried. Rayne seemed to really care for Jesse. That was a fact I knew. But I also knew what it was like to want something so much you'd do anything to get it. I'd seen the look on her face when she talked about her mother, before, in my own reflection, when I was desperate to have the normal life I thought I craved. "Right. That makes sense."

Jesse hurried down the hall until we reached a set of bronze double doors. A stocky male gargoyle with apricot wings stood guard to one side. Jesse straightened to his full height, his bearing as regal as any I'd ever seen.

"My name is Jesse. I'm here to see Rayne."

The gargoyle growled. "No one gets into the wizard's chambers without permission."

"I am the new emperor's son. I have permission."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sire." The guard was instantly contrite, obviously expecting Jesse to lash out at any second. "It's still so new." He stepped aside and pushed open half the door. "She isn't inside though. She left a few hours ago."

"Any idea where she was going?"

"Well," the guard paused, looking uncomfortable. "She mentioned Avalon's Cave."

"Where's that?" Jesse asked.

The gargoyle walked over to the nearest window on the water side. We followed. "See those caves to the left of the docks?" He pointed.

"Yes." Jesse was obviously trying to hold back his impatience.

"During low tide, many of the guards and warriors go in there to burn off steam. I doubt anybody's there right now because high tide is coming in maybe forty minutes."

Without another word Jesse turned and rushed back the way we'd come.

I hurried after him. "You aren't seriously going to go in those caves right now?"

"I am." He was practically running now.

"But you heard the guard. We only have forty minutes."

"Then I guess we'd better hurry."

OceanofPDF.com

FREAKING DAMSEL

JESSE and I stood at the base of a gaping cave.

I sent out a silent plea to Troy and Pops.

If they were here, those two could talk some sense into him.

The entryway looked to be a mile wide and half as tall. The water had already risen to just under my knees.

"I don't think this is a good idea," I said. "The tide is coming in fast."

"We'll just take a quick look around, and if we can't see anything, we'll come right back out."

I took a calming breath. "I don't know about you, but I have incredibly powerful vision, Jesse. I can see to the back of the cave. All that's inside is rock, rock, and more rock. Rayne isn't in there. Nothing living is."

"I want to believe you." He gave me a pained look before continuing, "But I have to see for myself. I hope you can understand."

Sadly, I did. Turned out Jesse was as stubborn as I was.

"Fine, how fast are you?" I asked, trying to contain my worry.

He shrugged. "Pretty fast."

"Awesome, let's race."

It was apparent by the look on his face that he didn't like the idea, but he nodded. I didn't give him a chance to argue.

"On your mark, get set, go." Aiming for dry ground I dashed forward, running through the water with the full extent of my vampire abilities.

My skin was tougher than human skin, but it wasn't impenetrable.

I was reminded of that fact when the sharp edge of a rock sliced

into the underside of my bare foot.

"Crap," I cursed, going down hard to my knees.

"Jasmine." Jesse's voice was full of concern, but I knew my wound would be healed by the time he arrived.

"Stupid rocks," I muttered, letting the blood rinse away in the water.

While I waited for the wound to heal, I took the opportunity to check out my surroundings. I was soaked.

The cavern floor was covered with sharp sea glass. Each time one caught the light, it sparkled within the water.

That explained the gash in my foot.

The glass probably didn't bother the gargoyles, but I didn't think I'd be able to get very far barefoot.

As Jesse moved in, I held up my hands.

"There's sea glass. It's very sharp. I'm nearly healed, but my skin is too soft. As soon as I try to take another step, I'll get cut again." I cursed my lack of wings once again.

"Okay." Jesse took a tentative step onto the glass and then another. "My skin is tough enough the glass doesn't bother me." He came over. "Mind if I pick you up?"

I felt like a freaking damsel in distress. "Please." Tamping down my discomfiture, I let him lift me into his arms and I wrapped my arms around his neck. "I get the feeling you don't like to be rescued."

I rolled my eyes. "Nope, not a big fan."

"Well, I'm just glad I can help. You rescued me from the dungeon. This is the least I can do." He finally reached the stairs within the cave and he let me down.

"You know I didn't rescue you, but thanks." I smiled, adjusting my little tube top.

"You did take a plate full of food in the face for me though. Or did you really do it for Troy, and I was just a fortunate beneficiary?"

I really wished he'd let that go and I tried not to blush. "Both," I admitted, starting up the stairs. "Let's hurry." I glanced back at the water. "The idea of becoming trapped inside this cave is creeping me out."

"Yeah, me too." Jesse shuddered and I wondered if he could swim. Rock wasn't really the most buoyant material out there.

The stairs went up with no end in sight. Up was good. The farther from the high tide mark, the better.

At last we came to a door.

"Should we check it out?" I pushed the door open without waiting for an answer.

"Definitely." He followed me in. The room was quiet, except for the sound of steady breathing. All around odd instruments hung like ornaments on a Christmas tree. They swayed slightly, some clanging against each other. Everything smelled like astringent and saltwater. In the center of the room was a table and atop it lay Rayne.

Jesse rushed forward, calling her name. I thought about stopping him, but he was already next to her, trying to shake her awake.

"Is she alive?" I put two fingers to her neck, hoping to feel a pulse. Her skin was similar to Jesse's, smooth and cool to the touch. "I'm not feeling anything," I said, suddenly sad. Jesse had obviously cared deeply for the girl.

"That doesn't mean anything, especially since she's half gargoyle, like me."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow at him in surprise.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, he grinned briefly. "Seriously. Try to find mine."

I placed my fingers on his neck. Nothing. No pulse.

"See," he said, when I pulled my fingers away.

"Then what's wrong with her? Why isn't she waking up?" I shook her lightly. At that, Rayne's blue-gray eyes opened, and she gasped.

I jumped back, surprised by her sudden movements. "You're alive?"

"What are you doing here?" She sat up, pushing her feet over the side of the table. "You shouldn't be here." Her eyes flashed, angry. "Where's my father?" She quickly scanned the room.

"He's with the new emperor, Edge," I said.

"Are you okay?" Jesse seemed as taken aback as I was by her hostility.

Rayne was surprised by the question. "I was part of a spell. By waking me you've ruined it." She climbed off the table and went to the entryway. "Graves?" she called.

"We just came from there and we were alone." The water had already reached the bottom of the stairs. "Will the water reach this far up?"

"I don't know. No, I don't think so." She still seemed frazzled, incoherent. I wasn't sure I believed her about the water.

"Why don't we all go back to the castle and we can discuss it? We can regroup and look for Graves there." I'd never felt claustrophobic before in my life, even when we were all crammed in that dungeon cell. But the thought of being trapped by all that water was starting to make me feel like the walls were closing in. It didn't matter that I could swim or that I wouldn't die if I were underwater. It was just something about water that had be shaking.

Maybe it was because of Mizu? That was a possibility.

Suddenly Rayne folded in on her herself, hugging her arms tightly around her belly, and I quit thinking about myself.

"No. It's too late." She started to cry as she wrung her hands, pacing around the rock table. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. Really sorry."

"Rayne." Jesse spoke her name softly and I watched Rayne's features ease slightly.

"Jesse. Oh, Jesse. I don't know what to do." She fell into his arms. "Graves promised me answers."

"What kind of answers?" I moved so that I could see her more clearly. "About your mom?" I remember her mentioning that when we were all locked in the cell together.

She closed her eyes, burying her face in Jesse's neck.

"Whatever kind of trouble you're in, I'll help you get through it." Pulling her close, Jesse's expression was tender as he stroked her hair.

"Well, whatever we're going to do, we need to do it fast. The water is still coming." A quick glance at the stairs and I saw that the water was more than halfway up. "As it is, we're going to have to swim out of here."

Jesse gave me a harsh look. Apparently, he didn't seem to think I was helping the situation.

OceanofPDF.com

GOBLIN SHARK

RAYNE RAISED her head and peered down the steps. "If you try to swim out of here, you'll be dashed against the rocks. The waves are relentless, not to mention there are huge goblin sharks that haunt the cave during high tide."

"I'm sure I'll be fine." I had no desire to stay here even one second longer than necessary.

Rayne looked at me like I was crazy. "You're saying your skin is tougher than rock?"

It wasn't. The issue with the sea glass proved that.

"Well, you might live through a goblin shark attack, but you'll be in pieces," Rayne continued, starting to sound more like her usual self.

I forced myself not to shudder at the images she conjured. "Fine. When will it be low tide again?"

She went past the table and pushed back a fabric curtain. "Not for hours. So why don't you chill out and wait for the water to recede."

I walked past her and yanked the fabric from her hands. "Why don't you stop patronizing me and tell us what the hell is going on?" Ha! Now it was her turn to be taken aback. Score one for the vampire.

Using the opportunity to clarify something that'd been bothering me about her, I asked, "How do you know English?" I hopped up onto the table and crossed my legs. Jesse sat on the floor beside Rayne, who'd crumpled into a heap there.

She took a deep breath, then spoke. "Graves made me live in the human realm from the time I was seven until I turned fourteen. I learned it there." She stared at her hands.

"That's a long time," Jesse said, gently pushing some of her hair off her face.

"Then you must've met your mother." It seemed logical to me. There was no way she could've survived on her own during that time. She was too young.

"The woman I lived with was a relation of Graves', but she wasn't my mom. In all those years, that woman taught me human ways, but never told me anything about herself, Graves, or my family. I didn't even know her real name, just called her Aunt, and I'm not even sure she was one, you know? But," she laughed sardonically, "if you want me to set a table for the Queen of England, or explain which fork to eat your salad with, then I'm your girl."

My insides lurched in sympathy. I felt bad for her. At least I knew my parents loved me. I never had to question that.

"I wonder why Graves kept your mom a secret," Jesse mused as he took Rayne's hand.

"I've always believed it was because he loved her and felt rejected by her, but I honestly don't know." Rayne patted his hand and brought it to her chest, holding it tightly.

Jesse seemed dazed by her story. Then I remembered, growing up, he didn't know who his parents were, either. For the first time I really got what Jesse and Rayne saw in each other. They had a lot in common.

Rayne squeezed her eyes shut. "I've found clues over the years. She loved the ocean. I once found a whole bag of seashells stuffed way back in a closet we never used. The bag had her name on it, and the shells were the most beautiful and strange I'd ever seen." Tears filled her eyes again and she wailed, "What I don't know is who she is."

"Wh - " I'd been about to ask the name on the bag when a light appeared directly above Rayne's head. It grew bigger and brighter, wrapping Rayne within its rays, like a warm blanket. "Hello, Rayne."

Rayne jumped up, right into the light. It adjusted to the change in her position, continuing to hover a few inches above her hair.

Jesse moved to stand next to me. Within the light a woman

appeared.

"Sweet, Rayne." Rayne raised her hands as though she were reaching out to touch the woman. "My name is Ariel and I am your mother."

"Holy frack," I whispered, leaning closer to the hologram. The woman had long fiery red hair, deep blue eyes, and spoke like a leader.

It was my grandmother!

I sat up straight, confused by what was happening. Was this some kind of joke? Had Sharra found a new way to torture me?

"Mom?" Rayne extended her arms some more. "Mom. I'm here." She laughed and sobbed at the same time.

"You know her?" Jesse whispered, looking at me.

"I think so." My stomach roiled at seeing Ariel this way. It had to be her ghost. There was no other explanation.

"Know that I love you. From the moment I felt you growing inside me, I loved you so much." Tears glistened on Ariel's cheeks. "And when you were born, I held you in my arms and knew, without a doubt, that you were so special." She wiped her eyes, anger cutting through her beautiful features. "Graves took you from me, promising I could see you on your eighteenth birthday, but only if I swore never to search for you. He threatened to kill you if I didn't cooperate." A sob escaped her throat and she looked away. "It wasn't all his fault though. I never was a very good mother. I could lead a city, deal with the day-to-day troubles of my people, but I struggled with everything else." Ariel shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"Mom," Rayne tried to step into the light, but it remained just out of her reach.

"And now you're eighteen." Ariel smiled. "My beautiful, incredible, amazing girl. How beautiful you are."

It felt like I was going to be sick and my insides ached like they

were being torn to shreds. How was this happening? Ariel was dead. Sharra murdered her. But if it were true, then Rayne was my mom's half-sister and my aunt.

"I'm sorry I missed watching you become the young woman you've grown into." She blew Rayne a kiss. "I love you, Rayne, my precious daughter." The light dimmed and disappeared.

"No, wait! Don't go. Mom!" Rayne fell to her knees, her head hitting the ground. Her cries echoed around the cave, making it sound as though even the walls mourned. "What happened to her? Why did she leave? I'm eighteen now. Today is my birthday." Hope flashed through her eyes as she stood. "Maybe she's coming in person? That was the spell working. It had to be. Graves said it was a calling forth spell." Rayne stood and went to the hole in the rock that looked like a window. "I'll see her again."

I wanted to tell her the truth, but she looked so happy. I couldn't make myself break her heart.

Jesse moved beside her. "I'm sure you're right," he said, stroking her hair.

Rayne seemed to suddenly remember he was there. "Jesse." She pulled him into a hug. "Thank you for being here with me. Thank you for caring for me." Her eyes shone with fresh tears. "You're the best thing that's happened to me and I don't know what I'd do without you." She rested her head against his chest.

"Of course," Jesse said, caressing her back.

Feeling like a voyeur, I went over to one of the shelves on the far side of the room, checking out the empty potion bottles made of what appeared to be paper-thin rock. There were bowls, spoons, beakers, pots and pans, all made of rock. I studied each with interest, trying to give Jesse and Rayne some privacy.

I forced myself to be happy for them, especially Jesse, even though I felt sick with the knowledge that at some point I would have to tell them both the truth. Eventually I curled up on a chair in the corner

and tried to sleep for a while, but my thoughts and guilt kept nagging at me.

The water reached almost to the top floor of the tower and lapped at the edge. Rayne had been right about the goblin sharks. Several came nearly to the top of the stairs as though waiting for something. Scraps of food? I wasn't sure but kept my distance.

Finally, the tide receded, and we climbed down the stairs. Jesse carried me through the cave, much to my irritation and Rayne's, and then we made our way back to the castle.

I kept looking toward the sky, hoping to spot Troy or Pops. I knew the gargoyles still searched for them, but I really missed them.

Especially Troy.

I really could have used some of his courage right about now.

OceanofPDF.com

DRAGON STATUES

I fiNISHED ANOTHER SHOWER, dried off, and donned a sea foam green pair of pants and matching bandeau top. I spent a little more time on my hair since it was for the coronation, pulling it high on top of my head before braiding it, then wrapping it in a bun. In between dressing and doing my hair, I went to the window in search of a dragon. Each time I left disappointed.

After returning from the cave Jesse and Rayne had gone to his room, promising to meet me at the coronation. I went past his door and listened. It was quiet so I headed downstairs. Throngs of gargoyles talked excitedly as they walked in the same direction. I guessed they were headed to the coronation, so I followed.

At the large opening to the throne room, a warrior stopped me. The space had been decorated with a myriad of golden strands, like streamers hanging from the ceiling between the peculiar round lights.

The gargoyle turned slightly and bowed. "Welcome, Jasmine of Sharra." His voice boomed through the corridor.

Hundreds of gargoyles stopped talking long enough to look my way. Some pointed and glared. Others smiled and whispered behind their hands before returning to whatever they'd been doing before I arrived.

For the event, the gargoyles had dressed up, using their wings as an accessory and to hold accessories.

They'd chosen clothing that matched or complimented their wings and then placed rings, jewels, and ribbons on them.

One female with cherry red wings even used hers as a cape, allowing them to drape over her shoulders. The effect was different, but beautiful just the same.

The hall sprawled before me, decked out in green and gold tablecloths and banners. All along the outskirts stood dozens of dragon statues.

"Emperor Edge wishes you to sit at his table." The guard indicated the long stone slab where Edge was seated next to Skye. Each of her white wings had been adorned with a delicate golden ribbon, a bow tied on the outside.

To Edge's right was Graves.

I didn't like that gargoyle, but apparently my grandmother saw something romantic in him. "Very good. Thank you." I strode over, dodging gargoyles until I reached the table. "Hello, Emperor Edge," I said, bowing slightly.

"Jasmine. Thank you for coming. Please have a seat." He indicated I sit next to Graves. My heart sank, but I managed not to let it show on my face.

"Thank you for having me." I crossed my arms, covering my stomach.

"Jasmine," Graves said as I sat. His oily voice seemed to coat the air and I instinctively moved back. He extended a hand toward me.

"Hello." I remembered the manners my mom had taught me and placed my palm in his, even as I studied him. He'd changed from a green to a golden cape with a black and gold broach clasped at his throat. The effect was magnificent. I wondered if he was purposely trying to appear more powerful that Edge.

"Are you looking forward to witnessing your first gargoyle coronation?" Graves still held my hand.

I pulled it away slowly, fighting the urge to wipe it off. "Sure."

"I think you'll enjoy it. As you can see, we are roasting a goblin shark and there will be fish cakes, shellfish salad, and horseradish stew." His gaze bored into me.

I wondered what the horrible smell was when I first came in.

"Sounds great," I lied, trying to appear excited.

"Oh, wait." He chuckled. "You are an original vampire. You probably don't even eat regular food, do you?"

I questioned his use of the word regular when paired with the description of the food that would be served for the banquet but resisted the urge to comment. "I prefer blood," was all I said.

"And how often do you need it? Once a day? A week? A year?" Curiosity danced across his hardened features.

The man was fishing for information. That was obvious. I gave him the vaguest answer I could think of. "It depends." I searched the entryways, hoping to see Jesse or Rayne or even Laeddin. I was sadly disappointed.

"If it's once a day, you must be starving. Too bad gargoyles don't have blood. At least not like the kind you're used to."

"It's fine. I'm not hungry." I continued to avoid looking at him as I spoke.

"Tell me about your wings. I know you're supposed to have them, so, where are they? Do they just pop out when you need them?"

Frack, the gargoyle had a lot of questions. I didn't want to go into detail about the choices I'd made that led me to be wingless. "Well, I -" I began, but Jesse and Rayne finally appeared. "Oh look, there's Rayne. Isn't she your daughter?"

A shadow fell across his face. "She is," he said, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"She saw her mother earlier," I said, watching for his reaction. But he kept his cool.

"Did she? How wonderful. It seems my spell worked." Now it was his turn to avoid looking at me.

"Yeah, quite a birthday present," I continued, knowing I might be pushing too hard, but not caring overly much.

Graves faced me. "Yes, it is." He took a sip from whatever was in

the gold-filigreed goblet above his plate.

I wanted to keep poking. If Rayne truly was my mom's half-sister, then that made her royalty of the highest order. Before I could prod him, Edge stood and the room quieted.

He clinked on his glass with one of his rings. "Attention everyone." His deep voice boomed across the room.

The room went silent. Jesse and Rayne quickly moved into the seats to the right of me. When they were situated, Edge smiled. "Welcome friends, family, neighbors, and allies. Thank you for coming. Tonight we will dance and sing and eat."

Everyone cheered. I noticed no one seemed sad that Jagg was gone.

"But first the business of my coronation. I promise it'll be quick and painless." Several guffaws erupted from the crowd. Edge looked over at Graves. "You're up."

The wizard stood, tossing one side of his cape over his shoulder. "As we all know Edge is a gargoyle of integrity. Of course some thought I should rule, but Edge will be a leader we can be proud of. He will keep the dirty outliers from destroying what we've built and make sure there is continued peace." He paused, allowing the crowd to cheer. They pounded their cups against the tabletops and flapped their wings in joy. "Even now, Edge is working to rid our realm of the Akuma and the darkness overtaking us. With him as our leader, we will be victorious!"

More cheers. Banging on tables and clapping. Jesse and Rayne held hands. They didn't join in with the cheering but looked like they were enjoying themselves. As I studied the girl who looked less like a gargoyle than I did, I debated how to tell her about Ariel. I wasn't sure how to bring up the fact that we were related and that, even though we were around the same age, she was my aunt.

Graves continued, "Our families and loved ones will be safer with him at our helm." He held out his hand and a golden crown, the same

color as Edge's wings, appeared on his palm. Made of gold ivy leaves, it shone in the light. "This crown should be worn with pride. As ruler of our people, may you lead us with resolution and valor."

Edge bent his head and allowed Graves to place it on his head.

When Edge straightened, Graves went on, "You will be known as Edge the Courageous." The wizard waved his hands and all the banners and tablecloths changed to different but complimentary shades of gold. Then he clapped his hands together once and the dragon statues all became golden lions.

Impressive. Even the gargoyles thought so. They oohed and aahed.

"Thank you, Graves." Edge picked up his glass. "In the name of Aria, our goddess, I do solemnly swear to rule our people with courage and valor." He lifted his glass. All the gargoyles followed.

"All hail Emperor Edge," Graves shouted.

The others repeated the phrase three times.

When they finished, Edge shouted, "Let's eat!"

Once the food was served, I pushed mine around long enough that if anyone bothered to check they would think I'd eaten.

"Tell me about this place," Jesse said. I overheard him speaking with Rayne and I listened. At that moment I felt like a party pariah. After the initial conversation with Graves, no one spoke to me.

Rayne pointed out three gargoyles whose names I forgot as soon as she said them. I did catch that they were the chieftains of the other three quarters of the realm and had come to support their new emperor. Rayne talked of the riches they'd brought and where they lived in conjunction to Edge's castle. I only half listened to the history lesson until she mentioned the Kaleidoscope Gardens.

"What are they?" Jesse asked.

She lowered her voice, but thankfully my vampire hearing allowed me to hear everything. "Everyone knows they exist, but there are only a handful of gargoyles who have seen them."

"Have you?"

I smiled to myself. Jesse was asking the right questions.

Rayne's voice dropped an octave. "Yes, but no one knows. I followed Graves once a few months ago."

Jesse sat up. "What's inside?"

"It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen. Surrounded by waterfalls, the ground is covered with lots of different colored plants and flowers. Some are incredibly tall while others are tiny. And there's something in the center. I'm not sure what it was, but that's where Graves went. He knelt there for a long time before retreating back to his rooms."

"Sounds like a cool place. What's it for?" Jesse asked as he took another bite and chewed.

"Legend says that it's the place that keeps the realm alive. It's also believed the place holds the secret to a gargoyle's colorful wings, but honestly, I don't know." Rayne shook her head at the idea.

"Wanna go see it? We could take a walk." Jesse leaned forward, grinning. "Maybe it will give both of us our wings."

"It's like you can read my mind." Rayne kissed him, taking both of his hands. Together they stood and took their leave.

I was sad and lonely and bored, which prompted me with the idea to follow them. Plus, I really wanted to see the Kaleidoscope Gardens. This was the first indication anything could actually grow here. Up until now, I hadn't seen so much as a single plant. I scanned the room and realized I wouldn't be missed. When they reached the exit, I stood.

"Where you off to?" Graves asked.

"Headache. I'm going to go lie down." It was almost true. Having him around was practically headache-inducing all by itself.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You need blood, don't you?"

"You might be right. But I'll be fine." I gave him my most confident

smile.

"Tomorrow, I'll have someone help you look for that crown piece."

"That would be great, thank you." My voice rang with sincerity. The sooner we found that piece, the sooner we could get out of here and find the rest.

"By the way, where is the genie?" His voice was casual, but his eyes were flinty as he spoke.

I'd wondered how long it would take for someone to ask. "He went to his realm to do some research," I said, then felt as if I'd given too much away so I added, "but he'll be back."

"Of that I have no doubt. He wouldn't leave you." The look on his face indicated he believed Laeddin and I were in a relationship. I decided not to correct him.

"No, he wouldn't. Good night." I didn't know whether it was night or not, but it felt like the right thing to say.

"Sleep well, Jasmine of Sharra." For some reason, hearing those words sent a shiver racing down my spine. I shook it off and headed out the door.

It was time to get a look at the Kaleidoscope Gardens with my own eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

STOP TO MAKE OUT

GRAVES HAD KEPT me longer than expected.

By the time I reached the exit, Rayne and Jesse were no longer in sight. So I closed my eyes and listened. At first I didn't hear anything except the fun going on at the party. But I pushed farther and farther, focusing until I heard Rayne's soft laugh. "Got you." I opened my eyes and started forward.

A lone gargoyle blocked my path. He wore a creepy smile as he studied me. "Talking to myself," I said, moving in the direction of the stairs.

"Don't go, little princess." He wrapped his arms around me from behind, holding me fast.

I immediately went limp, allowing him to bear all my weight.

His grip slipped just enough that I was able to ram the back of my foot into his knees and roll forward out of his arms.

The gargoyle cried out, and I was free before he even realized what had happened. Using my vampire speed, I dashed over to the stairs and raced down them before he had a chance to recover.

When I'd gone down two flights, I paused and listened for my attacker. No sounds of pursuit from him, but I did faintly hear something or someone else on the stairs above.

After waiting another minute and hearing nothing, I turned my attention to Jesse and Rayne. They weren't too far ahead, taking their time and enjoying each other's company.

I hurried, moving quietly until I was only one floor behind them.

They seemed to really care for each other. It was hard to listen to them.

When they stopped to make out, I rolled my eyes and crossed my

arms, leaning against the gray wall.

Memories of Troy and me kissing after the dance filled my mind and my heart.

I missed him. I closed my eyes, trying to imagine his arms around me, and the smell of him, and the way I felt in his arms.

"Hey." The voice came from above, not too far from my head.

My heart jumped. It sounded suspiciously like Troy.

I opened my eyes and blinked several times to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Troy, what are you doing here?" I whispered.

Emotions flooded me at seeing him and I could barely keep my voice down. "What if someone sees you?"

"I've been stalking you and Jesse." He rested his hands on my arms even as he looked me up and down, ignoring my last question. "You look damn hot." His smirk was positively sinful.

He was wearing a pair of black gargoyle pants and no shirt. I wondered where he'd gotten them. "So do you," I grinned back and hugged him tight, my bare skin tingling where it touched his. The air changed between us, filling with electricity.

"Jazz." He tilted my head up and lowered his mouth over mine.

Our kiss started out tender, but quickly they became hungry.

He pressed my mouth open, exploring. He tasted minty fresh and I wondered how that was possible. He pulled me closer, his hands caressing my nearly bare back.

They went lower until they were at the waist of my pants.

I let out a moan.

He lifted me into his arms, and I circled my legs around his hips.

"Troy," I whispered against his mouth.

He groaned, releasing me. "They're moving again."

I knew he was talking about Jesse and Rayne. "What? No," I

complained, pressing myself against him.

Troy gave me a quick kiss. "Come on." He grabbed my hand and tugged me along. "Let's think of it as a game. If they stop to make out, then we can too." He winked.

I adjusted my top, surprised at how easily I let myself get sucked into all the feelings I had for him. "Okay." I allowed him to lead me down the stairs, my hand in his, still in a daze. By the time we reached the next landing, Jesse and Rayne were kissing again. Troy, true to his word, pulled me around the corner and into his arms. My lips crashed into his. We tasted each other, hungry and happy. With each kiss, my worries about him dissipated.

Rayne and Jesse eventually stopped kissing again and it was time to move on.

"Damn," I whispered, trying to continue to kiss Troy as we moved. He chuckled and picked me up so that I could stay close, and I listened to his heartbeat against my ear as he moved. Four more times they stopped and kissed and four more times we did the same. By the time we reached the courtyard, I couldn't care less about the Kaleidoscope Gardens. I wanted nothing more than to find a quiet corner and learn all there was to know about Troy - physically and otherwise.

But Troy seemed determined to find them. "Let's go."

I chased after him, my fingers tracing my swollen lips. "Hey, where's Pops?" It suddenly occurred to me that he wasn't around.

He glanced back at me and shrugged. "After we escaped, we ended up in another of the gargoyle kingdoms. They seemed excited to see us and asked Pops for some help with an irrigation problem. He promised to stay if I promised to get Jesse out of here. We're going to meet back up and then return home together."

I stopped. "I haven't found the crown piece yet." Did he intend to take Jesse and leave me?

"We'll get it, Jazz. Don't worry." He flashed a broad smile. I'd really

missed his confidence.

"Where are they?" I whispered, looking around for Jesse and Rayne.

"Not too much farther." They moved and we tracked them, peeking around the corner. It felt like we were spies from a mystery novel, and I loved that I was with Troy. Doing anything with him was fun.

Rayne and Jesse were facing a solid rock wall. She touched certain spots on it like she was typing in a code on an invisible keypad. When she finished, she stepped back and the wall rose, revealing the most beautiful garden.

She peered around and we quickly jumped back, dodging her gaze just in time. After several seconds, we looked back around and saw that they'd gone inside, and the wall was closing behind them.

"Let's go." Troy pulled me forward. "Slide," he said, taking my hand. Like two baseball players, we made it under the wall just before it closed.

"What the goddess are you two doing here?" Rayne pressed a hand against her chest, breathing heavily. "I knew someone was following us."

"Troy, man, I'm glad you're all right," Jesse said, taking Troy's forearm and helping his brother up. "Jasmine?" He helped me to my feet too.

"I'm here to rescue Jesse and Jasmine likes shiny things," Troy said, answering Rayne's question. Then he pulled me against him, kissing me below the ear.

I batted his face and blushed. "You're the dragon. You're the one who's supposed to like shiny things." I stuck out my tongue.

Troy laughed. "Dragon humor. You're good at it." He lightly pinched my side, causing me to squirm.

Jesse and Rayne looked at each other like they understood exactly what Troy and I were feeling.

"I overheard you two talking about the gardens and wanted to see them," I admitted, sheepishly.

Rayne tried to smile. "It's just that no one is supposed to be in here." She started shaking. I'd never seen her so afraid. "If Graves discovers I let a non-gargoyle in here, let alone two - I'm not even supposed to know where this place is."

"He won't find out." I patted her back, an unexpected burst of affection bubbling up within me.

She didn't seem convinced but said no more. The four of us were too captivated by our surroundings. It was truly a paradise. Waterfalls rumbled all around us making the air heavy with moisture. Colorful flowers in every shape and size bloomed in all directions, including the crevices next to the waterfall, along the top, and the floor. Pathways made of gold cut into the flowers and culminated in the center of the garden. A heady scent reminiscent of lilacs and poppies overwhelmed me. "What's in the center?" I headed down the path.

Rayne followed, pushing past me. "I don't know."

"Let's find out," Jesse said, scooting past us both.

Troy took my hand. "You're the most beautiful thing in this place, by far."

I snuggled into him, feeling tingles run throughout my body.

We arrived in the center of the garden and stopped. In front of us gaped a large, round hole.

"Whoa. What the hell?" Troy said.

I knelt beside it and peered over the edge.

"What are you?" Rayne knelt beside me and stared into the dark abyss.

I thought the question an odd one but held my tongue.

Instantly, the swirling darkness began to spin clockwise, then turned to glass. Troy sat beside me and rested his hands on my shoulders. Jesse knelt beside Rayne.

An image appeared. He had the face of a man, but the body and ears of a cat. Long fur covered most of his face and it was the color of a dark blue sky. His eyes fluttered open. Their color surprised me, though it shouldn't have. They were deep yellow with flecks of blue and black along the edges. "I am Obin, Keeper of the Shades, and who might you be?"

"I am Rayne." She patted a hand on her chest as she spoke.

"Ah, yes. Rayne. I can sense your essence. Tell me why you've come."

Rayne leaned back, unsure about how to respond. None of us had come for any reason other than curiosity. "To say hello," was all Rayne uttered.

Obin's eyes widened. "You do not come seeking knowledge?"

"No, I - " She paused and took Jesse's hand. "What can you tell me of my mother?"

My heart clenched with worry.

Obin took notice and glanced at me before returning his focus to Rayne. "She loved the sea, was beautiful, and fiercely loyal. She loved you, of that there is no doubt."

Rayne leaned forward, excited. "Where is she?"

"Oh, youngling. Your mother is dead."

Rayne gasped, falling back onto her butt. Tears fell onto her cheeks.

My insides constricted with agony as I thought of her pain and it mingled with my own.

"But that can't be true. I just saw her," Rayne sobbed.

Jesse scooted beside her, wrapping his arms around her, whispering softly. He would hate me once Obin revealed the truth. They both would. My pain turned to dread, and I wanted to run away. Troy held me fast, his hand grasping hold of my braid. But if Obin knew things, if he had knowledge about this place and others, maybe

he'd know where the piece of the crown was. I couldn't afford to waste this opportunity.

Obin looked at me again. "Original vampire, why have you not told Rayne the truth about her mother? You have all the answers."

Rayne and Jesse both looked at me, accusation and curiosity mingling in their gazes. I tried to stand, nausea and fear gripping me. I lost my balance and nearly fell into the void, but Troy kept hold of me and pulled me into his arms.

Jesse finally spoke. "You know about Rayne's mom?"

"I only found out who her mom was in the cave last night." I pressed myself against Troy's chest, desperate to protect myself from the onslaught of anger that would surely come. "And I wasn't sure."

"You are sure, Jasmine, Princess of Sharra. Tell the girl the truth," Odin's voice was demanding.

"Fine." I pushed away from Troy, but he kept hold of my waist with one hand. "Your mother was Ariel, my grandmother." I blurted the words out all at once so that they tripped over each other.

"She's your grandmother?" Rayne was shocked, but a flicker of hope sparked in her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes. I didn't know her well, but she was as Odin said: beautiful and fierce and amazing."

"But you said 'was'. She's dead?" The hope in her eyes vanished and Rayne buried her face in Jesse's shoulder. It shook as sobs racked her body.

"Yes," I whispered, wishing it weren't true. "She died not that long ago."

"How did she die?" Jesse asked. I could tell he hoped it was from natural causes, and my heart broke that I was responsible for destroying his hope too.

"A sorceress named Sharra killed her," I said, looking away. "She did it to hurt me, to hurt my mom - " I paused a moment. "My mom is

your half-sister and you are technically my aunt." I pulled from Troy and backed away, unable to stand the pain I was causing.

"But without your magic and your wings, she never would've been able to hurt anyone," Obin added.

I was really starting to hate that guy.

"Why would you give such an evil woman your magic and your wings?" Rayne stood as well, sniffling and looking confused.

I'd reached the wall. Nowhere left to go. Troy was instantly beside me, a source of comfort. I turned away from them, resting my head against the cool rock wall and banged my fists against it. "I had no choice," I said, knowing I would do it all again despite the consequences.

"There's always a choice." Rayne pulled my shoulder, making me face her.

Troy stood in front of me, shielding me from Rayne's accusatory glare, but I stepped aside. I was tired of being a coward. It was time to face the consequences of the choices I'd made.

"You're right." I held Rayne's gaze as I spoke. "It was either let a friend die or give Sharra my wings. I chose to keep my friend alive."

OceanofPDF.com

SELFISH JERK

"LET'S GET OUT OF HERE." Rayne said, turning away from me and toward the entrance. "I can't stay here anymore." She touched the wall and it began to rise.

I glanced sideways, hoping to get Jesse's attention, but he wouldn't look at me either.

Troy still held me fast. "It's okay," he whispered.

I didn't know if it would be. I crossed my arms and waited as the wall retreated into the ceiling. On the other side, Rave and Scotch were waiting for us. My neck prickled. Something about them looked off.

"Sharra will see you now," Scotch said. His voice was entirely void of character and his brilliant orange wings had faded to dull umber. Worse, he mentioned Sharra. Rave and Scotch had become Akuma, soulless demon creatures.

Rave took hold of Jesse, but Jesse forced himself from the gargoyle's grasp. "Let me go."

Scotch tried to grab me, but I scooted out of the way as Troy half shifted and ripped off the gargoyle's arm. He didn't even flinch.

"Jesse, take Rayne and get out of here. Now," I shouted.

"What's wrong with them?" Rayne asked. I understood her confusion. She'd never seen an Akuma and neither had Jesse. I had to warn them, these beings weren't to be trifled with.

"It's the pestilence and the darkness. The reason my grandmother was killed. They've been turned into Akuma. Sharra has taken their souls." Troy and I blocked Jesse and Rayne as the gargoyles fought us. "They're here for me. So go. Hurry. Tell Edge the castle is no longer safe."

"We can't tell him that. We're kids. He'd never believe us." Rayne stood her ground, glaring at me angrily.

"Gah, just do as I say," I yelled, clenching my hands into fists.

Troy seemed torn. He didn't want to let Jesse out of his sight. But he also didn't want to leave me behind.

"No," Rayne returned, dodging Scotch's outstretched hands.

I fought to stay out of Rave's way, all the while begging them with my eyes to go. "Tell them, Troy," I said, hoping he'd help me out.

"Jaz - " Troy began, but was interrupted.

"Hey, hey, hey. What's going on?" Graves came down the stairs cautiously, his golden robes brushing along the floor, his eyes flicking between all of us. "Is everything all right?" When he noticed Troy's bronze scaled skin, his eyes glinted. "I don't know you."

"Take the wizard," Scotch shouted, reaching for him. "Sharra wants him as well. He will be a great asset to the cause."

Rave came at Graves.

Acting quickly, the wizard said something, and his body became surrounded by lightning. When Rave tried to put her hands on him, the one-armed male burst into flames and exploded.

Chunks of flesh, hair, wings, and more flew everywhere. I ducked as the disembodied head came at me.

"Gross," Rayne said, pressing her face into Jesse's neck.

Scotch screamed, going after Graves, but he exploded as well. Once both Akuma had been destroyed, the electricity around Graves vanished. "Does someone want to tell me what the goddess is going on?"

"Ask her. She seems to know a whole lot." Rayne pointed at me, accusation covering her features.

My shoulders slumped.

"Well, do you know why Rave and Scotch attacked me?" Graves came to stand directly in front of me, stepping over dismantled body

parts. Troy straightened and pulled me against him, refusing to allow the wizard to intimidate him.

I took comfort in his nearness. It was nice to have someone on my side.

"She has an idea, but why don't you hear it from me?" Sharra appeared beside Graves, my wings beating on her back.

She was striking and cunning and evil. She gave me a wicked scowl. "Hello, Jasmine. It's lovely to see you again." My wings fluttered, and I thought my insides would break. "Your wings suit me so much better than they did you, don't you think?"

Troy released me, lunging for her.

She took a step back, surprised, but recovered and using her staff, flung him back against the wall.

"Troy," I shouted, but didn't dare move or turn my back to Sharra.

"Who might you be?" Graves took a step forward, his body once again covered with electricity.

I noticed that his protections only extended to cover his person.

The selfish jerk didn't bother to protect his own daughter.

"Go. Get out of here," I mouthed to Jesse and Rayne.

Jesse shook his head and mouthed back. "I won't leave you."

Sharra and Graves sized each other up, each of their expressions reflected in the other. First one step, then another, they turned in a circle like two lions preparing for battle.

"I can sense your power is great, wizard. Why don't you join me?" Sharra's gaze turned predatory.

Graves gasped. "I would never join with you. I don't even know who you are."

"I can explain it to you. I think with a little persuasion you would come over to my way of thinking." She smirked, but there wasn't any humor in it.

"Absolutely not." Graves seemed to grow a foot as he spoke,

standing tall.

"Very well. I gave you a chance." Sharra pointed her staff at Graves. Green fire shot from its end, directly into the gargoyle's chest. He writhed and screamed as the emerald flames burned away the electricity and penetrated him; like lava from a volcano, they burned through his chest.

"I've changed my mind," he said, panting and falling to one knee. "I will work with you." The green lava climbed his neck, burned the cape from his body and moved into his thighs and wings.

"It's too late, wizard. Your death is now a matter of principle. How dare you even think your wretched gargoyle powers could defeat me?" She stepped forward as the green fire grew stronger, and by the time she reached him, Graves was nothing, not even ash. He was completely gone.

"Graves," Rayne said, reaching out for him. Her voice broke, but she didn't cry. Theirs hadn't been a close relationship.

"Now, it's high time you give me what I want." She aimed her staff at me. Green light swirled around the tip as though it were charging and then flung out at me.

Before the magic found its target, Laeddin appeared, taking the full brunt of the blow.

"Meddling genie. It's time you were put in your - "

Jesse and Rayne were suddenly there and tackled her to the ground. Shrieking with fury, Sharra vanished beneath them in a cloud of eerie green-black smoke.

"She's gone," Jesse said, helping Rayne up.

I took the opportunity to wrap my arms around Laeddin and hug him tight. He'd fallen on top of me, his body heavy against mine. Alarm shot through me when he didn't respond.

"Laeddin? Laeddin, speak to me," I said, gently scooting out from under him.

A pause, then he said, "I'm fine," though it was apparent by the tone of his voice that wasn't true.

His light green shirt was already stained with a large amount of blood. I watched, horrified, as it continued to grow right before my eyes. "You aren't fine. Use some of that great cosmic power you possess to heal yourself!"

Troy came to my side and I felt horrible I hadn't gone to check on him first thing. He patted my back and I knew he understood.

Laeddin coughed. "Haven't you learned by now that all magic comes with a price?"

Fury suddenly filled all the sad places within me. Why was he always so stubborn? "I don't care about the damn consequences. You can't die. I won't let you!"

He closed his eyes. "You're so bossy, princess. But it is what it is."

I knew what I had to do, and I knew Laeddin wouldn't like it, but I didn't care. I closed my eyes, focusing on how I wanted to phrase the sentence so that I would get exactly what I wanted. When I was ready, I opened my eyes and said, "I wish you freed from your duties as a genie and command you to heal yourself."

"No," Laeddin whispered, shaking his head. But it didn't matter. I'd made my wish and the results were instantaneous. The tattoos on Laeddin's wrists lit up and then disappeared completely.

"There," I said. "You are no longer beholden to me. Now heal yourself so that you can live life as a free man."

Laeddin coughed, his eyes rolling up into his head. Blood leaked out of the side of his mouth. I held my breath, forcing myself not to smell it. "Laeddin? Talk to me." I leaned over him, placing a hand on either side of his head so that we were nose-to-nose.

Slowly, his eyes rolled open and his dim gaze found mine. Tears filled his eyes, causing them to be extra shiny. "You are an amazing person, Jasmine of Sharra. Never forget that."

"That sounds like goodbye, Laeddin, and you aren't allowed to say goodbye."

He smiled. "Actually, thanks to you, princess, I'm allowed to do anything I like." He raised up and kissed me on the mouth. It was soft, sweet, and full of tenderness. Troy stiffened next to me, but I couldn't worry about what he might be feeling. Not with Laeddin dying right in front of me.

"Isn't that sweet?" Sharra's voice cut through the kiss, freezing me in place. I watched helplessly as she used her staff to lift the genie off the ground and out from under me. "You will give me what I want one way or another." With that she was gone, taking Laeddin with her.

"Laeddin," I cried, standing.

"She took him, Jazz. He's no longer here," Troy said from behind me.

I turned and fell against his chest. "Then it was all for nothing. Everything I've done." Pain rocketed through me, filling every void and crevice, pushing out all the new love and happiness I'd felt kissing Troy. Eradicating everything good, like a virus, it swept through my body, destroying anything that wasn't darkness.

Someone spoke. I heard the voice say my name, but it was far away. I was lost within the garden of pain, unable to find my way out. Utter desolation surrounded me in every direction.

Laeddin is gone. My parents are gone.

You will fail. Give up.

There's no point continuing.

OceanofPDF.com

WHAT I DESERVE

I WALKED and walked for what felt like months.

Dark sky hung above without a moon or stars to guide me.

The sand beneath me sank with every step, burying my bare feet, scorching my skin regardless of the missing sunlight.

I climbed hill after sandy hill, trying to find my way out, but it was endless. I crested each summit, hope filling my breast, only to have it dashed when I reached the top and saw a dozen more hills stretched out in every direction.

And with each step came the relentless berating.

You'll never defeat her.

You won't succeed.

Give yourself over to Sharra.

Then you can't fail.

I fought against the voice inside my head.

Time passed, and I began to believe this was my only existence.

The sand and dark sky were real.

Everything else had been a dream.

I finally lay down, not caring that the sand burned.

In fact, I relished its stinging, welcomed it.

Closed my eyes, desperate to be done.

Hope no longer existed.

Only the burning sand and the darkness.

Only failure and depression.

Only sadness and death.

I took a long, last breath, and blew it out with a sigh of impending

relief.

The voice became comforting.

That's right. Let go.

"Jasmine!" The voice was loud and sharp.

I jerked my eyes open.

An apparition stood in front of me.

I sat up, my mind trying to recall how I knew the person before me.

Not a person, a vampire, the voices said.

He will kill you, they added.

But as he came closer, I didn't feel afraid. He was life. He was –

"Christopher." I tried to speak but the words came out a croak.

My tongue and throat were covered with sand, so dry.

He knelt beside me, a gentle smile on his lips. "What have you done to yourself?"

"I - "

He lifted my head onto his lap and slashed his wrist with one of his fangs.

As soon as the scent of his blood struck my nose, my eyes opened wide.

"That's it, my girl. Drink." He stuck his wrist to my lips.

Blood flowed like honey into my mouth.

I swallowed and swallowed, growing thirstier with each drink.

I worried I might drink him dry, but I couldn't bring myself to pull away. I sensed he would let me drink until he had nothing left.

And I realized I couldn't kill him.

So I let go, falling back onto the sand.

Christopher lay down beside me. "Tell me what's wrong. What are you doing in this place?"

"It's what I deserve," I said, feeling the truth of it deep in my chest.

"Why do you say that?" He turned his head to face me, his voice compassionate. It sounded so out of place amidst the all-encompassing despair.

"Because of my wishes, everything is ruined." My voice broke and a tear leaked from the corner of my eye and rolled down the side of my face.

"That's not true." He leaned up on his side so I could see his face. "You made choices, Jasmine. That is true, but you need to climb off your high horse and quit thinking the world revolves around you."

That staggered me. "What do you mean by that? I don't think the world revolves around me."

He laughed. "You believe the Akuma are here because of you. You believe your friends died because of you. Don't you realize that yes, you played a part, but the calamities happening on Earth began way before you made your first wish?"

"No, they didn't," I said, but felt a flicker of hope and clung to it.

"You think Sharra was just sitting around waiting for you to make a wish so she could destroy the world?" He raised an eyebrow at me.

I hadn't thought about it like that.

He continued, "She's been making plans, throwing out tentacles in every possible direction, waiting, waiting, waiting. You are only one piece in the plan."

"Really?" The hope was stronger now, growing inside me.

"If you search your feelings, you'll know it's true." His steady gaze held mine, daring me to trust his words.

I did as he said. I wasn't strong enough to do anything else, anyway. Even before I shut my eyes, I knew he was right.

"I don't know how to leave this place," I said when I opened my eyes. "I don't even know how I got here."

He leaned down, kissing me on the forehead. "You've had a lot of

grief in your life recently and instead of dealing with it, you've been pushing it down, ignoring it, pretending it doesn't exist. This place is called the Wasteland. And the way to leave is to make a conscious choice to do so."

I closed my eyes. Immediately, the voices taunted me. Don't do it. Ignore him. He just wants to cause you pain. He's betraying you, just like he did your mother. Stay with us. You can't fail here.

Part of me wanted to give in. If I did, I knew I would drift away. No more feeling, no more misery or sadness. But then I thought of my mom and what she would do. My eyes flew open.

Christopher smiled. "You ready?"

"Almost." I rubbed my lips together. "Where do you go when you aren't saving my life?" I asked softly, touching his face with my hand. I wanted to see if he was real or just a figment of my imagination. His face felt solid against my palm.

He chuckled. "I am in charge of the vampires, remember. They keep me busy."

"So you aren't lonely?"

His expression became serious. "Only a little."

"I'm sorry," I said, wishing I could bring him some happiness.

He lightly hugged me. "I have much to make up for. And while your mom and dad might not believe me, I intend to make it right. Helping you in any way I can does that and brings me immense joy. More than I've ever known. Remember that."

"You're sure?" I wanted to believe him, but I saw the gloom. I understood what he wanted, which was me, even though he knew I didn't feel that way about him.

"For now." He gave me a sad smile. "And I'll wait for you forever, Jasmine. Always." He started to disappear, like a sandcastle slowly blowing away in a mild wind.

"Thank you, Christopher."

He grinned and was gone.

It was time to wake up, face my fears, and stop blaming myself for everything. At least I'd try.

OceanofPDF.com

RELIEF AND WORRY

I OPENED my eyes for real this time. They went immediately to the window. It was even darker than I remembered, and I wondered how long I'd been gone."

"Jazz." Troy was abruptly at my side, sitting beside me on the bed. Relief covered his entire face like a blanket.

"Where are we?" I rubbed at my temples, trying to regain my bearings.

"We're still in the gargoyle realm," he said. His eyes shone with unshed tears. "I didn't think you were coming back to me." With infinite care, he brushed some hair off my forehead.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Eleven days." He scooted closer. "You look better, like you've eaten."

I glanced down at my hands. "I did."

"Oh?" He was understandably alarmed by the revelation. "How?"

I touched the wooden bear on my wrist. "Christopher," I said plainly, knowing I needed to tell the truth.

"That's impossible." His voice was hard. "I've been with you the whole time and he hasn't been here."

"Well," my voice lifted along with my gaze. "He was able to reach me in the Wasteland. He fed me and helped me to return. So here I am." I glanced at him shyly, hoping he would understand.

"The Wasteland?" Troy's gaze was a baffling mixture of relief and worry. He probably thought I was going crazy. I sounded crazy, even to myself.

I gave him the small details of what I'd been going through, leaving out the part about the voices. When I finished, I said, "But I'm

feeling much better." I sat up and threw my legs over the side of the bed. "Where's Pops and the others?"

"Pops is around. So are Jesse and Rayne. Laeddin is - still gone," Troy said, tenderly.

"I know, but not forever. I'll get him back, just like I'll get my mom and dad back."

Troy placed his hands on my arms. "You should lie back and rest."

I didn't want to rest. I'd been resting for eleven days. "Troy," I took his face in my hands and kissed him. Troy responded carefully at first, his fingers gently running along my arms, sending tingles over my body. I wanted him and deepened the kiss, tasting him and tugging him against me. "Don't stop," I whispered against his mouth.

My words seemed to wake him up. He jumped up like I suddenly caught fire. "I'm so sorry, Jasmine."

I was in a hungry fog. It took me a second to realign my brain cells enough to speak. "Wait." I took his hand, standing beside him.

He took in my pajama clad body. "Let me get you something to wear." He disappeared into the closet and reappeared with a deep purple pair of pants and a top. Give the boy a hand, everything matched. "Here."

I took them, and he turned around, rubbing a hand over his neck. "I swear that wasn't my plan, to wake you up and make out with you," he said, despair in his voice.

When I finished dressing, I turned him around. "Troy, my dragon boy. I love you." I touched his face, enjoying the roughness.

"You do?" His eyes came alive with surprise.

"Yes - " I began.

But he stopped me, lifting me into his arms, kissing me again. Too soon he let me back down, his gaze searching mine. "I love you too."

"You think we'll end up together?" I touched my swollen lips, feeling breathless from our kiss.

"I can't imagine myself with anyone but you, Jasmine of Sharra."

I smiled, leaning against him. We were young. Barely old enough to be thinking about who we'd end up with. But I knew I was in love with Troy. With all my heart. It didn't matter that I was only - " I froze. "What day is it?"

Troy looked confused. "July the twenty-seventh. Why?"

I slapped him lightly on the chest. "Today's my birthday. I'm officially eighteen."

He gave me a heart-stopping smile. "Happy birthday, Jazz." He kissed me again until we were lost in each other and I couldn't tell when I ended, and he began. Too soon, he lifted his head, studying me with his signature smirk. "What should we do to celebrate?" he finally asked.

My body urged me to say things, but I was in control of myself and knew there was still much to do. I took in a shuddered breath. "Tell me about Pops, Jesse, and Rayne. Are they all right?" All I wanted was for those I loved to be safe and for the world to go back to the way it was.

His face darkened, but only for a moment. "Yes. I told Pops to take Jesse and Rayne back to the human realm. Jesse wasn't going to go. He's the new emperor's son, but when Rayne said she wanted to leave, at least for a while, he agreed, and they went back together so she could meet her half-sister." He winked. "Your mother."

"But Jesse is coming back?" I ignored the statement about Rayne. I didn't know whether she'd forgive me or not, but I had no control over that.

"Yes. Edge intends to raise him as the next leader."

That surprised me. "I thought the gargoyles didn't like half-breeds. The guards called him a mutt while in we were the cell."

"I'm not sure what Edge intends to do about that, I only know what Jesse told me." He snorted, blowing smoke out of his nose. It was a complication for another time.

I took his hand in mine, enjoying the warmth his touch caused. "Will you help me get the crown piece?"

"Right now?" Troy laughed.

"Yes. I'm tired of being here. It's time to move on. Come on." I was out the door and down the hall before he moved.

"Jazz." He walked beside me.

The castle was quiet. "Is everyone gone?"

"No, they're sleeping."

"Even better." We went down the stairs and into the throne room. It was empty too, except for all of the statues.

The jewel in my forehead began to burn. "Hang on a second." I grabbed Troy's hand. "This way." We walked quietly along the outskirts of the statues in the direction of the female with the bird wings. At the foot of her statue, the gem in my forehead burned more painfully than ever before. I looked up, feeling like the statue went on for miles it was so tall. It was more than twice the size of Edge, and he was nearing seven feet. "It's here. Help me find a lever or something."

He went one way and I went the other until we met back where we'd started. "Anything?"

"No." He shook his head. "You?"

"No." I stepped back, looking up at the woman's face, taken by her familiarity.

The rock rippled as the statue of the woman came alive. I grabbed hold of Troy and he wrapped his arms around me.

The woman smiled. "Hello, Jasmine."

I swallowed, fighting the urge to hide behind one of the other statues.

"I've been waiting these long weeks to talk to you. The gargoyles know me as Aria, but I am one of the original vampires. I believe you know my sister, Sharra."

I sputtered. "You're Silindra." A quick flash of the story my mom

had shared about how Sharra had Silindra killed many years ago filled my vision. For the briefest moment I questioned whether I'd really woken up, or if this was actually a very elaborate dream.

"I'm sorry for all of the trouble my sister has given you. The crown piece you're looking for is here." She opened her mouth and a box fell out. Troy half changed into a dragon, jumped up and caught it, using his wings to return to the ground.

I quickly took the box from him, smiling. "Thank you, Troy."

"Be warned," Silindra said. "My sister will not stop until the universe is exactly as she's always wanted it. The Akuma and the darkness are only two of her tools. The vampire called Arthur has begun laying plans to catch you and make you Sharra's, but if you won't comply, he will find another. And when he does, he will extract the pieces of the crown once you've gone through the trouble of finding them all, then give the crown to Sharra."

With that much power, nothing would be able to stop her.

"What can we do?" Troy asked, tucking me closer into his side.

"Find all of the pieces and keep Jasmine away from Sharra and Arthur." She smiled at Troy. "You're good for her." Silindra's body began to revert back to stone. "One more thing." Silindra removed the necklace she was wearing and dropped it. I reached out and caught it before it could hit the floor. The chain was made of silver and the gem was large and multifaceted, sparkling with all the colors of the seven magics. "This will allow you to travel between realms as you search for the remaining pieces." The final word hung on her mouth, as she once again became stone.

I shivered, trying to shake off the bizarre encounter. Then I looked at Troy. "Will you hold the necklace?"

"Sure, but why?" He took it, looking like he'd just about reached his quota of unusual happenings for one day.

I held up the glistening black box. "As soon as I open this box, an assassin will appear. I have to fight him before I can take the crown

piece."

"Oh, well I'll help you." Troy rolled his shoulders, looking more eager than worried.

"Sorry, Troy. You can't. Laeddin provided me with a spell that allows only me to defeat the assassin. If anyone else tries," I gave Troy a pointed look, "he will be killed, and I don't want you dead. Understand?"

"You're serious?"

"You'll see." I set the box on the ground in front of me. "Promise me you'll stay out of the fight."

He closed his eyes a moment before meeting my gaze. "I promise."

"Good."

As before a sickly sweet scent emanated from the box, though it was a slightly different from the first. I guessed there would be flower petals inside like the first time, though possibly a different species. "Here we go," I said, opening the box and peering inside. Sure enough, the piece of the crown lay on top of a bed of violet colored petals. The emeralds embedded within the crown twinkled in the low light. I tipped the container, allowing the petals to fall to the ground as my fingers brushed against the cold metal crown. Immediately, the petals found purchase in the rock and burrowed deep within. Smoke billowed up, thickening and taking shape until an assassin stood before me.

I heard Troy gasp, but I didn't look his way.

The assassins eyes opened, the same violet color as the petals. "Who dares awaken me from my slumber?"

Like the first encounter with an assassin, I said, "It is I, Jasmine. I'm here to take the piece of crown you protect."

His violet eyes flashed with anger. "I will not allow that." He reached back and grabbed his swords from the sheaths at his back. "Prepare yourself for destruction."

"I won't die, assassin. It's my fate to kill you." Twin blades exactly like the assassin's appeared in my hands. Red lightning crackled all along their honed edges.

The assassin came forward, his weight causing the ground to tremble slightly. I held my stance as he brought his blades down, trying to end me with one blow. In answer, I crossed my blades, blocking his swords. Red and purple lightning flashed together. Metal grated against metal like chainsaw slicing through ice. He pressed down heavily, sending me to my knees. But Christopher had just fed me, and I was strong.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Troy come forward. "No!" I yelled. "I mean it. Stay back."

Troy stopped, but didn't look happy about it.

I pushed back hard. The assassin growled, turned, and turned came at me from a different angle. I held him back with one sword as his blades clashed against mine. With the other, I stabbed him in the side. The assassin fell to one knee and I took the advantage. With my vampire abilities, I jumped high in the air so that I was above him. He stood more rapidly than I planned, but I hung in the air long enough to cross my swords and chop off his head. I reached the ground as his body fell forward. Stepping back, I moved out of the way just as the head landed on the floor in front of me. It rolled forward, empty eyes staring, his mouth hanging open. Then his body and head vanished along with the swords in my hands.

"Holy hell. That was amazing." Troy seemed nervous to touch me.

"Thank you," I said, though I hadn't taken any pleasure in it. The assassin was doing his job. I understood that it was his destiny to defend the crown piece until death.

"And for the briefest moment, it looked like a pair of wings were on your back." Troy shook his head as though he thought he was seeing things.

My insides quivered. I'd seen wings too, right after Laeddin had

performed the spell on me, but not since. "I - " I wasn't sure how to respond. It was too painful. Instead, I knelt in front of the crown and picked it up. Immediately the metal edges dug into my skin. I watched in awe, not scared like the first time, but accepting.

Troy reacted differently. "What is happening?"

"It's okay," I said, trying to reassure him. "This is how the first piece ended up here." I touched my head.

"You sure?" His eyes were huge, and he looked pretty freaked out.

"Yes." When I felt it reach my eyes there was a flash of light, and it moved over next to the first piece. I could feel it, but only for a moment before it was gone.

"That's it?" He came close, pushing hair off my forehead and feeling for it. "Does it hurt?"

"No, I feel fine. Great, actually."

"You sure?" He cupped my face in his hands, his mouth inches from mine. "My awesome, lovely assassin-slaying vampire."

I laughed at the ridiculous title. It was a mouthful, to say the least. "Positive."

He kissed me softly. "Then let's get out of here."

"Hold me first," I said.

"With pleasure." He wrapped his arms around my waist. I had no idea how to work the amulet attached to the necklace Silindra gave me, but I put a hand over the gem and thought about home. A bright light flashed around us and instantly we were back in my mom's house in Salem.

Gatsby sat on the counter, licking his mouth. "Where have you been?"

OceanofPDF.com

VAMPIRES & DRAGONS

OceanofPDF.com

33 DAYS UNTIL TOTAL DARKNESS

I DIDN'T NEED light to see.

Neither did Troy.

But the rest of the world did.

And it was my job to keep it from disappearing completely, especially since the looming darkness was my fault.

After leaving the gargoyle realm, it only took us a few days to find the third piece of the crown created - and then hidden - by elves a long time ago.

According to Laeddin, only I could wield the powers contained within.

If I collected all the pieces in time, then I would possess the magic necessary to destroy Sharra and save the world.

I hoped he was right. Part of me even believed it, especially since each time I found a piece, it embedded itself in my forehead.

The rest of me wasn't sure I could stop the Darkness or the Akuma, and specifically not Sharra. The prospect terrified me.

But I had to try.

"Stand back, Troy." I glanced up at his handsomely rugged face. He had smudges of dirt on his chin and nose, which somehow made him even more gorgeous, if that were possible.

"I'm against the wall, Jazz. Sheesh." He gave me a serious look; one that said he wouldn't interfere unless he thought it was necessary.

I nodded, thinking I liked that he called me Jazz. Then shook off the thought and returned my attention to the old wooden box on the floor in front of me. Inside was what I'd been searching for. I could feel it.

And it was about time.

Troy and I were in a cave under the main palace in the troll realm. Everything here smelled like oil mixed with brine - not a pleasant scent - and a thick darkness pervaded, even worse than in the gargoyle realm. We'd been here a few days as we searched for the crown. The trolls treated us surprisingly well considering the chaos happening around us. Had they known I was to blame for the darkening skies, things might have been different. But I wasn't going to tell them.

During the day we spent time looking. At night, Troy and I tried to sleep. It'd been difficult, my dreams filled with images of my mom and dad being tortured. For that reason, I spent little time with my eyes closed. The troll who helped me get ready for bed was very kind. It turned out most trolls were tender hearted. And they were definitely all about having fun in spite of the precarious situation we were all in. They threw us a party when we first arrived. Their court musician wrote and performed songs about the love Troy and I had for each other, while the troubadour talked of our romantic destiny.

The trolls had built striking edifices out of the dark rock common in their land. Their buildings were strangely beautiful and I couldn't help but be drawn to them. During our time here I'd gained respect for most of this realms inhabitants, though not all. I still despised the troll leader. It was obvious he didn't care for me in the least. I guessed it probably had something to do with the fact that he'd been commanded by my mother to give me blood as a child.

The troll king seemed very interested in Troy though. I think he was the only reason we'd been allowed to stay in their realm.

"And don't help. I can handle this," I said as an afterthought, but felt it necessary to remind him.

"I'll keep my distance."

I could almost hear him smile. His fingers reached out and stroked my hair. My determination wavered as a trembling of love and need ripped through me. The force of my emotions for him nearly knocked me off my feet. In that moment, I thought of kissing him, of - My eyes

flicked to his neck and the vein pumping strongly beneath his skin.

He noticed and chuckled. "I'm all yours once you're done here. You know I am. Always and forever." He nodded his head, indicating the box.

I swallowed. Then I stuck the sharp edge of one of my fangs into my bottom lip, drawing blood. It tasted of Christopher, but only slightly. In the past, my favorite blood had been unicorn. But everything changed once I'd given away my wings. Sometime later, Christopher had shown up and told me to drink his blood. Out of desperation I'd finally done it. And oh my! His blood did things to me that none of the others could. It not only tasted better than any blood, it also returned my vampire powers. I was grateful, because without them I'd still be a normal human.

Christopher basically brought me back to life after Sharra took my power and my wings. I missed my wings. Terribly. I longed to feel the weight of them on my back. Each absent ebony feather felt like a piece of my soul had vanished. I hoped to get them back. At this point it seemed highly unlikely. But I wouldn't stop trying.

"Jazz?" Troy gave me a quizzical look.

Blood. I craved Troy's, but I needed Christopher's. It'd been ten days since I'd had any and I could sense the difference within myself. I felt less civilized and more carnal - more monstrous. "Right." I returned my attention to the box.

It was made of strange, deep green wood. The latch created of a special metal gilded with gold filigree. I took a deep breath, preparing myself for what would come next. I pushed out thoughts of my mom and dad. Of Laeddin, and even Troy. I thought only of the fragment of crown contained within. I had to retrieve it and doing so meant slaying an elven assassin whose sole purpose was to protect the crown fragment.

"You okay? Maybe we should come back another time." Troy's frown deepened and he knelt beside me.

"No, I'm fine." I appreciated his concern. He really was one of the sweetest guys I'd ever met.

"Awesome. Then open that box and kick the assassin's ass so we can get out of here. The smell is foul," he said waving a hand in front of his nose as he moved away. "Not to mention I'm a dragon and being underground freaks me out."

"I know. Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. I'm here for you one hundred percent." He spoke with sincerity, but I saw the unease in his expression. Time to hurry this up.

"Here I go." Determined, I lifted the latch, opened the box, and stepped back. Wispy curls of darkness filled the room, before morphing into the assassin. He stood over six feet tall and clutched a pair of wicked looking swords. At once, just as before, twin blades appeared in my hands.

I stepped forward, raising my weapons as his blades came down to meet mine. Metal grated against metal, the sound reverberating through the cave. Soil and debris came down around us like dirty rain. Unlike the others, this battle lasted barely more than a minute. It was like his heart wasn't in it. He scarcely fought. Before I dispatched him, I had the assassin on his back, my knee pressing in on his chest while both my blades crossed at his neck.

"We believe in your cause, Original Vampire," the assassin said. "The wicked queen must be stopped."

For a moment, I was too shocked to respond. This had definitely never happened before. My mind ran through likely reasons. The first? He wanted to throw me off guard. Even as I thought about it, I pressed my blades deeper into his throat. I could not allow him to get the drop on me. Retrieving the crown was too important. Then I thought of the other reason. The assassin meant what he said.

Highly unlikely, but I had to consider it.

The assassin opened his mouth. "The - Next - Piece of the - Crown

is - " He choked out the words. I let off some of the pressure on his throat.

"Thank you, Vampire," he said.

"Tell me. Where is the next piece?" My eyes blazed as I waited to see if he would speak again.

"It's located in the vault under the Château de Chinon, in France."

Since he was being so forthcoming, I decided to see what else he would tell me. "And the final piece? Where is it?"

Before I understood what he was doing, the assassin forced my blades down on his own throat and he vaporized in a puff of smoke. I gasped, my knees smacking against the hard, packed-earth floor. "Did you hear him, Troy?" I jumped up, ignoring the pain. Everything that had just happened felt so surreal. I needed to verify that I hadn't hallucinated the whole interchange.

"I did," he responded, wiping off my face with his shirtsleeve.

I nodded, breathing heavily. "So I wasn't dreaming?" My blades vanished as the jewel from the elven crown made its way up my body and into my forehead where it stopped next to the first two pieces.

"Nope. I heard him too." Troy caressed my skin where the jewel landed. "That's the craziest thing I've ever seen."

At his closeness, my skin tingled and my desire for him grew. "Imagine how it feels." I smirked, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Thank you for coming with me."

"I wouldn't miss it. You're amazing." He lowered his head to kiss me.

I stood on the tips of my toes to meet him. His mouth on mine sent fireworks through my stomach. Fiery hunger. Desire and need shot through me. I let my fingers tangle in his hair, desperate for us to be even closer. He growled, and his skin rippled from human to the smooth scales of his dragon form. "Troy," I whispered against his lips.

"I know, Jazzy Jazz. But not here. Let's get you home and cleaned

up." He kissed my cheek.

"And you," I added, wiping at the dirt on his face, still fighting against the want fluttering over me. Over the last ten days, our making out had become more and more needy. I wanted all of him. And I wanted his blood even more, but I would be patient for a little longer.

OceanofPDF.com

CHRISTOPHER

IN THE GARGOYLE REALM, I was given a necklace by Sharra's sister, Silindra.

She wasn't actually there, and I didn't know how it worked exactly, but she gave me the necklace. All I had to do was think of where I wanted to go and it would take me there.

It was tucked under my shirt, and I pulled it out.

Wrapping my fingers around it, I thought of the house in Salem, Massachusetts where my mom grew up.

When we arrived, I sighed. It looked the same as when I left it, expect maybe a little more dust. The house was empty, not even the gray cat, Gatsby wandered the rooms. It felt vacant without him there. Troy escorted me to my bedroom door before going into the bathroom to get cleaned up.

I showered, allowing the hot water to rinse away the stress that clung to me from the troll realm. My interchange with the assassin still ran through my mind.

I didn't know whether I should believe him or not. Part of me felt like it was too easy. None of the other assassins had offered so much as a hint as to where to find the next piece, which is why it had taken me so long to find them.

The assassin said he believed in my cause, but what did that even mean?

Why would he just blurt the next location, especially when he and the others were sworn to protect the crown and had done so for thousands of years?

With time running out, and the darkness almost upon us, I couldn't afford to ignore what he said.

If the jewel wasn't where the assassin said it would be, then I'd move on.

But it would be crazy not to check.

That meant our next stop would be in France. I didn't know much about the country, but Pops would.

I'd ask him for help.

Maybe he'd go with Troy and me.

After what Laeddin showed me, I knew he was from France.

That he'd been in love with Joan of Arc.

What I'd learned of his story surprised me, but in a good way.

He'd had a life. Even then, Sharra had been around, trying to mess with the human realm. She had quite the fixation and as I finished my shower, I debated how I could use that to my advantage.

Shutting off the water, I put my hair in a towel and slid into a terrycloth bathrobe. Steam filled the bathroom and fogged up the mirror. I wiped some condensation away and stifled a scream.

"What the - " Whipping around, I glared at Christopher, but was actually happy to see him. He stood there casually as if he showed up in my bathroom every day, which he didn't.

"What are you doing in here?" I hissed, tying the robe's belt in a quick bow.

"Checking on you." He crossed his arms, his face contorted with worry.

The time I spent in the Wasteland during the death dream or whatever it was came flooding back. Without doubt, Christopher had saved me. Again. His blood and his words were exactly what I needed to hear and had pulled me out of the Wasteland and brought me back to the land of the living. He'd told me to climb off my high horse and quit thinking the world revolved around me. I smiled at the memory.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

"Just that if I wasn't wearing a towel, I would hug you." I glanced

down at my bare feet as feelings of gratefulness for the Hunter fluttered around in my veins.

"For what?" He gave me a cheeky grin since he obviously knew what I meant.

"You know what," I responded, and smiled. "Thank you. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Christopher became serious. "It's my pleasure. Really." He swallowed, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Well I appreciate it as well as all you've done for me." I touched his arm, and caught a whiff of his blood. My breathing became ragged as my teeth pressed against the inside of my mouth. It'd been too long since I fed.

He immediately understood. "Right now I know you need my blood," he said matter-of-factly, his lips twitching as he tried not to smile.

He wasn't wrong. I did need his blood. Desperately. But he shouldn't just show up in my bathroom whenever he wanted to. "Not now."

"If not now, then when? Unless you want me to go down and wait with Troy?" He waited for my answer. "He and I could chat about things." He raised an eyebrow.

"No." I leaned against the bathroom door. I hated that he was right. It made me feel dirty, like I wasn't being faithful to Troy. "It's just, sometimes you show up at the worst times." I glanced at his neck beneath the white button-down shirt. It occurred to me that he wore white a lot. I wondered why, but didn't think on it too long.

He bowed stiffly. "Sorry, princess. I can return another time."

"I'd appre - " I paused, taking a deep breath. I cared for Christopher. I wanted him to find happiness, and I did need his blood, but that didn't change the fact that Christopher needed boundaries.

"What?" He came close, a smirk lifting his lips. My mouth watered

at the scent of his blood. Desperate, I threw all caution out the window and sank my fangs into his neck before I could give it a second thought. His blood burst into my mouth like the juice from a ripe strawberry. I moaned with immediate relief. The more I drank, the better I felt. Like a wilted flower receiving water, my insides come alive. "There you go. That's it, Jasmine."

I clung to his shoulders, holding him close, until it registered that he'd put his arms around my waist and buried his face in the crook of my neck. Was he going to drink from me? I didn't want that. It felt too intimate. And I knew Christopher still believed he and I were meant to be together, that it was destiny; but I didn't feel that way about him. In truth, I wouldn't let myself feel anything but friendship for the Hunter. First, because Christopher was really old, like born in the sixties, I think. The biggest reason though? I loved Troy. Only him, and no one else. Not ever.

Unfortunately, I couldn't stop drinking from Christopher. Not if I wanted to defeat Sharra. My vampire powers were too important to lose right now. Torn between need and guilt, I took several more gulps before shoving him away.

Surprised, Christopher fell against the sink, causing my hairbrush to clatter to the floor. Quick as lightning, he righted himself and smiled. "You're feeling better." He adjusted his collar and ran a hand through his hair.

Embarrassment turned my cheeks hot. "Yes. I am, thank you." I meant it. I really appreciated him and all he did for me. Without his blood, I would've been just another mortal. He allowed me to tap into my vampire magic.

"Are you all right, Jazz?" Troy asked from the other side of the door.

"Um, yes." I put a finger to my lips in an effort to keep Christopher quiet.

He smiled, and put a pretend lock on his lips before throwing away

the invisible key.

I shook my head. "I'm fine. I just dropped my brush." To Christopher I mouthed, "Please leave."

Christopher bowed again. "Of course." He vanished before I could blink.

I heaved a breath; grateful he was gone, but truthfully, I was sad too. Was there a way I could help him? After everything he'd done for me, I really wanted to.

Troy spoke through the door again. "Okay. Just checking. You about finished?"

Guilt permeated through me, even though I had nothing to feel bad about. Still, I knew I needed to tell Troy about drinking Christopher's blood. I didn't know how to bring it up though. "Yeah, I'll be just a few more minutes."

"Sweet. I'll be downstairs making a sandwich. A man-dragon's gotta eat," he said, teasingly, and I heard him chuckle at his own silliness.

I laughed. It was impossible to stay gloomy when Troy was around. "True. Be down soon." I listened to his footfalls getting farther away. My bedroom door closed. I relaxed my shoulders, forcing the guilt away. My remorse wouldn't do either of us any good anyway. Not right now. We still had so much work to do.

I brushed my hair, dried it, and put it up in a ponytail. Then dressed in black skinny jeans, a light green tee shirt and my black boots. I put the necklace Silindra gave me over my head and tucked it beneath my shirt.

A quick glance out my mom's old bedroom window revealed how dark it had become outside, even at one o'clock in the afternoon. There wasn't much time left. I sat on the bed, trying hard not to feel defeated as I tied my shoes. I missed my mom and dad. I missed Laeddin. I even missed Sabrina.

She and I had been best friends since I could remember. When I left my realm, I left her behind. It hadn't been kind and I apologized,

but I still wished she could be with me. Except it wasn't possible. She had work and her own life. Last I heard, she'd fallen for a handsome pixilette, and they were serious.

Like the darkness, the Akuma grew in numbers daily. Scientists and doctors were stumped about the Akuma's origination, calling it the zombie virus. They didn't even know how it was transferred, which had the whole country on edge. Doctors worked tirelessly to find the cause, but so far they hadn't been able to discover an answer or a cure. Nor would they ever. Science couldn't explain or cure a magical disease.

And it wasn't like I could tell them the disease was actually evil magic, inflicted upon them by a wicked queen. Nor would it do me any good to tell them that all the science in the world couldn't reverse the effects. The only way to treat the Akuma was to destroy Sharra and that rested on me.

It was horrifying, watching families suffer, especially once the government began shooting the Akuma on site.

Martial law became more strictly imposed the darker it got. Salem, Massachusetts was no exception. Curfews were enforced as well. Military tanks and military trucks roamed the streets night and day. Ongoing gunfire had become mundane and could be heard regularly. I didn't want to think about the reason.

It broke my heart. I knew I'd gotten the world into this mess, and I was determined to get us out. The best way to do that was to stay strong. That meant I needed Christopher's blood.

I really needed it, I told myself, wiping at a wayward tear.

Then cleared my throat, pushing down all of my feelings. Without Christopher's blood I would be nothing. I wouldn't be ashamed of doing what needed to be done. I wouldn't!

The way the Akuma moved reminded me of living marionettes, their every effort controlled by Sharra. They did her bidding, and that meant they didn't do anyone any good. I knew the Akuma only sought

out those with a lot of darkness in them, but I still worried for Pops, Jesse, and the others, though they'd assured me they could take care of themselves. I forced myself to believe them since I had my own part to play. That meant finding the remaining pieces of the crown. If the assassin was telling the truth, then I needed to go to France.

Troy would go with me. There was no leaving him behind. Not that I wanted to. I needed him as well. When he was around I felt more confident. He truly inspired me to be my best self.

A horn honked and I went to the window. Gatsby sprang from the lowest tree branch and landed on the grassy ground below. His tail flicked back and forth before he glanced up. Eyes luminescent with lamplight zoned in on me. I waved. "Hey, Gatsby."

He stuck his nose in the air and proceeded to scamper away. I knew Gatsby was the dragon Abernathy, but truly in cat form a different part of his personality was most prevalent.

"Rude," I whispered, wondering why he was upset. Before I left to get the third piece of the crown, he'd been around a lot more. I had a feeling it had to do with Troy. He seemed to bounce between irritation and awe when it came to my dragon boyfriend. It was entertaining to watch them together.

I opened the door just as Troy was about to knock. His fist rapped against my forehead. "Ouch," I said with a chuckle as I grabbed his hand and pulled him down so I could kiss him. It didn't matter that he was half dragon. I was full vampire. An Original, and that made me extra, super strong.

"Sorry." He smiled when we broke apart.

My insides melted. I loved his smile. "Kiss me again," I said, standing on my tiptoes. Then I noticed he held something in his free hand.

OceanofPDF.com

BLOOD-FLAVORED CAKE

IT WAS a cake with lit candles on top. Eighteen fiery reminders that I had my birthday in the gargoyle realm. "What's this?" Had he gone out and got me a cake? It looked that way.

"A woman needs a cake for her eighteenth birthday, even if it is a little late." He pressed his lips to mine softly.

"Honestly, I'd rather have other things," I said. "Especially since I don't eat cake."

"Other things are nice." He wriggled his eyebrows, making me laugh. "But this is a special cake made with special magic from the realm of Sharra."

"What?" I went to stick a finger in the frosting, but he held it out of my way.

"Not until I sing and you blow out the candles." He walked by, sitting on my bed and placed the cake in the center.

"You're going to sing to me?" I couldn't help but remember my actual birthday. Troy and I had spent a long time kissing, and kissing some more. It'd been one of the best days of my life. I couldn't have asked for a better present and had told him as much. So, the fact that he went to Sharra and had the cooks there prepare a special blood-flavored cake (so not gross for a vampire like me) was amazing. Troy really was special. I didn't know if I deserved him.

"Yes, I am." He lifted his chin, trying to act cool, but it was sweet to see that he was a little embarrassed.

I plopped down on the other side of my cake causing the candles to dance and flicker. "This is going to be good." I rubbed my hands together.

He cleared his throat. Sat up straight. Brushed some hair off his

face. Smiled. "Happy birthday to you," he sang, his voice low and smooth, but the man had perfect pitch. He paused.

"Wow," I said, trying to calm the excited butterflies dancing in my belly.

He winked, giving me a sultry look. "Right?"

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Ja-azz." He held out the last note before continuing. "Happy birthday to you."

My heart raced. I hadn't thought Troy could get any more amazing, but here he was singing to me, while looking and sounding like a rock star. I finally understood why women would talk about going gaga over a guy.

"Make a wish and blow out your candles." He held up the cake between us.

I closed my eyes and thought of Troy, hoping we would always be together, but I didn't make a wish. After everything that happened with the genie and my wishes, I didn't want to go there. Finally, with eyes open, I blew.

He handed the cake to me. "What did you wish for?"

"It's a secret," I said, dipping a finger into the frosting and tasting.

He watched me as though he wished I was tasting him. "I bet I can guess," he said and smirked, making his gorgeous mouth all the more kissable.

I put the cake on the bedside table and climbed onto his lap. "I won't tell you, but I can show you."

"I like the sound of that." He caressed my cheek.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing my lips to each side of his mouth.

"You teasing me?" he asked, his voice growly before he took hold of my face and pressed his lips to mine.

For the next several minutes we were tangled up in each other and I forgot the dreadfulness happening around us. I needed this, needed

his hope. What would I do if I ever lost him?

He took hold of my long hair and wrapped it around his hand, pulling my head back, exposing my neck. I watched his warm eyes flicker from my mouth to my eyes and land on my neck. He wouldn't bite me - at least not to drink from me. He didn't drink blood. But I loved that he focused on my neck. It was extra sensitive, especially when it was him. "What was your wish, Jazz?" He rolled us so we were sitting once again.

"No more wishes for me," I admitted, reaching over and taking another taste of the cake. It was really yummy.

He took my free hand, kissing each knuckle. "I guess that makes sense." He dragged his teeth along my neck and I shivered. "How's the cake?"

I worked to focus. "I'm surprised you remembered unicorn blood is my favorite," I said, savoring the frosting.

He kissed my neck, his warm lips lingering, obviously pleased I was happy. "So you like it?"

"Yes," I said, and swallowed. Not really thinking about the cake. But I tried. "It's delicious. Thank you." I took another taste of the frosting, feeling the healing power of its magic fill me. "Want a bite?" I asked.

He sat back, giving me a look that said he'd rather die than taste the blood. "I'm going to pass, but thanks for the offer." He wrinkled his nose.

I laughed and picked up the cake, focusing on it. "Fine." I ate the whole thing and didn't feel the least bit ashamed.

"So, when do you want to leave?" he asked as I used my finger to scoop up the last of the frosting from the plate.

With a sigh I faced him. The reality of his words struck me hard and all my happiness evaporated. I didn't want to leave. I didn't know if I could do it. My deepest fear came out. "What if I can't beat her? What if I lose?" I didn't mind letting him see my insecurity. I knew he

would say the right things to help me defeat it.

As expected, he gave me a soft look. My heart surged with joy as I watched him. "You can. I know you can. You're everything she isn't. Kind. Generous. Caring. That's why you'll win. You stand for all that is good. She only cares for power and herself." I tried to interrupt, but he placed a finger tenderly over my mouth. "Sharra may have your wings, but that doesn't mean she's you. Not by a freaking long shot."

"Troy." I spoke his name gently.

"I mean it." He wrapped me in a hug.

I breathed him in, clinging to him as I enjoyed his nearness, wishing we could go off somewhere, just the two of us, and forget about all that was happening around us. But that would be selfish. I'd thought only of myself when I wished away my wings. It was my fault all of this happened - the darkness, the Akuma, all of it. The time for selfishness was over. I wasn't that person anymore. I cared about what happened to the people around me, even those I didn't know. That was a new feeling for me. And I realized something. It was important to care about the world because it was my world too.

"Did you need more blood?" he asked, his lips against my neck.

I wasn't thirsty. Thanks to Christopher and the unicorn blood cake, I would be good for a while. But I wanted Troy's blood just for the sheer pleasure. The scent was heady and I was almost delirious from his question. My fangs grew and pressed against my lips.

"My blood is yours, Jazz," he continued, kissing my skin.

My hands trailed up to his neck and twisted lightly in his hair as I relished the feeling of his warm mouth.

"You smell good," he said. "What is that? Tango Tangerine?" He brushed his nose along my collarbone.

That pushed me over the edge and I sank my fangs into the vein on his neck. His body tensed a moment when my teeth pricked his skin, but he quickly relaxed. Wrapped me in his arms and pulled me against him. Troy's blood was amazing. Filled with copper and strength, and

magic, and fire, and brimstone, and love, and sweetness, and more love. Wow! The love I tasted in his blood was so strong it made my heart ache with happiness.

Tears sprang into my eyes and I pulled away. "Troy." I cupped his face and turned him to me. His kind eyes were alight with fire. "I love you so much," I said, placing a gentle kiss on his lips.

"And I love you, Jazz." He kissed me back. Then kissed each of the gems on my forehead. "I'm here for you forever, if you'll have me."

Tears spilled onto my cheeks. I didn't know why I was crying, except that I felt so happy and it seemed wrong amidst all the adversity we faced - I faced. I had so much yet to accomplish and no idea what I was doing.

Troy brushed away my tears with his thumbs. "Would it be awful if I asked you to marry me?"

I leaned back, shocked, and searched his eyes to see whether he was joking. He wasn't. "That wouldn't be awful at all." It didn't matter that we were so young or that the rest of the world would think we were nuts. Especially my mom and dad. In fact, they might kill Troy if they found out. And Pops? What would he do to Troy? I didn't want to think about it. Because what they thought didn't matter. All I wanted to do was take this amazing moment and focus on Troy.

"Well then, Jasmine, Princess of Sharra, will you make me the happiest person on Earth and become my wife?" His features were focused on my eyes, waiting to see what I would say. He placed his hands on my waist and slid me closer to him.

At his touch, my body ignited. "Yes, Troy. Yes. Of course I will." I hugged him. "Yes. Yes. Yes," I said into his hair as I trailed kisses along his cheek to his mouth. His soft lips captured mine and held me there. But that lasted only a minute until his mouth became urgent. Hungry. He traced my lips with his tongue. My mouth opened and he dove in. We tasted each other, so together I didn't know where I ended and he began.

Troy groaned, wrapping his arms around me, holding me so close it was like we were one. My hands found the ends of his shirt and I lifted it, wanting to feel his body next to mine. Beyond the delicious scent of his blood, I smelled coconut.

OceanofPDF.com

SENSE OF DREAD

"YOUNG LOVE. The two of you are sweet."

Her voice was sarcastic and instantly recognizable. Sharra.

My body vibrated with anger, outrage, and fear.

How dare she come into my room at my happiest moment?

"Get out!" I climbed off Troy. "Unless you've come to return my mom and dad, leave." I lunged forward and got in her face, completely out of control in my fury.

"Jasmine." She wore a long black dress and carried her staff with the orb on the end. Her face was calm, but her eyes sparked with interest when they fell on the gems in my forehead. "You've collected three already. Good. That's very good." Her wicked chuckle chilled me to the bone. My anger died, replaced by a growing sense of dread. "The world will be completely encompassed in darkness soon and I want that elven crown. With it, no one will ever be able to stop me."

I sucked in a large gulp of air. She obviously didn't think I was any sort of threat. That hurt, but it was also understandable. I hadn't been a formidable opponent so far.

"I will never give you the crown," I said, internally vowing to keep it from her whatever the cost. I knew I wouldn't be able to stop her. Not at this point. I was too weak, too insignificant. I stepped back, holding out my hand for Troy, grateful I wasn't alone. He stood beside me, his body a wall of strength and protection as it rippled back and forth between his human and dragon form. "When I collect all the pieces, I'll defeat you. I swear it!" I meant every word too. I had to win. Everyone was counting on me.

She hooted. "No, my dear, when you have them all, I will take them from you and use them to rule this and every realm. All

creatures will be at mine to command." Her eyes glinted and her brow scrunched as she focused on me. "You can give me the first three now." As she spoke, she brought her staff forward and pointed it at me.

Troy was suddenly in front of me. "You will leave now or have me to contend with, Sharra." His skin rippled again and I thought he might transform into his dragon form right then and there.

"There's no need for such commotion," she responded.

I sensed amusement from her, not fear. In that moment I knew she was toying with us.

"Get out of this house!" Troy rushed her, taking her by the neck. He lifted her off the ground with ease. Immediately her wings - my wings - stretched out and flapped against the air. Seeing them on her back, even though I'd seen them before, knocked the wind out of me.

I wanted to tear them from her body. They were mine.

"I'll do no such thing." She tapped him with her the orb end of her staff and Troy released her. He was breathing heavily and fell to my knees.

"Troy." I ran to him.

He saw my distress and tried to smile, though he wasn't able to move his body. "I'm here."

I nodded, tears pushing against the backs of my eyes. "Leave," I said again, wishing I didn't sound so weak. "What do you want?" I added, my voice cracking.

"I told you. I want the crown, Jasmine." Her extremely beautiful face remained serene. As I studied her I noticed she looked both old and young at once, like marble. "And I think in the not too distant future you will give it to me."

"I will not," I said, holding Troy's head in my lap, wishing I could destroy Sharra and end all of this.

Sharra watched Troy and me. "Your love, though new is very

strong. I can sense it all around you." Her lips curved up in a vile grin. "It's so exhilarating in the beginning, but over time that feeling will die."

"Get out - " Troy tried to speak.

"I am leaving," she said. But something about the way she said it set me on edge. "The crown is worthless unless all of the pieces are collected. I'll let you gather them and when you're done, you will come to me and we will make a trade. Your mom and dad - " She paused, considering Troy. "And Troy for the crown." As she spoke, she moved her staff. Dark blue light shot from it and went into Troy.

In an instant, he was gone.

I screamed, pressing my hands to my chest. "No!" I fought to stay upright. Pain slashed through my insides, shredding me as tears blurred my vision. A horrible sound tore my throat.

Not Troy too.

"Please!" I begged. "No. Bring him back. Please." I felt like I wanted to die, to curl up into a ball and never move again, but a part of me kept fighting. I needed to try and keep my wits about me, at least for now. When she was gone I could wallow, but not while the she stood so smugly in front of me.

"You'll give me anything if I return him. I know this. That is why it will be a fair trade." She walked over to the wall that held pictures of my mom and her friends. Touched several before scorching them with the end of her staff.

The smell of burning paper filled the air. Ignoring it, I thought about what she said. Would I do anything to have Troy back? Yes. Yes, I would. And I would do anything for my mom, dad, and Laeddin too.

Before I could say anything, Sharra went on, "Of course you will. Your love for Troy is incredibly rare. You'll want to hold on to that for as long as you can."

I did want to hold on to it. Desperately. Without him, it felt like

my heart was ripped out. That she'd taken it as well.

"So, you'll do as I say. You'll collect the remaining pieces and then you'll come to me."

I shook my head, too full of despair for words. I'd made a similar trade with her to save Laeddin's life, and look where it got me. Gotten all of us. I couldn't make the same mistake again. "I won't. I can't. The world doesn't deserve what you're doing to it."

"The darkness? The Akuma? This world is begging for all of it and more. Besides, who do you think I am? A Saint. With a kind nature?" She clucked her tongue irritably. "I have returned to exact my revenge. Snow White, your mother took everything from me. For years, I suffered, waiting for my chance. As you grew, I realized the best way to hurt her was to hurt you. And Snow is hurting. Oh yes. I revel in her pain. Arthur enjoys torturing her and I enjoy letting him. Snow's pain feeds me and fuels my aim even further."

"Please," I said again, even though I knew it was pointless. I needed to stop her, but I didn't know how.

She sighed. "I'm almost sad I've taken this path instead of just destroying you years ago." She stood up straight. "If you don't collect all of the pieces, it'll be of no matter to me. The darkness will consume you as well as those you love, along with the rest of the world, and I will win anyway." An oily grin spread across her face. "I don't know if you've noticed yet, but the darkness is more than just a lack of light. I've infused it with sadness, with depression, pain, torment, and gloom. Those who come in contact with it have their personal pains and sorrows intensified until they become unbearable. By the time all realms are covered, there will be wailing and wallowing and such grief. All happiness will be gone. In their misery I'll rise up and provide them with hope. They will look to me as a goddess, as their savior."

Tears streamed down my face. Had I felt the effects of the darkness? I was sure I had. The hurt within felt like it would become a

permanent friend.

"And one other piece of information you might want to know. Your genie, the great Laeddin of the Lamp?"

I looked up at the mention of him. Had she killed him?

"I tried to take him in the gargoyle realm, but he possesses all of his powers, making it impossible to hold him. He's gone. Probably back in his lamp, shut away from the world. And good riddance, I say." She moved closer as her words sank in. "From the look on your face, you haven't seen him. I guess he cared less for you than we both thought."

Another level of anguish ripped through me. If Laeddin wasn't in her clutches, then where was he? Why hadn't he returned to me? I knew the answer. He was free. No longer beholden to anyone. Why would he return? He only saw me as a willful child with little to offer.

Sharra's glee was transcendent. "Not to worry, my dear. If you ask it of me, I will kill you in the end to put you out of your misery. Until then - " She disappeared in a puff of dark blue smoke.

OceanofPDF.com

I HAD POWER

I DON'T KNOW how long I lay on the floor. At some point, I must've passed out. While unconscious, I dreamed of flying on Abernathy's back. More than once he peered back at me with his gigantic golden head. He seemed disappointed. But I didn't care. I didn't blame him either. I was disappointed in myself too. I allowed Troy to be taken. It was my fault. Again. What would Pops say? And Jesse? He was Troy's brother and his best friend. He would be devastated.

Occasionally, I heard Abernathy speaking. Though none of his words made any sense.

The dragon said into my mind: She's afraid of you. And she should be. You don't need to destroy her to get back your wings, vampire. All you need is to believe you deserve them more than she does. Because you do, Jasmine. They're yours - a part of you.

His words reminded me of something from a fairy tale or a nursery rhyme.

But they also made no sense.

Believing is something wasn't going to give me back my wings.

The dragon went on: You possess the power from all seven magics. Don't you realize how powerful you are? There's a way to find your parents, to find Troy.

When Abernathy spoke Troy's name, that finally broke through my haze of misery and I began to listen.

Abernathy said: Did you forget your father's blood contains all seven magics? And since you are an Original Vampire, you can use that power to find him. If you listen hard enough, you can hear it call you.

I struggled to believe but clung to that idea.

It wasn't a bad one.

I still needed to get the other two pieces of the crown first. It wouldn't do any good to find my dad and the others and then not be able to protect them.

The enormous golden dragon read my mind and responded in kind: The crown can only amplify whatever powers you already possess. No more. Laeddin was right, you can destroy her with its power, but only if you trust that you already possess it.

I knew I had power.

I was strong, fast, and able to see and hear better than any other creature on the planet.

I was a vampire. But there was more.

I hadn't ever experimented with that part of me, but I knew it was the reason I drank blood from each of the creatures representing the seven magics.

If what Abernathy was saying were true, then I might not have enough strength to destroy Sharra, even with the crown.

Except for the unicorn blood Troy had given me, and Troy and Christopher, I hadn't drunk from all seven magics in months.

Abernathy's voice inside my mind said: You need to dig deep, vampire. Find the confidence within you. BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN WIN. He roared, filling the sky with fire, then went on: It's the only way to defeat her.

Heat beat against my body, even as the wind whipped against my hair.

After a while, Abernathy's form dissipated and I found myself alone on an extra soft bed in a room I didn't recognize. As I came to, I knew that however Abernathy and I communicated, it wasn't a dream. I'd been taken away from my home. I fought to open my eyes, to discover where he brought me, but my mind wasn't ready. Each time I thought I might be strong enough, a picture of Sharra taking Troy

entered my thoughts, and I shrank back into myself. It was as though all my courage and strength had disappeared with him. I couldn't do this without Troy. I just couldn't.

"Come on, Jasmine. The time has come for you to awaken." The voice wasn't Abernathy's, but it was familiar. It zinged through my consciousness. I didn't want to wake up because doing so meant I had to deal with my problems. The pain and sorrow hurt too much and I didn't want to witness life carrying on without him in it. "Thanks to the blasted dragon, we have a lot of work to do."

As he spoke, he came closer. I inhaled, and knew exactly who'd come. Christopher. The Hunter. Had Abernathy brought him too? It was a little strange and more than a little creepy that the Hunter always seemed to know where I was. Then I remembered the bear on the bracelet I always wore. He told me he would always be able to find me.

"Jasmine." Christopher's voice boomed with command.

"Fine," I whispered and opened my eyes.

"That a girl." He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned in close. His face was lined with worry. "You're stronger than you think, you know."

I'd heard that before. Sadly, I still didn't believe it. But I hoisted myself into the sitting position and crossed my arms. "Where am I?"

The room was dark, the single window revealing the night sky. The walls were wallpapered in light and dark blue garden roses. Heavy furniture painted cream with gold filigree accents adorned the room.

"You're in a small but luxurious room." He paused and smiled bracingly. "Luxurious for the time, anyway. But we are in a chateau." There was something odd about the way he stared at me as though he wasn't telling me everything.

"What? Is it the Château de Chinon, then?" That would be nice. To be exactly where I needed to be.

"More important than the where we are is the when." He went to

the window.

"What do you mean?" I pushed the light blue comforter off my legs and stood, going to the window. "Just tell me everything, please." I shoved back the heavy drapes. More stars than I'd ever seen in my life shone brightly against the darkness. In the distance was the sound of the sea.

"We are in France, so right country," he said, his smile gone as he stood beside me.

"But," I encouraged. Outside, I noticed several small huts and that the ground wasn't paved but dirt. My pulse sped up.

"We are in the year fourteen hundred and twenty-eight." Christopher sounded more perturbed than impressed. "Thanks to Abernathy," he added with a huff.

I raised an eyebrow, but didn't respond. Abernathy had a way of garnering that reaction from most everyone. Except my mom. She liked the ancient creature, including all of his peculiar behaviors, and only had good things to say about him.

My opinion of him was still up in the air. "I've been here before," I said, but was shocked Abernathy could time travel. It was surprise enough when Laeddin took us back in time. But I had a sudden thought. If time travel was possible, why not just go back in time and kill Sharra? That seemed brutal, but doing so would solve all of the problems. I caught my breath at that line of thinking and then shook my head. If Sharra were dead then Laeddin never would've become a genie. If Sharra were dead, my mom never would've become a vampire. Which meant, if Sharra were dead, I never would've been born.

"Oh?" That surprised Christopher and he crossed his arms.

"Laeddin brought me here so I could learn about how Pops became a vampire and also to learn more about Sharra."

He watched me, his mouth open. "You're kidding?" he finally asked.

"Nope. I just didn't think anyone but Laeddin could time travel. Dragons can too then." It was a statement and I was shocked.

"Apparently so. The dragon knows so much more than we can even imagine." He shook his head. "His little claw contains more power than the rest of us have in our entire bodies." He moved away. "That's why I have a hard time liking him. He could save us all right now and this whole thing would be over, but either he's too lazy or he just doesn't care enough to help."

The Hunter's words rang true. "Why did he bring us here?" I crossed my arms trying to hold back the nervousness raging through my body. The fifteenth century wasn't a great time to be alive.

"He said it was my job to train you, feed you, and keep you safe. Not that I mind. That's what I'm here for, but I didn't know we'd go back in time." He walked over to the door, opened it, and peeked out. "Abernathy told me this chateau used to belong to a Nicolas and Lorette Vouges. They had two children, Pierre and Jessette as well as a title and prestige. They disappeared a while ago, leaving the place unused. We are supposed to be their relatives, cousins to Nicolas Vouges. We are to say we were asked to stop by and make sure the place is still accommodating. Abernathy set us up so we can stay until we've located what we need."

He was talking about the crown. I had wondered how I would get to the piece without Laeddin using his magic to pop us wherever we needed to be. "Are we close to the crown piece then?" I faced Christopher, my vampire vision having no trouble seeing. But it occurred to me there were no light bulbs in 1428.

"Not exactly. We are a week's journey from the Chateau de Chinon, in the village of Domremy." He paused and went over to a chair, sitting heavily in it. "There's more."

I sat beside him as understanding dawned on me. This was the town were Adam lived. Abernathy wanted Adam to help us. "So we are here for Pops - Adam. We are to enlist his help?"

"That's right." He studied me. "Did Adam meet you when you came back here the first time?"

I shook my head, not wanting to tell him that I was inside Joanna's mind while Laeddin was inside Adam's. "No, he didn't know I was here." I got to my feet and ran to the door, suddenly excited for the chance to speak with him before he was the vampire hunter or even my grandfather. If anyone could help get us to where we needed to go, it was Professor Pops.

Christopher was immediately beside me. "Not yet, Jasmine. It's the middle of the night. You'll scare the people. Remember, we need to blend in." He patted my arm.

"Yeah, that makes sense, I guess." I went back to my chair. "So, what should we do now?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I could really use a drink." He glanced at my neck.

My stomach quivered. The idea of drinking more of his blood sounded good. I knew it would make me feel better, but after drinking Troy's, it was like no other blood mattered. "I'm really not that hungry," I said.

"I am though." He glanced at my neck again and I finally understood.

"You need to feed?"

"Yes." He only seemed slightly embarrassed. "I hate to impose, but it would be most helpful."

I went over to the bed and sat. "Sure." I held out my wrist.

He sat beside me. Smiled. Brushed some hair off my shoulder. "I'd like to feed from your neck. The blood is best from there."

My first instinct was to say no, but he continued, "And that way you can feed from my neck as well."

I studied him, searching for any mischievousness on his part. Thankfully I didn't see any. But we could easily feed from each other's

wrists. "It's just - "

"Please," Christopher asked again.

"Sure. I guess."

He scooted closer, leaned in and sank his teeth into my neck. I relaxed into him, drinking from his neck as well. It was true. The blood did taste better from the vein at his neck. It was like all of the magics rolled into one - sweet, satisfying, amazing and beyond delicious. Still, his blood wasn't as good as Troy's. Probably because his blood was infused with his love for me, and for that reason his blood would always taste better than anything else.

I knew some would think what Christopher and I did was sensual, but my heart, body, and soul were with Troy, wherever he might be. Dragon boy was my everything, and that would never change.

But I was a vampire and I needed blood. The more I drank the stronger I would be. This was a necessary part of what I was. The sooner I accepted it, the better off I would be. It was too bad I hadn't figured out the importance of loving one's self months ago. Then the world wouldn't be covered in darkness.

OceanofPDF.com

FIFTEENTH CENTURY

THE NEXT MORNING I found some clothes. A long muslin dress in burgundy with embroidered trim around the collar and along the edge of the hem.

It had a gold belt, and white sleeves. It was a little itchy, but the underdress helped.

The shoes were plain and brown. I left my hair down, but braided a piece from each side and pinned it back. I thought I looked very fifteen-century France.

"You look lovely," Christopher said, when I came out of my room. "It's a little chilly outside though. I recommend this be added to your outfit." He held out a dark wool cape with a hood attached. "Let me help you put this on."

"Thanks." I turned and he slipped it over my shoulders.

When I faced him I noticed his clothing. He wore a cream shirt with rough material. A chocolate brown vest buttoned up tight over the top. Dark pants and brown boots on the bottom half. His belt matched his boots. He also had on a cape. His clothes brought back a memory from when I was younger. I'd seen him looking almost exactly like this. My heart filled with unexpected warmth and I wondered where the memory came from.

I also remembered I considered him a friend back then. It seemed he'd always been around for me, even when I didn't realize it or even want his presence. Though I knew he considered me more than a friend recently. He believed we were meant to be together in a different way. But I would make sure he realized that would never happen. It couldn't. My heart belonged to someone else and it always would. "You look nice, too," I said, patting him on the chest.

He grinned, touching a finger to my forehead. "How are we going

to explain the jewels on your forehead?" He touched each one softly.

I hadn't thought about it. In truth, I'd forgotten about them. I went to a mirror and glanced at them. There wouldn't be any good explanation. I went to the kitchen and began opening cupboards and drawers, an idea forming.

"What are you doing?"

"Help me find some scissors or at least something I can use to give myself bangs."

"You're going to cut your hair?" He was shocked.

"Sure, why not?" I went dug through some spools of thread.

"Good idea." He came over to help me.

I found a pair at the back of the thread drawer. They were crude and didn't look very sharp, but they would do. I took a chunk of hair and brushed it in front of my eyes.

"Wait. Allow me." He took the scissors. I thought about telling him I didn't need his help, but decided to let him.

"I'm not sure it'll work," I said. In the past I cut my hair and it grew right back, but that was when I had my wings. It might be different now. It wouldn't hurt to try.

Christopher cut through my hair, letting it fall to the floor. "There."

We waited a moment to see if it would grow back, but it didn't. My hair covered the jewels. I turned back and forth, studying my reflection. "What do you think?"

"Still beautiful." He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

I smiled. "Good."

Then he took my hand. "Come on, let's go meet your grandfather."

We went to the door, but before he opened it, I stopped him. "One thing has been bothering me since you saved me in the Wasteland."

"What's that?"

"How did you find me?" I knew the wooden bear he'd carved and

that I wore allowed him to track me, but it surprised me he could do it subconsciously too.

"Hmmm, that's difficult to explain and will take some time."

"A story for another day?"

"Exactly."

"Fine." I opened the door.

As soon as we stepped outside, I paused. Being back here in the flesh and not just in Joanna's mind was different. Even the scenery had me dazed. One word could describe the surroundings and that was dreary. Small houses with thatched roofs spotted the countryside. Most had simple fences around them to keep their animals, like chickens and goats contained. They also had areas tilled for gardens.

Smoke spindled into the sky from the tops of the houses. All around was very little color, mostly just shades of brown. I felt slightly overdressed wearing a burgundy gown. It seemed too colorful and decorated for such a drab place.

Beneath us was nothing but hardened dirt filled with ruts, potholes and divots. I guessed horses and the wheels on carriages and wagons had created them. The townsfolk didn't seem to notice, but moved around like they knew where every uneven portion of the road lay. Navigating the irregular footing probably became easy after months and years of living in the same place.

I lifted the edge of my hem to keep it out of the dirt. People passed us by and would look at us and then away. "I don't think they are happy we're here."

"Probably because of where we came from. We are outsiders," Christopher said, taking my hand and placing it in the crook of his arm.

"I guess you're right. But I would think they'd be eager to introduce themselves to their new neighbors."

"Do you speak any French?" Christopher eyes me worriedly.

"Mais oui, Monsieur." I winked.

"Really? How?" He looked at me, astonished. "I thought I'd have to say you were my mute sister and couldn't speak to keep them for calling you a witch." He chuckled as he spoke.

"I speak fluently," I said in a huff, though I wasn't really angry. "My nanny was French. She taught me the language."

"Well good." He was obviously pleasantly surprised. "A happy coincidence," he added.

I shrugged. "Really, Christopher. Is anything a coincidence?"

He raised his eyebrows and smirked. "Probably not." After a moment, he went on. "We need to make an effort with the townspeople. I know when my mother and I first moved to a new place, everyone steered clear of us, until one day, after we'd been there a while, they decided to introduce themselves. They were wary of us just as we were of them."

"Hmmm, I guess." My experience had been much different, probably because I was the daughter of the Vampire Queen. Creatures from all over the land came to see me. They brought me gifts, toys, blood. They made sure I was happy. I'd been spoiled and hadn't even realized it.

"Let's give it a try." Christopher stepped off our front porch and into the street, taking me along with him. As we walked, I thought about my life. Growing up in Sharra hadn't been perfect. I'd been the recipient of unkind looks and harsh words. School at the Seven Magics Academy had been both hard and easy. I was popular, but also something to be attained. That's why Abrea was my dearest friend. And that was part of the reason I wished my wings away. So I could be normal. But the truth I was slowly discovering was that normal didn't really exist. It was a lie people pretended to possess, some even fought to protect it. But we all carried our own uniqueness.

Knowing that, I held my head up as we walked. I put a smile on my face, and said hello to all we passed. Most didn't respond, though

some did, openly curious about who we were.

When we reached the center of the village, the smell of rotting fruit tainted the air around us. It was cloying and sweet and stung the inside of my nose. I decided breathing was a waste of time and held my breath. Christopher looked over and nodded. I noted he was doing the same.

"Who are you and what business to you have here?" The question came from a large, surly man. Dark hair lay plastered against his ruddy face. His tan shirt had dirt stains on it and his belt was unbuckled, causing a clanging sound when he walked.

As he spoke, I noticed the villagers back away behind their carts of food and bundles.

The man tucked in his shirt and did up his belt as he waited for Christopher to answer. It was a rather disgusting display and I looked away toward a couple of children playing and giggling around their mother.

Christopher stepped in front of me. "My name is Christopher Prinfois. I am Nicolas Vouges' cousin," he said in excellent French.

"Ansel Grafton," the man said. He carried a mug of something I guessed was like beer since he struggled to stay up right. It was early morning and I wondered if he were already drinking or if he'd been to sleep yet. "The Vouges haven't been around in months. We thought them dead. I had planned to lay claim on the house. Good thing you arrived, I guess." He frowned at Christopher. I could almost see his wheels turning as thoughts on how to get rid of us entered his mind.

"Nope, not dead. Just out of the country, sir." Christopher pushed me further behind him.

I thought about reminding him that I was a vampire. It wouldn't be easy to break me, and especially not by the big lug in front of us. Ansel would get hurt before I even felt it.

But I held my tongue. It wouldn't do to say anything. So, I tried to settle down, but it didn't last. Several of the villagers had begun to

gather around. They whispered behind hands, and scowled at us over their pitchforks. Some carried pails or bales of twigs. They were people who worked hard from the moment they woke until just before bed.

"Who's the little chère with you?" Ansel indicated me.

Christopher tried to stay in front, but I stepped out from behind him.

"I'm Jasmine, Princ - "

Ansel lifted an eyebrow at me.

"Prinfois. Nicholas's cousin and my sister," Christopher said, cutting me off.

Ansel moved in for a closer look. "She's quite the piece to look at."

"Yes, she is. And I'm sure if she wasn't already promised to another, she might consider your interest. As it is, sir, she mustn't even formally make your acquaintance."

Ansel blustered, scrutinizing the two of us. "You don't look anything alike." He glanced around at the crowd for agreement.

Some of the townspeople commented. Others went away, while still others studied Christopher and me like we were two-headed dragons.

"I take after my mom," I said.

"And I look like my father," Christopher replied.

I considered what would happen if my dad heard Christopher call him father. It wouldn't be a happy ending, that was for sure.

"Allow me to give you the tour of our village," Ansel said. "It's actually quite grand as far as villages go."

"Great. Thank you. Jasmine, shall we?" Christopher glanced at me, his look suggesting I remain on guard.

"I'd love to have a look around," I said, taking Christopher's arm once again.

Ansel seemed perturbed by Christopher's asking my opinion. But

only said, "Very good. Let's be on our way, then."

We walked the main square. The buildings had been built in a literal square. In the center were three pillory stocks. All three had people in them. A small crowd was throwing rotten fruit and vegetables at them. That was where the stench came from.

Ansel noticed me looking at them and smiled. "We've had quite the excitement around here. These three were caught stealing from the meat shop last night." He laughed. "Caused quite a ruckus. But that's what happens to thieves and liars around these parts. Be warned." He gave Christopher another cursory glance.

The guy was a jerk and his french was brusque. I didn't like him at all. "Good thing we aren't thieves or liars then, isn't it?" My words came out clipped. I knew that probably wasn't a good idea, but I couldn't help myself.

Christopher noticed the irritation on my face and patted my hand still tucked into the crook of his arm. "Trust me, she isn't something you'd ever want to try," he said softly to Ansel, but his eyes were on me.

Ansel just laughed. "Right. Anyway, here we have the bakery. Best bread in all of France," he said.

The buildings all looked the same, their walls attached to the next one. They were all made of wood. The only distinguishing marks between buildings were the signs above the doors.

I peeked in on a bakery, admiring the amazing aromas coming from within. It smelled like warmth and comfort. Dozens of crusty bread loaves lined wooden countertops. A light dusting of flour coated every surface. Next to the bakery was the meats shop. Cured meats hung from racks in the front of the store. In back hung dead animals including an overly large wolf. Its dark eyes still open and its tongue lolling to one side. I had to look away.

Ansel commented to Christopher about my feminine sensibilities and I had to cover another irritated smile.

We passed a cheese shop, a quaint hotel that looked more like a brothel, and a blacksmith. There was also a dress shop, the constable's office, and a general store that carried sugar, flour, and other necessities.

"That's it," he said when we completed the square. "Did you want to toss some rotten fruit? It's a lot of fun." Ansel waggled his eyebrows.

"We're going to pass, but thank you for the offer, Ansel. You're a kind man and a great host. We appreciate you showing us around."

I scoffed at Christopher's obvious blustering. He shot me a glare and I immediately returned my features to neutral.

"No problem. If you need anything else, let me know."

"Actually," Christopher said. "We were hoping to speak with a man called Adam Henry. Do you know where he might be at this hour?"

The man's cordial features fell into annoyance. "Why? What business do you have with that waste of a man?"

Christopher's kind features changed, but only subtly into something that looked more like a wild animal than that of a genteel man of proper upbringing. He looked every inch a vampire and I wondered how I hadn't seen that side of him before.

Ansel backed up. "His father runs the blacksmith," he said and hastily retreated.

"Thank you." Christopher bowed.

"You know you can be scary when you want to be, right?" I asked, keeping up with him step for step.

He smiled, guiding me in the direction of the blacksmith's shop. "Of course I do."

OceanofPDF.com

MASTER BLACKSMITH

WHEN WE'D PASSED the blacksmith's earlier, no one had been visible. Now, an elderly man with white hair and leathery skin pounded on a blade. He glanced up when he heard us.

"Good day," Christopher said. "We are looking for Adam Henry."

"Why?" The smith's voice was garbled and full of growl.

"We have a proposition for him."

That stopped him. He looked up and focused on Christopher and me intently. "Did you need a sword? If that's the case, Adam is still in training. I am his father and the master blacksmith."

"We may have need of a sword or two, yes, and I will remember that you're the man for the job when the time comes. But right now, we seek Adam's assistance on another matter." As Christopher spoke, he stepped further into the shop with me in tow.

"Fine. Adam is in the back." He pointed in the direction we should go. Glared and returned to his work.

"Thank you." Christopher flicked a coin at him. Even though he wasn't looking, Mr. Henry paused his hammering long enough to reach out and catch it. I knew Adam's father wasn't a vampire, nor was he young, but he was still quicker than most. I gathered that must be where Pops got his reflexes. Sure, they'd been enhanced when he became a vampire, but it started with his father.

We came into another, smaller room. A variety of metal objects lined every inch of the walls. Some looked sinister and dangerous while others appeared almost docile in nature. Each gleamed as light from the doorway shone on them. Weapons hung on the walls too. An interesting-looking bow, a shield, and a long sword were interspersed among the tools.

The floor was covered in clean, dry straw, and nothing else, except a rack filled with swords. We went out the back door. Behind the building and across another dirt street stood a small house and beyond that was a rugged training arena. Two men, one much shorter than the other battled each other with practice swords. The shorter one wore a steel helmet and chain mail. Even with all of the protection, he seemed much smaller than the unhindered man.

As one, Christopher and I moved toward them. "Let me do the talking," Christopher said.

"We'll see." I smiled as I spoke, teasing him like the brother he claimed to be.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he said quietly. I would never love anyone like I loved Troy, but I liked Christopher. I was glad he was here with me.

When we entered, two men stopped what they were doing.

"Can I help you?" the taller one asked.

I pulled Christopher to a stop as he spoke. It was Pops. He looked almost exactly as he did in our day. There were slight differences. His hair color had changed and he bore more wrinkles in the future. In truth, he was a startlingly handsome young man. Part of me wanted to launch myself into his arms the way I did in my time, but I held back, knowing he was only a man now and I would probably hurt him if I did. Not to mention the fact that he would think me fresh and not a proper lady too.

Christopher sensed my hesitation and stopped beside me. "Bonjour. I am Christopher Prinfois. This is my sister, Jasmine. We are cousins of the Vogues family. We've come to ask you a favor."

The other man removed his helmet as Christopher spoke. Shocked, I realized it wasn't a man but a woman, with bright red hair that tumbled down her back and eyes green as fresh cut grass shone intelligently. Joanna.

"A favor. What kind of favor?" she asked.

It was as though someone struck a match and lit the young woman on fire. She wasn't much older than I, but where I was lacking, she was all confidence and determination. I was excited to talk to her.

Christopher bowed. "My Lady. We've heard Adam has expert knowledge of the lands round about this area and seek his guidance."

Pops - Adam - stepped forward. "Who told you such things? There are those who know the land better than I."

"He goes by the name Abernathy," Christopher said.

"I don't believe I know a man called Abernathy," Adam said, scrutinizing us.

"Well, he knows you. He told me that you are possessed of great integrity and a vast knowledge of France, which is good. We have need to reach the Château de Chinon."

"But isn't that where the Vouges are at the moment. Surely you've been there." He eyed us warily.

I licked my lips and my pulse quickened. Adam had a keen intellect and wasn't afraid to use it. "Yes, but we were both so young the last time we visited our cousins." I paused, hoping I wasn't making things worse. "We could really use your help, Pro - Mr. Henry." I released Christopher's arm and stepped toward him, unable to help myself. He was my grandfather. That was how I'd known him my whole life, but as he stood before me, I saw so much more than a grandfather, I saw a man filled with dreams. "Please," I added. "We need you," I paused and glanced over at Joanna. "And your friend can come too."

Adam shook his head. "Joanna has no need to do any travelling." He moved slightly so that he stood in front of her.

She didn't like that and her eyes flashed with fierce irritation. "Adam, you cannot speak for me. Not now and not ever."

Adam smiled; his eyes filled with unmistakable love. I couldn't help but glance back and forth between them, my desire to learn even more about Joanna growing by the second.

"Apologies, Miss d'Arc. Of course you may do whatever you please." Adam gave her a brilliant smile.

It was all I could do not to jump up and down and clap for joy. Or rush my grandfather in a hug. It was fun to see him like that - just a man.

"Will you come?" I asked, urgency driving me forward. I hoped I didn't sound like a spoiled child, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted both of them to journey with us.

"Miss Joanna d'Arc, it isn't necessary for you to leave the comforts of your home," Christopher said and I glared, but didn't interrupt. "We intend to travel quickly and I certainly wouldn't want to cause you any distress, especially because we will be travelling long hours on horseback and sleeping on the ground," he added.

Joanna let out a very unladylike snort. "Dear Christopher, you've just described my comfort. If Adam doesn't wish to go, I will take you." Her eyes dropped to a moment before she glanced back at us.

Christopher smiled, obviously as smitten with her as me. "Very well. If it is all right with your father, then we would be honored to have you travel with us."

"Hold on a minute. I don't think this is a good idea," Adam said, a combination of frustration and amusement coloring his features.

"But you have to," I said and then looked away. He wasn't my grandfather yet and he didn't have to do anything.

There were several moments of awkward silence and I watched a beetle scuttle around in a corner. But I waited, holding my tongue, though it was difficult.

"When do you wish to leave?" Adam finally asked.

"The sooner the better," Christopher said, obvious relief in his words.

I nodded, feeling my face light up with happiness. "It's going to be great," I agreed, clapping my hands.

"You are an interesting sort," Adam said, eying me warily.

I supposed that was his way of saying I wasn't very ladylike. Surely since he loved Joanna, he didn't care about that kind of thing.

"Shush, Adam. You made Jasmine's day," Joanna cooed, her eyes still on me. She was surprised by the way I behaved too, but in her case, she approved.

"Very well." The way Adam looked at her and the way she returned his look was wonderful. I'd seen that before. Between Troy and me. At the thought of him, my heart sank and the smile left my face. How I missed him.

"What's the matter young Jasmine? It's as though a ghost walked over your soul." Adam appraised me, concern evident in his features.

I tried to recover, but couldn't. Pain filled every inch of me.

Christopher tried to cover for me. "She's missing her betrothed."

"There. There," Joanna said. "You must be strong. I'm sure your love wouldn't want to be the cause of pain to you." She came over and took my hand.

I knew she was right. Troy would want me to fight for him, not lie down and cry. I swallowed down my sorrow and tried to smile.

"There you go." She patted my hand.

I looked up and caught Adam staring at me. "You should feel honored. My dear Joanna d'Arc isn't usually so friendly with strangers."

"Of course. Thank you," I said behind watery tears. She was the Joan of Arc, the woman who would lead the French army, and fought more bravely than most men. I looked back at Christopher who smiled broadly. "Thank you, Joanna. I appreciate your kind words."

She smiled. "We will leave first thing in the morning since it will take time to prepare. Is that acceptable?" Her eyes flitted between me and Christopher.

"For sure." A quick glance at Christopher told me he agreed as well.

"But won't you need to ask your parents?"

"We do as we please," Joanna said, lifting her head in stubbornness.

She was an enigma. I knew that from before, but this time would be different.

OceanofPDF.com

JOAN OF ARC

CHRISTOPHER and I spent the next several hours obtaining horses, gear, and food to keep up appearances.

I asked him more than once why we didn't just have someone draw us a map and use our vampire abilities to run to the chateau.

We'd be there in hardly any time and we needed to hurry. He just smiled and said Abernathy felt I needed to spend some time with Adam Henry, which was why the dragon had dropped us in his town.

We couldn't do that if we just ran.

"I guess," I said. "But he must realize how dire the world's circumstances." I still felt the urgency to get the remaining two pieces so I could save the world, rescue my mom and dad, and Troy. A lot had to happen in a short amount of time.

"It's important," he added. "Something to do with helping you grow."

"Fine." I gritted my teeth.

What was it about adults always thinking they knew better than me.

I let out a breath.

That kind of thinking is what got me in this mess in the first place.

If Abernathy said it was important, then I was going to get whatever I could out of the experience.

Christopher and I were in the stables near the house, brushing the horses we purchased.

"Can you believe we get to hang out with Joan of Arc? I'm not even sure how to talk to her."

Christopher chuckled. "No doubt it's pretty cool. But remember, right now she's just a young woman. Sure, she's committed to her

goals, but decisions haven't been made yet. Her destiny hasn't been fulfilled. Recognize that and know we can affect her decisions. We don't want to change their histories too much."

"I understand." From my time here with Laeddin, I knew what happened to them in the near future. Sharra would come soon. Joanna and Adam wouldn't end up together because of her.

In some ways Joanna's life and mine felt similar. We were around the same age. Our destinies would soon be fulfilled, though she didn't know how hers would play out. I wasn't sure how mine would either, and that made me nervous. I wondered if Joanna ever got nervous?

I peeked outside the barn, hoping I could tell the time by the lightness in the sky. It was still before mid-day.

"You should probably eat again tonight. You need your strength." Christopher's eyes went to my neck.

I agreed, surprised my heart jumped at the thought of drinking more of Christopher's blood. It really was yummy.

We finished with the horses and went inside the quaint house. Christopher went to the kitchen and put on a pot of tea. I guessed it was out of habit, and watched as he busied himself.

"Do you think it would be a complete scandal if I wore pants? I don't want to ride in a dress." I sat at the kitchen table, waiting for his reply.

"We're going on an adventure with Joan of Arc, the woman destined to lead armies of men. I think she'll be fine with you wearing pants." He smirked, taking my hand and intertwining his fingers in mine. "She's going to love you."

"I don't know about that. She's everything I'm not. Confident. Assured. Without guile or restraint. I'm sure she wouldn't have wished her wings away to be normal." As I spoke, I noticed him looking at the bear bracelet he'd given me a while ago. It still dangled from my wrist.

"There's more to you than you're giving yourself credit for," he

whispered softly.

"Thanks." I wanted to believe he was right, but couldn't get there. "Let's talk about something else. Tell me about you." I studied his intent face. "What you were like before you became the man who betrayed my mom. I'd like to know more about that Christopher."

He withdrew his hand, crossing his arms, and sitting beside me. "There isn't much to tell."

I'd touched a nerve and felt bad. "Somehow I don't believe that." I decided to press harder. I wanted to get to know him better. "If we're going to be friends, it'd be nice to actually know you."

Christopher stared intently. "I don't usually talk about myself. Nor do I share personal information."

Exasperated, I threw my hands in the air. "Maybe that's why you don't have any friends, Chris." I stood and put my hands on my hips. "Because that's what friends do. They talk to each other."

"You really want to know?" He seemed genuinely surprised and I settled back in my chair, trying to put myself in his shoes. It must be difficult to be him.

"Yes, for goodness sake. I want to know everything. Let's start with family." I paused and he nodded for me to continue. "Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

"No. I'm an only child, like you."

"See, was that so hard?" I leaned forward and patted his knee. "Now we know we have something in common."

Christopher chuckled. "You mean other than the fact that we're both vampires?" He raised an eyebrow.

I crossed my eyes and made a face. "Well, right," I said, laughing.

"Fine," he said. "What else?"

"Did you like your parents?"

His light-hearted expression vanished.

Crap, I hit another nerve.

"If you don't want to talk about your parents, that's fine," I said. "You can tell me how you learned to carve this bear."

"Growing up, I never knew my dad. I asked my mom about him, but she would only tell me he was a loser." He sounded like the hurt child he was.

"That must've been hard." I couldn't imagine how difficult it would've been to grow up without a father. My dad meant the world to me.

"It was all I knew," he said, clasping his hands together.

"So he wasn't the one to teach you how to carve?" I indicated the bear he gave me, dangling from my wrist.

"No, I taught myself how to do that. In the seventies, we had a TV but no other technology. And my mom watched soap operas all day. I saw a commercial for woodworking and thought it looked interesting. The next time my mom sent me to the grocery store, I found a woodworking magazine. It was fascinating, seeing a block of wood turn into something." He gave a rueful smile. "It's hard to explain why I was so interested in it. I have theories, but who knows. It doesn't matter anyway." He ran his hands through his hair. "I decided to try my hand at carving." He paused, momentarily lost in his past. I stayed quiet, hoping he would go on. After another minute, I was rewarded for my patience. "The hobby came easy for me. Over time, I got better and better, and wanted to try new things. That required different tools, which I didn't have. So I went to junkyards and secondhand stores, searching diligently until I found what I was looking for or at least something that might work. When my room became too crowded, my mom said I could use the garage as a work area, and I was grateful to her for that." His faraway look grew sad. "It was the kindest thing she ever did for me." He reached for the bear at my wrist, smoothing it between two fingers.

"Did, Snow - your mom tell you anything about the bear?"

That surprised me. "My mom? No, it never came up."

"It's an interesting story. Strange too. I think Snow came to me the same way I came to you in the Wasteland."

I sat forward, desperate to hear what he had to say. My mom hadn't given me any details about her and Christopher. Mom only said that at one time she trusted him and he betrayed her. As I watched him watching me, I got the feeling there was a whole lot about my mom I didn't know. "What is the Wasteland?" I asked, changing the subject.

"It's a place created by the Unknowns, kind of like hell for the soul."

"That's a good description of the place since that was how it felt to be there," I said, leaning back. "What do you know about the Unknowns?" Kenmei gave a lecture on them in his class at the Seven Magics Academy. Supposedly they enjoyed interfering with the creatures of Earth.

"They are the creators - of everything." His voice was quiet like he didn't want to talk about them.

"That hurts my head." I allowed my thoughts to run over my life and all I'd been through and was still going through. "If the Unknowns are the Creators, why are they allowing the darkness to happen?"

Chris sighed. "If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that the Unknowns don't care about us, except what we can do to entertain them." He ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know whether it's because they've been around so long or something else, but to them it's just a game, I think. We are pawns. Either they find you interesting or they don't like you." He shrugged. "Who knows?"

We talked well into the night and on until early the next morning. I came to understand that my mom had feelings for Christopher before she fell in love with my dad. I could tell he had feelings for my mom as well, but they became marred by his hunger for power and his need to serve the vampire queen. Sharra. Listening to him talk about that time in his life surprised me. He was full of regret about his choices.

That much was obvious.

"So, why is the bear special," I finally asked. We'd come full circle and I was sure that Joanna and Adam would be by soon to pick us up so we could begin our journey.

"I don't have the exact answer to that question. All I can tell you is that somehow your mom was able to enter my memories and physically take the bear and bring it forward in time. She gave it to me and by doing so she helped me to become a better person. I also know that's the reason I can sense where you are when you're wearing it."

I studied the bear with renewed interest. "But you still betrayed her," I said quietly. Deep sympathy for my mom filled me, as did sadness. I missed her. I hadn't respected or appreciated her before, but if I got her back - No, when I got her back, I would be a better daughter and I would show her more often how much I loved and appreciated her.

"Yes and it's my biggest regret." He sighed heavily. "Joanna and Adam will be here soon. Drink." He tilted his neck.

My fangs grew as I leaned forward, taking him by the shoulders. "I hear them," I said and sank my teeth into his neck. His blood! It was the equivalent of what I guessed four cups of coffee did to a human body. I was invigorated. When I finished, I thanked him and stood, stretching.

Christopher did the same.

"And thanks for sharing some of your life with me. I really appreciate it." I hugged him.

"That's what friends do, right?" His hand dropped to my waist.

"Right," I said squeezing him tightly, before stepping from his grasp and going to the door.

When Pops knocked, I immediately opened it. "Hi Pro - Adam."

"Are you ready, then?" he asked, surprised I answered so quickly.

OceanofPDF.com

DEEP RESOLVE

WE RODE MORE than half the morning. Our band included Joanna, Adam, and two other men whose names were Lance and Arthur.

It didn't escape my notice that his name was the same as that of the vampire Sharra woke, but upon closer inspection, I didn't think he looked the type. Besides Arthur didn't smell like a vampire. He and Lance followed behind Christopher and me.

Joanna and Adam rode in the lead. They spoke quietly to each other.

Had I been a mere mortal I wouldn't have been able to hear them, but I eavesdropped, using my vampire hearing.

"I had another vision," Joanna said.

Adam gave her a quick glance. "What was it about this time?"

"I was commanded to lead the French army against the English and those of our country who side with them."

Adam's back stiffened, but nearly as quickly he relaxed. "Anything else."

She playfully punched him in the arm. "I need you to continue to train me. I have no military training. I cannot read or write, but I have faith. And I believe it is my destiny."

I listened to her speak and heard the deep resolve in her voice. She was young, younger than me, yet she was filled with such conviction. It astounded me.

"Not just a dream, Red?" Adam asked.

I thought it was adorable he called her Red.

"Non." She faced forward, but then turned back to Adam. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Without a doubt," he said simply, clicking the horse to trot up

beside her.

And I smiled because I understood what it meant to have someone support you one hundred percent and without question. That's the kind of person Troy was too. My breath hitched at the thought of him and I pleaded internally that he was okay.

"Thinking serious thoughts?" Christopher asked.

"More or less." I glanced down at my hands, nervously clinging to the horse.

"Is there anything I can do?" He was a lot more comfortable on a horse than I was.

I looked at him and smiled kindly. "You're doing it, helping me get the crown piece."

"I - " Christopher wasn't able to finish.

"Let's take a break," Adam said, interrupting.

We rode into a small clearing. Lance and Arthur passed us in order to speak with Adam and Joanna. "Keep a careful watch. There's been talk of wolves in this area," Arthur said to Adam.

"And you as well," Adam returned, sliding off his horse and tethering it to a nearby tree.

Christopher, me, and the others did the same. A small stream ambled along to the left of us. Joanna went over and bent to rinse her face in the water. Patches of cattails grew a little up the bank, the ground soft with moisture. The air smelled sweet. I didn't know whether the aroma came from the bright yellow wildflowers that grew sporadically amongst the tall grass or if it was something else. But I guessed the flowers. Adjusting my pants, I walked over and joined Joanna. It didn't escape my notice that she wore trousers just as Christopher said she would.

When I squatted beside her, Joanna glanced over. "I see you've chosen a man's attire, same as me." Her words were straight forward and to the point. There was no high school drama in her in any way.

It was refreshing.

"Oui," I replied, rubbing my hands together inside the cool water. It felt good against my skin and I allowed my hands to linger.

She paused, gazing intently at me or more specifically at my forehead. "What are they?" She touched one. "How are they staying flush with your forehead?"

"Oh," I said, pushing my bangs down over the jewels. "It's a special kind of glue."

"Glue?"

"It allows things to stick together," I tried to explain.

"Oh, well they are lovely."

"Merci." I shook off my hands and wiped them on my pants.

She nodded. "Have you enjoyed the ride so far? Our country is quite beautiful, non?

"It is," I said, but something of my thoughts of Troy must've remained on my face.

"But I sense your sadness, Jasmine. What troubles you?" She stood, tucking her hands into her pockets.

For the briefest moment I thought of telling her everything. I had a feeling her advice would be frank and to the point, yet well thought out and helpful. I glanced back at Christopher, who was listening while the other men talked. His eyes caught mine. When he knew that I saw him, he shook his head once. And I knew he didn't want me to say anything.

I sighed, giving him the briefest nod that I agreed. "It's just that I'm anxious to get to the Chateau de Chinon. It's urgent." That was true too so it didn't feel like a lie.

Joanna studied me, her bright green eyes seeing more than I was sharing. "Adam and I will get you there as quickly as possible. But it is important to rest and water the horses as well as ourselves. If they grow weak, the whole group will suffer." She took a piece of dried

meat from the satchel at her waist. "Here. The same goes for you. Eat. Drink. Keep up your strength." Then she paused. "And no matter the urgency or the importance of your journey, it's good it have a little fun too." As she spoke, she considered Adam, who'd come to get water in the stream. "Adam Henry taught me that."

She gave him a smile and I felt Adam's heart swell and melt. He loved her beyond measure. And that made me sad. I knew what would happen and it didn't end happily. She was burned at the stake for being a witch. That knowledge caused sorrowful emotions to swirl. Adam would lose Joanna. Their story abruptly cut short. What pain my grandfather must've suffered at her loss.

"Shall we spar?" Joanna closed her bag. Then helped Adam up. I liked that she was beautiful, but not prissy or girlie in anyway. She was tough and strong and - yeah, I wanted to be her when I grew up.

"Are you up for it?" Adam spoke softly, tenderness for Joanna radiating from him.

It looked strange on him. And I realized it was because the man I knew, Pops - my grandfather had been through hundreds of years of hardship since this moment.

He'd seen more than I ever could imagine.

How many times had he loved? I wondered and then tossed the question away. I didn't want to know.

"Have you used a sword?" Joanna asked me, taking in my hands.

I quickly hid them behind my back.

Adam looked me up and down. "Probably not," he said. His words weren't filled with distain, but they certainly didn't exude the love and adoration I was used to either.

The two of them moved away from the water.

I lifted my chin, following behind. "Actually, I know a little."

"Do you?" Lance asked as I walked by him and Arthur who were seated on a fallen log near the horses.

"She does," Christopher said, backing me up. He had a knife in one hand and a piece of wood in the other.

It brought me great joy to see that. When he noticed, he smiled and I returned it.

"Bon, let's spar." Joanna went to her horse and pulled her sword from its covering. Arthur and Lance removed theirs as well.

Christopher and I hadn't packed any weapons. As vampires, we didn't have need. Except when I battled the assassins, of course. But when I fought them, the swords just appeared. Along with the swords, I was given special abilities to use them as well. Or maybe they were a part of me. At this point I didn't know where I ended and the quest for the crown pieces began.

"You brought no weapons," Adam asked, real distain coloring his features. "There are wolves in this country, not to mention thieves."

"And don't forget about the large flying thing Arthur saw in the sky last night." Lance swung his sword, biting at the air.

Adam snorted, but Lance wouldn't be deterred.

"Tell them, Arthur," Lance said. "You said it was larger than the Town Square."

"We don't have any," Christopher said, interrupting, his eyes on me.

I had a feeling the large flying thing Arthur had seen was Abernathy.

"It was a demon," Arthur said, his face troubled. "A shadow, darker than the night, with large golden eyes that shone in the darkness, and tore into my soul." As he spoke, he studied the sky.

"Are you sure?" Joanna asked, peering at the sky with him. It wasn't that she doubted him. That, I could tell. But she was worried.

"I promise you. I went out to check on my horse because I heard a ruckus. Immediately, I saw the thing swoop out of the sky like a condor, snatch one of farmer Benois cattle, and then launch back into

the sky. I heard the crunch of bones on teeth as it ate. The thing, which I believe was a dragon caught me watching it and I believed I would be next."

Adam gave Joanna a look that said Arthur was crazy.

I would've laughed expect I was still in shock at my grandfather's attitude. Christopher came over and took hold of my arm. "Don't take it too personally," his whispered, seeming to understand what I was thinking. "Remember where we are. This is an age where a small cut can kill you. They have to be tough. He is a product of his upbringing and we are in the middle ages after all."

"Very true." I relaxed and focused on Arthur. "I believe you," I said, tucking the jerky Joanna had given me into my pack. I didn't want to waste it.

"You do?" Arthur didn't look convinced.

"Yes, there are many creatures that haven't yet been discovered. If you say you saw something then I don't doubt that you did." I turned to Adam and Joanna. "I'm sorry. We should've brought weapons. We weren't thinking."

"Luckily we can fight hand-to-hand," Christopher added, smirking at Lance and Arthur.

"Well, that's something," Adam said, though he didn't seem convinced. "Not that it'll do much good against the toothy snout of a wolf."

Joanna wrapped an arm around my shoulders. I was at least five inches taller than her, yet she felt like a giant with all she could do. "It's all right, Jasmine. You can use mine."

"Thank you, Joanna."

"Oui. We're here for you."

Adam Henry took his stance, preparing to practice as Joanna drew her sword. "Are you ready, Red?" He winked at her though his features still suggested he was upset with Christopher and me.

"Mais oui, ma chère." Joanna readied her sword. Stepped forward as Adam did the same. And suddenly it was as though they were dancing. One would lunge, the other parried. Joanna swung her blade above her head as she spun in a circle before bringing down her sword on Adam's with a clang.

"It's like they know what the other is thinking," Chris said, his arms crossed.

"It's beautiful." I walked around Adam and Joanna admiring how in tune they were with each other.

Every once in a while, Adam would comment. "Watch your foot." Or "Strike with more force."

I didn't even think they noticed me.

Joanna caught Adam and knocked him on his butt. He laughed. "Very good."

"Thank you." Joanna stuck out her hand to help him stand. Once he was up, she slid her sword into its hilt. "Would you mind showing me some of your hand to hand combat?" she asked me.

"Um, sure." I'd never fought a human before. I worried I would hurt her.

"Go easy," Christopher said, his hands behind his back.

"I'm going to do my best," I said and stuck out my tongue.

Joanna watched our interchange and smiled. "It's good you get along with your sibling."

"He's a doof, but yeah, we get along." I winked at him.

"Doof?" Joanna repeated.

"It means he's a little off balance in the head, but not bad," I said, trying to explain.

Joanna seemed to get it. "Doof. I like the word." She brought up her hands. "Show me what to do."

"Stand with your legs hips width apart," I said, nervous about showing her anything. Worried I would be too rough.

Joanna moved into position.

Adam put away his sword and stood opposite Christopher.

I tried not to focus on the look on his face. "Now, put your hands up," I continued.

"Like this?" She lifted them above her head.

"Well - " I moved her hands lower so that she looked like a boxer. "Better," I said.

"Have you ever fought hand to hand?" Christopher asked Adam.

"Don't insult me." He didn't even look at Christopher. Just continued to watch Joanna and me.

"Well then, let's go," Christopher said.

While I showed Joanna how to fight, Christopher and Adam fought too. Except they didn't look like they were pretending, though the Hunter was obviously holding back.

After an hour or so, Joanna and I stopped sparring and turned our attention to Christopher and Adam.

Adam fought hard, his muscles straining as thought fought. Dirt streaked his sweating face and his shirt was torn at the collar.

"Do you think he's okay?" Joanna whispered.

"He's fine. It looks like he can hold his own." Even without his vampire abilities, Pops was a natural fighter.

"I don't know. Christopher seems to be holding back."

"You noticed, huh?" The girl was very intuitive.

Joanna smirked. "I did." She paused. "So, why are you really here?" Joanna asked, keeping her eyes on the men.

I decided not to lie. "There's something I need to retrieve from under the château de chinon. It's very important I find it."

"Does it have something to do with those gems on your forehead?" She clasped her hands together in front of her.

Yet again, I was impressed with how perceptive she was. "Yes, it

does."

"And why are they so important?"

"I need to save my mom and dad - and the man I love," I admitted. "And I need to stop a very bad person from hurting a lot of other people."

Her jaw clenched together. "Well, then I'm glad I'm here to help."

"I'm glad you're here too." I smiled. "It's great to see Pro - Adam so in love."

"Oh, why's that?" She didn't seem upset, just curious.

I hadn't meant to say that. As far as Joanna knew, I had only just met Adam, and he barely tolerated me. I gave her my full attention. "In the future," I paused. "Quite a ways into the future, he means a great deal to me," I finally said.

Joanna's eyes met and held mine. "I see." A small smile lifted her lips. "I knew it was his destiny to love more than just me."

I nodded. "His destiny is très important."

"Tell me more," she said, her eyes alight with interest.

"I would if I could, but it's essential that I don't." It was difficult not to tell her all of it, but Christopher said I shouldn't, and I appreciated he knew more than I did.

Joanna watched me a moment longer. "Very well," she said. Then faced Christopher and Adam. "We should be on our way."

The two of them stopped. Both looked grateful to be done. It seemed neither wanted to be the first to quit.

Stubborn arrogance, I thought, climbing on my horse. The others climbed on theirs as well. We rode on along the dirt path until nightfall. Adam found a place and we made camp.

I slept fitfully.

Dreams of my mom, dad, and Troy being tortured by Sharra swirled between my waking and sleeping.

OceanofPDF.com

STALKING US

THE NEXT MORNING WE WOKE, ate, and started out.

Nobody said much.

Arthur and Lance kept mostly to themselves.

But the rest of us weren't talkative either. Each lost in our own thoughts.

The day shone bright and beautiful.

Clear skies, not a cloud in the wide, blue sky. Birds dipped and dove through the tops of the trees. Small animals skittered along the branches and in and out from under bushes.

Our group still rode parallel with the stream. It rushed on; it's gentle music filled the air.

I felt more at peace than I had in a long time. That peace left by mid-morning when I sensed something hunted us. I used all of my vampire abilities to find out what it was, but the predators were cunning. The only thing I could tell for certain was that they were big.

"Something is stalking us," I said to Christopher, keeping my voice low enough so only he could hear.

"I hear them too. It's going to be hard to keep our secret about what we are if we have to fight for real with our bare hands."

"What do you think they are?"

"I'm not sure," he said, glancing beyond the stream and into the trees.

The trail led us into the forest, with thick trees on either side, giving those tracking us plenty of places to hide while our little group was exposed.

A large howl pierced the air followed by several howling answers.

"Wolves," I whispered.

"At least a dozen," Christopher added.

"Probably more." I tilted my head to listen.

Adam turned in his saddle. "Stay on your horses. We don't have the manpower or the advantage to contend against wolves. Our only chance is if we outrun them." Adam urged his horse forward into a gallop and the rest of us followed. Now that the wolves had made themselves known to us, they ran, keeping pace. Adam must've seen them too. He pushed his horse harder and our horses responded.

A jolt of fear flashed along my spine. It wasn't for myself or Christopher, but I was concerned for Adam and Joanna and even the others. They were good fighters. Great even. But they were human and that meant they were in danger.

All sorts of horrible thoughts crossed my mind. Like, if Adam were killed, then there would never be Professor Pops and he wouldn't adopt the seven brothers, so my mom would never meet Dorian. Or if Adam died, then he wouldn't adopt Troy either and I wouldn't ever meet him. Or, heck since I'd been created from the seven magics and the blood of my mom and dad, if they never met then I wouldn't be born. Again with those thoughts. Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. I caused a lot of trouble for those I loved and cared about. I'd given Sharra my wings and with them, she caused the darkness.

From the corner of my eye, I saw one of the wolves. He was huge, his fur a deep gray color. Sharp teeth flashed. One bright yellow eye caught mine and held it. I caught my breath at the way he looked at me. It wasn't like the look of an animal, but of a cold, calculating creature ready to slaughter me. "Christopher," I said. He was a couple of paces ahead of me.

"I see him," he answered.

A moment later, three more wolves came into view. They obviously weren't afraid of us. They hunted us and that worried me. I needed to do something.

Ahead, I heard the whinny of Adam and Joanna's horses as they slid to a stop.

"Why are you stopping?" I asked, pulling the reins on my horse just after Christopher did the same. Before Adam responded, I got my answer. There were four large wolves blocking our path. Teeth bared, they stood nearly as tall as the horses. On the left and the right another eight wolves closed in. I glanced behind. Arthur and Lance had their swords drawn and were facing four more behind us. Sixteen enormous wolves!

"Have you ever seen wolves so big," Lance asked Arthur.

"No," he answered.

"Four against sixteen," Adam said, giving Christopher a furious glare.

Christopher climbed off his horse. "Don't count Jasmine and I out yet, Adam."

I started to get off my horse, but Adam rode over and pushed me back on. "What are you thinking? Stay on your horse and when there's an opening, run for it. Joanna will go with you."

"Non, I will stay and fight," Joanna said, her voice severe, her sword drawn.

"Joanna," Adam started, but returned his focus to the wolves closing in around us. "Fine, just stay close to me." He gave me a sorrowful look that said I was already dead and he was sorry but there was nothing he could do about it. He would do everything in his power to keep Joanna safe. That included sacrificing Christopher and me, if necessary. I wanted to feel bad, but all I could do was nod my understanding. He didn't know me. He didn't realize that I would do all I could to keep him and Joanna safe as well. A quick glance at Christopher told me he felt the same way.

"You know it won't take long for them to realize we aren't just regular people," I whispered, sliding off my horse.

"That is the least of our problems. We must do everything we can

to keep Adam and Joanna safe. We will save them now and explain later."

"Agreed."

Lance and Arthur faced the four in our rear. One of the wolves jumped forward and nipped at Arthur. He kicked at the wolf, sending it flying. That shocked me. How did he possess such power?

Another wolf came after Lance. He didn't have the same strength as Arthur, and was yanked off his horse. Arthur slid off and went after the wolf.

I turned my focus to Joanna and Adam. They remained on their horses with their swords drawn.

"Joanna. Christopher. Focus your efforts on those four," Adam shouted. "Lance. Arthur," he continued, but stopped. The two of them were already fighting the four wolves bringing up the rear.

"Merde," Adam swore.

Christopher ran over to help them.

"Get Joanna out of here," I yelled at Adam.

Adam laughed harshly, bitterness in his eyes. He blamed Chris and I for what he believed would be our doom. "Surely you can't be serious. You believe yourself capable enough to handle the wolves by yourself?" He turned to Joanna.

"Don't question me. Do as I say," I yelled, fear for their safety at an all-time high.

Adam was taken back. He studied me as though seeing me for the first time. "Fine."

"You can handle this, right?" Joanna asked. She was curious, but also believed in me. I guessed it was probably because she understood more about the world than most.

"Yes, I can do this," I said and turned to face the four wolves coming toward me.

Joanna and Adam didn't leave, but I couldn't worry about what

they might see.

I glanced at Christopher who shrugged.

We'd run out of options and he knew it too.

The remaining wolves held their ground, but didn't attack.

Padded feet in rust, black, brown, and white moved together as though they were smaller parts of a whole and hemming us in.

I got the feeling they could understand us too, which surprised me though it should've have.

OceanofPDF.com

WOLVES

"YOU SHOULD GO," I whispered to the wolf closest to me, hoping Joanna, Adam and the others wouldn't hear me. Christopher heard me though. I saw the look on his face. "I would hate to hurt you or your companions." I bowed slightly, as a sign of respect.

The wolf eyed me as though considering my words. Then, he spoke. "You're surrounded. I think we'll be fine."

Behind me, I heard Adam saying something to Joanna, but didn't pick up what he said. I had to keep my focus on the wolves. "Perhaps you underestimate us."

"You don't seem surprised that I understand your language and can speak it," the wolf said. It looked like he was smiling.

"That should tell you that I'm not like the others in this group and neither is my blond companion. We cannot die."

He shook his head and barked a signal, causing the other wolves to stop their advancement, including those fighting Arthur and Lance. "What are you then?" His voice was guttural, a cross between a growl and a howl. Oddly beautiful, I thought. And he spoke so low I doubted anyone could hear him, but me, and probably Christopher.

"I am a vampire. My friend is also. Have you heard of our kind?" I asked, keeping my center of gravity low in case they tried to attack.

He seemed surprised. "We've encountered vampires before, recently in fact. I have a feeling the leader is looking for someone special. She is evil and cares nothing for the welfare of humans." He drew in a deep breath. "You do smell similar to those creatures, which is to say you smell like wet dirt."

I decided not to be offended. "Why can you speak and understand the language of humans?" If they were the creatures I believed them to

be, I would be shocked. Of course I knew all supernaturals existed, but to have so many in a pack and living in France. For some reason, it would be a great surprise.

"We aren't like regular wolves, but are called Locanis."

I knew it! I learned about Locanis at the Seven Magics Academy. There were also similar creatures called werewolves, a subspecies of the Locanis. Few knew of their existence. Professor Pops told me about the Vaktare or werecats as well. He'd helped one a while ago. "I've heard of your kind as well," I said. "In fact I go to school with - " I stopped talking. Saying anymore and I would have to explain about time travel. Now didn't seem like the time.

"Why have the wolves stopped advancing," Arthur shouted from my right.

It was obvious he didn't realize I was speaking with the animals, which was good. I turned in time to see him lift his sword as though to strike down one of the wolves.

"Arthur, wait," I shouted. I turned to Adam and Joanna. "Stay where you are. All of you," I hollered. "Do not move." Returning my gaze to the lead wolf, I continued, "My name is Jasmine. I have no desire to hurt you. My companion and I must get to the Chateau de Chinon. These with us are accompanying us on the journey. Will you allow us to pass or must we fight our way out?"

The wolf bowed. "I am Crayith. We are hungry. It's been a long while since we've eaten. Perhaps you could spare a horse or two in exchange for your freedom?"

"Is that wolf speaking?" Arthur's face had gone more pale than usual.

"Quiet," Christopher hissed.

"We cannot spare our horses," I said, trying to ignore them. "We need them to get where we're going."

"I know one of your vampire abilities is speed. My guess is that you can run faster even than the horses that carry you. Why are you

wasting time?"

My sentiments exactly, I thought.

"Those who travel with us don't know we are vampires and we'd like to keep it that way," I said aloud.

"I am the leader of this pack, but I don't think I'll be able to stop them from feeding. It's of the greatest urgency and our animal instincts sometimes take over."

I looked more closely at the great wolves surrounding us and realized he was right. Many were emaciated. "Why haven't you eaten?"

"We aren't the only hunters in this land. There are people who hunt our fur for warmth and our flesh for food. Not to mention we also saw a dragon last night. We are large and fast, but we aren't invincible the way you are."

"Are you all right, Jasmine?" Joanna asked.

I didn't mean to ignore her, but I had to think of a way out of this. I thought of everything Professor Pops had told me about Beatrice and the other Adam and all they'd been through. And then it dawned on me. "What if you returned to your human form? Then we could share our food and hunt together."

Crayith chuffed and howled, lifting his head as he did.

The others responded.

"Jasmine, talk to me," Christopher yelled again.

"Give me a minute, please," I said, keeping my eyes on the leader.

After a few seconds, Crayith bowed. "We will leave and return in our human forms. But you must keep your word or there will be a fight whether you can die or not, vampire."

"I understand." I bowed again, deeper this time. "Thank you." As he turned to go, I thought of something. "How will I know who you are?"

He turned sideways and I noticed he carried something around his neck. "This amulet is a symbol of my people. I'll still be wearing it when I've transformed."

"Good. Farewell for now, then."

"Until we meet again, Jasmine." He howled and the others returned it. They turned and ran away, disappearing into the trees.

When they were gone, Adam came over to me. "What just happened?"

I shrugged. "I'm not really sure," I lied, making my way over to my horse.

"I don't believe you," Adam said, grabbing my arm.

"Well, I don't care if you believe me or not," I spat, angry at his arrogance. The man was intolerable. "They're gone and that's all that matters, right?" I pulled from his grasp, taking the reins of my horse and climbed on. The brown bay was skittish because of the wolves and I couldn't blame him. Things might've ended much differently. A twinge of doubt and fear coursed through my veins. Had I done the right thing by telling them to shift into their human forms?

Christopher came to stand beside me. "Tread carefully, Adam Henry."

Arthur and Lance rode over. Lance held one of his arms. It was soaked with blood. My canines grew at the scent. As soon as I realized what was happening, I calmed myself and covered my mouth.

"I don't know what just happened, but let's get out of here before they come back," Arthur said.

"Agreed," Lance said. "We need to fix up my arm."

Joanna patted Adam on the arm. "My love, all is as it should be. Let's be gone." She gave me a look that said she wanted me to explain later. "I believe Jasmine has a way with animals, which is good. She saved us. I'm certain of it." She gave me a slight nod.

"I didn't really do anything," I said, feeling my face get warm at her compliment.

Once Joanna and Adam took the lead again and were following the path, Christopher brought his horse even with mine. "Give me the

details. I heard you speaking with them and caught most of it."

"They are Locanis, the same supernaturals Professor Pops helped, including Beatrice - "

"I'm aware," he said. "But what are they doing here?"

"They're hungry. I promised to share our food. We have plenty. They can have our portions."

Christopher nodded. "That isn't going to go over great with Mr. Grouchy up there not to mention the fact that our two portions aren't going to go nearly far enough for sixteen Locanis."

"True, but it's better than nothing. If he's Mr. Grouchy, then you're Mr. Negative." I smiled when he made a face.

"I'm just keeping it real, Jasmine," he chortled.

"It's outlandish to think that such a large group of wolves can't find something to hunt. Surely there are at least rabbits around?" Crayish's story seemed fishy to me, but then he'd mentioned Abernathy. Maybe all animals were in hiding.

"It's possible, but it could also be the fact that they have such a large group they choose not to hunt unless all can eat. But we can keep a close eye on them, make sure they don't have an ulterior motive."

That's what I worried about, their ulterior motives. But it could be as Christopher said, they only hunted what the whole group could eat or not at all.

We rode another hour before a group of sixteen men and women appeared on the forested road ahead of us. I noticed the amulet on the man in the forefront and knew immediately who they were.

Adam leaned over and told Joanna to draw her sword. Then he rode past Christopher and I, telling Arthur and Lance of the thieves blocking our way.

I needed to get a handle on the situation immediately. "Adam, these people aren't thieves. They don't want trouble. They're just

hungry."

Adam gave me a look that said I'd lost it. "How do you know?"

I lifted my chin in defiance. "They need food. Look at the way their clothes are hanging."

"Well, we don't have any food for them. So that won't end well." He scowled as he rode back toward Joanna.

My stomach went sour. "They are welcome to mine and Christopher's food. We will help them."

"Of course we will," Joanna added. She raised a hand at the people. "Hello. I am Joanna d'Arc. I understand you are in need of food." She pulled her horse to a stop. Adam did the same, on her left. I stopped my horse on Joanna's other side. "We are happy to share," she continued.

"Are you sure about this? They look like a raggedy bunch," Adam said to Joanna.

That was true. They did look worse for wear. The leader, Crayith's black hair was the same color as his fur had been. It was shaggy, longer than was in fashion in this or any time. His clothes were dingy and smelled of dust and sweat.

"Yes, mi amour. We cannot let them suffer." She took his hand.

"All right. You know I stand by your decisions." As he spoke, I heard him unbuckle the covering on his sword.

Adam believed in Joanna, but he still intended to be prepared. I got that. But I didn't want him to spook them. I rode out in front of the others. "Hello, Crayith. It's nice to see you again."

"Jasmine," he said, bowing.

"Careful," Christopher called, getting off his horse and standing beside me. His arms were crossed, but he stood with his feet shoulder's width apart. He wanted the others to think he was being casual, but it was obvious he was prepared for a fight.

"Welcome," I said when Crayith came forward.

"Thank you for allowing us to join your group. We are excellent trackers," he said loud enough for the group to hear.

"So am I," Arthur said, surprising all of us when he came forward. "We don't need more mouths to feed." He glared at Crayith. "But, I'll happily share my portion with your group as well." He smiled. But it wasn't from kindness or generosity. There was something else. My blood seemed to freeze in my veins. Was this the Arthur from the tomb? Could it be him?

I studied Lance. The scarf he wore around his neck, though he was sweating profusely. The gloves he wore to his elbows.

It was true.

Arthur was a vampire - a Hunter. His companion, Lance was his walking food bank. Arthur didn't understand what these people were. He only saw them as additional blood sources. I was curious whether a Locanis could be compelled. If not, Arthur would be in for quite a surprise. From what Pops and Troy told me, the Locanis were vicious warriors and wouldn't be easy to fight.

But could he be the same vampire Sharra woke in the tomb? It was possible.

It stood to reason Arthur would know what Christopher and I were as well. Had that been the reason he agreed to come? Was his purpose on the road more than protection, but something sinister? I decided to pay special attention to the vampire and his blood servant. With new eyes, I watched Arthur dress Lance's wound. How had I not seen what he truly was before? Did Christopher know? I looked at him, indicating with my eyes that he should check out Arthur more closely.

He nodded that he knew, leaving me to feel like a childish fool.

"Thank you," Crayith said. "There are many of us, but a little food will go a long way."

Adam glanced around our group with distain followed by complete irritation. I guessed the reason. He was our leader, but he was no longer in control. That frustrated him. "Perhaps we should go back,"

he said to Joanna, his voice quiet. "Our services no longer required."

"Non, I wish to remain. There is much to learn on this journey, I can feel it," she said, softly.

Adam sighed, exasperated. "Let's make camp here for the night," he said in a voice loud enough for us all to hear.

OceanofPDF.com

COMING WAR

We did as Adam ordered.

Christopher and I created a makeshift tent.

Arthur and Lance had something similar.

Adam and Joanna each had their own tent.

Not to be deterred, Adam set up near Joanna.

Christopher and I offered to let the Locanis use our extra blankets to make a shelter, but they declined, saying they enjoyed sleeping out in the elements. I figured it was because of their wolf nature. One of the females, named Emery took one of my blankets. She was the smallest with long blond hair that touched the backs of her knees.

Once we were all settled and a fire was built, Arthur, Christopher, and I did as we promised and gave them our food. Joanna also shared some of hers, much to Adam's dismay.

The Locanis wolfed down the food in record time. Keeping to themselves, they huddled together away from the fire. I caught snippets of their discussion. They spoke of a coming war between the Locanis and the Vaktare. I wondered if that was the reason they were in the human realm. If I got the chance, I'd ask them.

Joanna and Adam were on the opposite side of the fire, lost in conversation. I listened in to make sure Adam wasn't treating Joanna with anything but respect. I shouldn't have worried. He was a lot of bluster to everyone except her. His feelings for Joanna hadn't changed. He adored her, loved her.

"If you say it's a good idea, then I believe you, Red," Adam said.

She laughed. "My dearest, I believe in you as well, with all of my heart. I can tell you there is so much more to you than you can even imagine right now."

"How do you know?" He didn't seem convinced. But I knew what he'd become.

She took his hand in his. "I just do." A wave of sadness passed over her features, but just as rapidly, she wiped it away.

"You aren't going to tell me more?" He kissed her cheek.

"No. It's better that I don't."

"Are you listening in on their conversation?" Christopher sat beside me, wrapping his cloak around him. "Didn't Snow White teach you any manners?" He asked only with slight sarcasm.

"She tried," I replied, pursing my lips together.

His eyes searched mine. "I'm teasing." He winked, scooting closer to me and staring up at the night sky.

"I'm not in a teasing mood," I said, removing my cloak, wadding it up and setting it on the ground beside me. I figured I'd use it as a pillow later, if I decided to lie down.

"She's fine." Christopher brushed some hair from my eyes.

The scent of his blood washed over me. "I know, but I wanted to check. He's so different. I'm not sure whether it's a good thing."

"Hey." He smiled. "He doesn't know he's your grandfather yet. He doesn't know he should love you. He's young and can only focus on his feelings for Joanna."

I guessed Christopher was right. "I know," I said, my fingers finding the bear around my wrist, playing with it.

"Are you talking about me?" Joanna stood in front of us.

"Hi," I said, standing.

"Bonjour. Can we talk a moment?" she asked.

"Sure. I patted the ground beside me.

"Actually, I would like to speak with you in private?" She glanced at a place on the other side of the fire, away from Adam, the Locanis, and Christopher.

I stood. "Of course."

Christopher squeezed my hand before releasing it.

I followed Joanna. Helped her spread out a blanket. Then sat after she did. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes." She gave me a serious look. "But I wanted to talk to you about the - "

"There," Arthur shouted, flipping his blanket off his shoulders.

I followed his finger and saw the dark shadow in the sky. "Abernathy," I said.

Joanna stood as well. "That thing has a name?" Her voice was filled with awe. Not fear, but amazement.

"It's the demon." Lance drew his sword.

"That will be of no use against the dark creature," Arthur said, his voice filled with sarcasm.

"I must still try, Sire. No matter the consequences, I will protect you."

Adam was suddenly beside Joanna. "Get the horses," he shouted. We must hide in the trees."

The Locanis were already up and nearly to the edge of the forest. They ran faster than humans. Luckily, no one except me seemed to notice. A couple of them had turned into their wolf forms too. Lance grabbed his and Arthur's horses, but Arthur was already running, and using his vampire speed had already reached the forest's edge. Without missing a beat, Lance climbed on his horse and rode while holding Arthur's horse's reins.

Christopher stood beside me. "He's so damn dramatic." He shook his head. "I wonder what he wants."

"I don't know." As I watched, Abernathy circled us several times before disappearing.

"It's gone," I shouted to those hiding. "What an odd group," I whispered to Christopher.

"Agreed. We have vampires, werewolves, and a girl whose destiny demands she conquer against malevolent forces in order to save those she loves."

I nodded. "Joanna is amazing, isn't she?"

"I wasn't talking about Joanna. I meant you." He touched my arm.

My face got hot. "My destiny is to fix all that I have broken, nothing more." I turned away, searching the sky for any sign of Abernathy.

"If you say so." He dropped his hand and followed my gaze. It was apparent he wanted to say more, but didn't believe now was the time. He sat back down. "Is the dragon trying to cause panic?"

"I don't know. Maybe he just wanted to let us know he's still around, if we need him?" I crossed my legs. "Or maybe he's hungry."

Christopher snorted. "We need him to stop flying around and just fix everything."

"That would be nice." It irritated me that Abernathy could do so much more than he was, but wouldn't. No more consequences. Everything back to normal. Or not normal, but back to the way it was before I made my stupid wish.

"You're so brave," Joanna said, hopping off her horse.

"Not really," I replied, but smiled.

"You aren't afraid," she continued, watching me.

"I didn't see a point." I pushed several loose strands of hair out of my eyes. "Did you still want to talk?"

"Oui." She patted her horse's neck, leaving him to eat some grass.

The blanket was still on the ground. I headed back over. Crayith and Emery intercepted us.

"Do you know what that is?" Crayith asked. He held Emery's hand. The small woman shook like a leaf.

"There's no need to be frightened," I said, speaking directly to Emery and ignoring Crayith's question.

"Was it a demon?" she asked.

"No, not really," I said, unsure how much I should tell them. Since they were Locanis they should know about supernatural creatures, same as me. "It was a dragon," I added.

"I thought those existed only in fairy tales." Emery sat beside me, clutching Crayith's arm like it was her life support.

I gave Joanna a look that said I was sorry, but she just smiled. Obviously the dragon was on her list of things she wanted to talk to me about too. "Tell us more, Jasmine," she said.

"They are very rare - here, but they do exist," I said, brushing some stray hair off my face. The wind had picked up, causing wispy hairs to dance around.

"You act as though you know the dragon," Arthur went on, coming over to what was fast becoming the community blanket.

"Well, I'm relatively certain I do." I immediately regretted saying that. Arthur was not to be trusted. I could tell.

"All I've heard of dragons is that they are fire-breathing-people-eating creatures who care for no one and nothing. They'd just as soon burn you to ash as look at you. Obsessed by treasure, they rarely leave their cave, except to feed, " Arthur sat in front of me. Lance sat beside him. "I can't help but question your intentions if you know such a creature. And to add to that point, what does it mean that you know it? Does it talk to you?

Adam and Christopher came over too. The rest of the Locanis remained in the trees and I was grateful. If was getting difficult to include everyone in my conversation. Instead I just focused on Christopher. He wore an expression of uncertainty, but I knew he was on my side.

"You seem to know a lot about a creature you've never met," I said, uncomfortable with the vampire and trying to put him on the defensive.

"I'm only restating the lore told by my people." Arthur glanced at

Adam. "It was before I came to be in our village," he added.

Adam looked at the man as though for the first time. "Where are you from then?" One hand still rested on the hilt of his sword.

"I came from Camelot," the vampire said.

"Never heard of such a place," Adam said. "Is it in France?"

"It's a land not well known. Many haven't heard of it," Lance cut in, eager to voice his opinion.

"What brought you - " Adam began, but stopped. "Never mind." He shook his head. "What can you tell us of the dragon?" He focused on me. "Will it be a problem?"

"What do you mean?" I was fairly certain Abernathy wouldn't eat people. I didn't know about wolves and gave Crayith a concerned look.

"Will it eat us?" Joanna asked for him.

"No, it won't," I said with more confidence than I felt.

"Bon." That was her biggest concern and she appeared to trust my answer.

Adam and the others weren't so mollified.

"How do you know?" Arthur asked. His sword rested across his lap; his legs crossed underneath.

I looked to Christopher, wondering how much I should share with the group. He shrugged, leaving it to me. "I know because I've talked to the dragon before. In fact I consider him a friend."

At my words, Arthur stood. "You are friends with the monstrosity. I cannot be a part of this group any longer." He faced Adam. "Lance and I will take our leave immediately." He got to his feet.

Lance rose as well.

Adam looked as though he wanted to join Arthur, but a quick look at the resolve on Joanna's face and he sighed. "If you must, Arthur. Be well."

Arthur bowed, before heading over to his horse, Lance trailing

behind him.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled. All that I knew of the wicked queen, her Hunters, and the vampire minions worried me. Had Arthur been a spy? After what I saw when I was inside Joanna's head, it could've been Arthur who told Sharra about Joanna and Adam. She would come for them. If not now, then soon. I glanced at Adam. He was in shock, though he was doing a great job hiding it. I could tell because of the slight sweat along his hairline and his heartbeat. A vein at his neck pulsed like a drum in my ears and I licked my lips, before quickly dismissing it. I needed some peppermint and a few moments alone with Christopher. His eyes went to my neck and I nodded.

"Perhaps we should turn in for the night," I said.

"If you're sure the dragon will not attack?" Adam asked. I got the feeling that whatever I said wouldn't matter. He would stay up all night to watch over his Joanna.

"I am sure," I said. "But my brother would be happy to keep watch, just to be safe."

Adam grunted. He didn't trust us. "I've got it."

Joanna rose. "Let's talk tomorrow while we ride, Jasmine. Is that acceptable?"

"I'd like that a lot, Joanna."

OceanofPDF.com

KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOR

"Do you think it was wise to tell them that you knew Abernathy?" Christopher settled against his rolled up blanket.

The wind whipped around us and a smattering of rain fell against the tent.

"Probably not," I said, lying down beside him, allowing my thoughts to roam.

He tilted his neck, allowing me access. I sank my teeth in. As I drank, for some reason I thought about the first time I took his blood. It felt like a lifetime ago. But while I drank, I'd seen his memories. This time was the same. They flooded my mind -

Christopher was at school, walking the halls alone.

A group of guys hollered after him. He walked faster, but they followed.

The leader shoved him, sending him to the floor and his books everywhere.

My heart broke as they took turns hitting and kicking him. It seemed everyone bullied him. The guys on the motorcycle were the reason he was shot and died.

I knew he could fight, but he chose not to. That said something about him, didn't it?

"Hey, why don't you go to class?" A dark haired girl placed herself between the bullies and Christopher.

"Why don't you mind your business?" the leader said, smirking.

"Come on, Vern. I'll let you take me out for ice cream." She smiled sweetly up at him.

"You will?"

"Of course, silly. Why do you think I came over?" She gave him a

sultry look.

"Groovy." He backed away and snapped his fingers.

"But only if you and your friends leave Chris alone. I can't date a guy that likes to beat up other guys. I prefer the knights in shining armor type, not bullies." Her smile got bigger. It was obvious he liked her a lot. But he had his friends and his rep to protect.

Rubbing a hand on the back of his neck, he moved through the group of guys. "Yeah, cool. Whatever. Maybe I'll call ya." He walked away, and the other guys followed.

When they were gone, the girl went to Christopher. "Hey, let me help you to the nurse."

Christopher groaned and he got up on his hands and knees. "It's okay," he said, but his breath was knocked out of him and the words sounded funny.

"You sure?" She helped him stand.

"Yeah." Blood dripped from his lip and from a cut on his eye. He pulled his arm from her grasp. "I don't need a mamma bear type girl standing up for me." He walked away with a limp.

"Chris, don't be like that. I was trying to help." She watched him walk away, hurt.

"Why, so you and your date can laugh about it later?"

"No." She caught up with him. "I only said that to make him stop. I'm not interested in him, but someone else. And definitely not in a momma bear kind of way." The red ribbon in her hair was askew. Christopher noticed it, but didn't say anything. Just kept walking.

"Chris. Christopher," she said, but stopped walking with him.

That night he started making the bear. I realized it was for her, the girl with the red bow. He didn't show it, but his feelings for her had been incredibly strong. I gathered it was because she cared for him and was willing to show it, unlike his mom or anyone else at the time. And I knew what a powerful emotion love could be -

"And inviting the Locanis, was that wise?" Christopher asked, interrupting my thoughts. He wasn't really questioning me, just voicing the thoughts in his head.

I released his neck and wiped my mouth. "I think so. It's better they are with us instead of hunting us."

"True." He looked over and smiled. "You really have matured, Jasmine."

"I don't know about that." But I hoped he was right. Abernathy sending me to meet Joanna had been a smart move. Watching the way she carried herself, the way she handled all situations with such grace and courage truly affected me. I found myself feeling stronger and more confident with her around.

"Yes you do." Christopher crossed his arms over his chest. "My turn?" He glanced at my neck.

"Go for it." I tilted my head to the side and he sank his fangs in. But it wasn't for long before he pulled away.

"What's the matter?" Not that I minded.

He wiped his mouth. "It's Troy's blood." He shook his head. "I taste him in you and I don't like it," he growled.

I decided to change the subject. "Tell me why you made this bear." I rubbed my fingers over its smooth surface, as I thought of the memory I just saw. I wanted to hear the truth from him.

"A girl," Christopher said after a moment, lying back, his focus on the ceiling of the tent.

That perked me up. "Really?" He was actually going to tell me the story.

"Yes, really. Her name was Rebecca."

"Oh, that's a pretty name." I got comfortable beside him.

Christopher gave me a severe look. "She - " He paused, rolling onto his side so he faced me. "She was in my math and English classes in high school. I had a crush on her."

"And did you and Rebecca ever kiss?"

He snorted. "No."

"Why?" I really wanted to know. It was obvious from his memory that she liked him as much as he liked her.

He closed his eyes a moment and I guessed he was remembering. "I became a vampire not too long after I realized how she felt about me. Then it was too late. So, I went with Sharra and that life - Rebecca no longer mattered." He looked at me. "I'd forgotten about her until your mom returned the bear to me." He smiled. "In a lot of ways you remind me of Rebecca."

"I do?"

"Yep. She cared deeply for people and would've done anything to help out. One time, she brought all of her coats, including the one she was wearing to a coat drive at school for the homeless. It was adorable." He rolled onto his back.

I smiled sadly. "She sounds like a great person." That didn't feel like me.

"She was."

A wolf howled.

Christopher and I sat up at the same time.

"What now?" Christopher didn't bother with his cloak. He didn't get cold. We'd been wearing them to keep up appearances, but if there was a problem, it would be a hindrance, especially with the wind.

I exited the tent first. Christopher was close behind. Adam was standing, his back to us, searching the direction the wolf howled from.

"What is it?" I ran over to Adam.

"I don't know. I can't see anything." He sounded frustrated.

I peered into the darkness, able to see all of the Locanis. A quick count verified all were there but one. "I can't see anything either."

Crayith ran over to us. "Gilved is gone. There is no sign of what took him," he said as he came to a stop in front of us.

Adam lifted his sword to the ready. "Probably the dragon." He gave me a furious look. "Bring your group closer to the fire. It may be that the wolves have found us."

Crayith glanced at me.

"It's possible," I said. "Why don't I come with you to tell your group?" I turned to Christopher. "Why don't you and Adam build up the fire?"

The group of us had collected a large pile of wood and Christopher went over to it. "You sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"I'll be fine," I said.

Crayith and I didn't speak until we were out of earshot.

"What happened?" I whispered.

"I don't know. There are only the tracks of him being dragged to the river, nothing more. Would the dragon do that?" He didn't seem convinced.

"No, he would've just plucked him off the ground and flew away."

Crayith grunted. "I figured. Whatever it was took him away the same way it walked into our camp. That's cunning. Not only that, but there isn't much that can harm our kind. We can smell, hear, and see better than most."

I knew that already. The Seven Magics Academy really did teach me stuff. "What do you think did it?"

"My first thought was the dragon, as I said, but since it wasn't him, I don't know." He eyed me. "What about you? Any ideas?"

I did have an idea. Possible Arthur. Possibly Sharra. I hoped neither. We reached the tree line. The others huddled in smaller groups, talking anxiously. "Show me where?" I didn't know the Locanis personally, but I didn't want anyone hurt either.

Crayith led me over to the spot where their companion had been taken. Sure enough, the only evidence was of the guy being dragged. A quick look around verified the trail went cold. I smelled the air,

trying to catch the scent of whatever took him, and caught hold of a scent. I recognized it. "I know what did it. Or, I should say who."

"You do?" Crayith placed his hands on his hips. He didn't look happy. "Another of your friends?"

"He isn't a friend. It was Arthur, the other vampire."

Crayith growled. "You know, I've never liked vampires. Always thought they were deceptive and mean." His eyes filled with distain. "It's obvious I wasn't wrong." Without another word, he turned on his heel, and headed back to the group.

I slowly followed debating whether there was more I should say, but Crayith didn't give me a chance.

"We'll take it from here, Jasmine. Thank you for sharing your food." He howled, shaking his head, and right before my eyes, shifted into his wolf form.

I stepped back, forcing myself to remain calm. Crayith stood nearly as tall as me in werewolf form; his black fur caught the moonlight and glistened softly. Yellow eyes glared. The rest of the group shifted as well, and I was suddenly surrounded by a pack of wolves. "Goodbye, Jasmine." Crayith launched into a run and the others followed, leaving me in a cloud of dust.

"Are you all right?" Christopher was suddenly beside me.

"Yes, I'm fine." I shook my head, frustrated. "It was Arthur who took the Locanis. What I can't figure out is why," I said in hushed tones so that only he could hear. Adam watched me; his expression disgruntled.

"Blood," Christopher said.

"What did I just witness?" Adam slid to a stop and scratched his head with the hand that held his sword. "Did I just see those people change into wolves the size of horses? Or am I dreaming?"

Joanna was beside him and she pinched him.

"Ouch," he said, rubbing his arm.

"Nope, not dreaming," she laughed, a giant smile spread across her face. It was strange seeing the serious girl come alive around so much supernatural activity.

"How are you smiling? Why aren't you terrified? I'm terrified. Everything I ever knew about this world has shifted on its head." He smiled at her and turned a furious glare at me. "And I think it's all her fault."

Joanna jogged over and hugged me. "I know. Isn't it wonderful?"

I hugged her back, watching Adam. He shook his head. And before my eyes, his love for Joanna grew deeper. I could understand why. Joanna d'Arc handled every bit of oddness she encountered with a quiet ease that astonished me.

"Have you lost your mind, Red?" He came over to study her up close.

Joanna released me and faced Adam. "Would you still love me if I were crazy, ma chère?" She took his free hand and clasped it between both of hers. "This is who I am," she continued after a moment's pause.

He kissed her lips. "Crazy or no, I'll always love you, Red. Always. But that doesn't mean I won't have questions." He looked at her grimly.

"Good." She rose up and pecked him on the lips before turning back to me. "These were the same wolves that surrounded us earlier?"

"Yes, that's right." I decided to come clean. "They were hungry and hadn't been able to find food. I didn't believe that was their only reason for tracking us, but it seems I was wrong." I shrugged.

"And how did you communicate with the beast?" Adam asked, scrutinizing me.

"I - " I looked to Christopher for help.

"She has a special talent for talking with animals," Christopher said.

"Uh-huh." Adam obviously knew there was more to it than that,

but he left it alone.

I figured it was because he didn't want to know more.

Joanna didn't look like she believed Christopher's story either. To me, she said, "I'd love to talk to you some more about your talents. Maybe tonight?"

"Oui," I agreed.

"Merci," she said.

"Can we expect any more surprises?" Adam asked.

"I hope not," I responded.

He walked away. Joanna winked before following Adam back to camp.

Once they were out of earshot, Christopher touched my arm.

"It's okay, Jasmine. You did the best you could. You didn't know Arthur would take one of their kind."

"No, I didn't, but that's no excuse." If I ever saw the vampire again, there would be hell to pay.

Christopher followed me back to our shelter. When we reached it, he rushed forward and opened the flap, allowing me to step inside.

"Thanks."

Once we settled in, Christopher looked at me.

"What?" I asked.

"I wonder what Locanis blood tastes like?"

I scrunched up my nose. "You mean you haven't tried before?"

"No."

"Could it be possible Arthur wanted to use the wolf to try and track Abernathy?" I dropped onto my knees and then to my side, rolling away from Christopher. "Let's talk more in the morning. I'm exhausted. Good night."

OceanofPDF.com

GREEN FIRE

HEAT PRESSED AGAINST ME. Even though I didn't need to breath to survive, it felt as though my lungs were being crushed.

I sat up, searching for a clue that would tell me where I was.

Directly in front of me burned a circular, green fire. Within the scorching ring hung three people by their wrists.

Heads bent, each moaned in pain. I took a step forward.

"Hello?"

The one in the middle looked up. His face was streaked in dirt mixed with blood.

"Troy!" I rushed to the edge of the fire. "Troy, I'm coming." With only the briefest pause, I ran through the flames.

They engulfed me, scorching my hair and burning up my clothes and my skin, but I didn't pay it any attention.

My eyes fixed on Troy. "Hang on."

At my words, the person on the right of Troy looked up.

"Mom!"

I knew instinctively the person on the left of Troy would be my dad. "Dad, it's going to be all right. I'll free you all."

From the outside the ring of fire had seemed thin and small, but I spent many minutes within the flames and couldn't get out.

"Jasmine, have you brought me my crown?" Sharra used my wings to fly down and land in front of Troy so that I could no longer see him.

I came up short. "No, I haven't. Not yet." Fear washed over me. "But I'm working on it."

"I see." She gave me a cruel grin. Walked over to my father, and

with one of her sharp, black nails, cut into his cheek. A line of blood formed along with a mixture of colors.

I knew it was the seven magics. When he'd saved my mother, they'd infused within him. He wasn't like me, but there were similarities between us. His love had saved her and that love had combined with the seven magics, which saved him. I was created of my mom and dad's love and the seven magics.

"Isn't it amazing, Jasmine? Your father bleeds magic." She cackled heartily, moving over to Troy. When she stopped beside him, my heart clenched. "This one. He's fiery."

I tried to push my way free of the fire, but was unable to. So I backed up the way I'd come. As soon as I was out, the fire shrank to just below my knees, but it made it easier to see Mom, Dad, and Troy. "Leave them alone," I said, half-heartedly. I didn't know whether what I saw was real or not.

"Oh, it's real. I've brought your sub-conscious here so that you might see how they are faring." She touched the top of her staff against Troy's forehead. He gritted his teeth, trying to be strong, but a trail of smoke escaped his nose.

"Troy," I whispered.

His eyes bore into mine. "I love you," he mouthed.

A sob escaped my throat. I covered my mouth with my hands.

"Jasmine." It was my mom who said my name.

I looked at her. There was such strength on her face. She have me the slightest nod and I knew what it meant. She wanted me to stay strong and have courage.

Sharra noticed the silent communication between my mom and I and went over to her, placing a hand on her neck. "What do you think you're doing?" She squeezed. Black veins formed and appeared on my mom's face, neck, and arms.

"Stop. Stop it."

Sharra laughed heartily, releasing my mom and facing me. She pointed her staff at me. "Hurry. I won't keep them alive much longer." As she spoke, she waved her staff and everything got blurry.

MY EYES FLASHED OPEN. I lay on my back. Light shone through the fabric of the shelter. The clang of metal against metal rang through the air. "We need to hurry, Chris," I said. But quickly realized he wasn't there. I peeked outside the tent and found him sparring with Adam. Joanna watched a little ways off. Christopher was holding back, actually sparring with the sword in his left hand instead of his dominant right. It was weird to see my grandfather at such a disadvantage. From the moment I could remember, Adam Henry had been one of my greatest heroes, second only to my dad.

"Come on, Adam. You can do this," Joanna said, clutching her hands together in a moment of pure femininity. She was amazing as a tomboy and as a young woman in love. Both suited her and were obviously two parts of what made her great.

Adam grunted, lunging, his eyes never leaving the battle. His sword came down with a clang on Christopher's, metal scraping against metal. They were equal in height, but in that moment Adam seemed taller. And I knew Christopher was yet again letting him have the upper hand. My heart warmed for him. There was definitely still good in Christopher.

While I watched the two of them spar, it occurred to me that all heroes still had weaknesses and frailties as my grandfather did. What made them heroic wasn't their superpowers, but the way they handled their weaknesses, and more importantly, rose above them.

I moved to stand beside Joanna, each step away from the tent lessening the pain of the nightmare I just experienced.

Joanna heard me coming and smiled. "Jasmine. How was your night? Did you sleep well?"

"Sure. Yes. But I am anxious to continue our journey. The sooner

we reach Chinon, the better."

Joanna's eyes took in my face and she nodded. "You have a destiny, Jasmine. I don't know what it is, but I understand what it looks like. I'm sure I wear the same look." She took my hand and patted it. "Christopher and Adam? Let us be on our way."

The two men stopped sparring, sweat creased Adam's face and along his chest.

Christopher handed his sword back to Adam. "Thank you for the lesson." He gave Adam an easygoing look. While the young Adam Henry bothered me, Christopher liked him, probably because they hadn't had years to despise each other. Christopher hadn't betrayed my mom yet nor had he been in the service of the vampire queen. He hadn't even been born. For Chris being here must've been so freeing. And he obviously respected Adam. I watched him with new eyes, happy that he and I had the opportunity to become friends.

"Right." Adam started toward the horses but stopped, glancing back at Christopher. "Great match. I even learned a few things. Your skill is unparalleled." He smiled genially, though mistrust still hung in the background. "I get the feeling you were holding back and I appreciate it." He walked over to his horse, rubbing his shoulder a moment before packing his swords.

The horses were already watered and fed and were ready to go. They'd been waiting on me.

"You should've waked me." Then I might have missed that horrible dream.

"I figured you could use it," Chris said.

Sleep wasn't a necessity, but it was nice to have a mental break once in a while. Except my sleep hadn't been mentally relaxing lately. It'd been the opposite. "Not really," I muttered.

When our shelter was packed, we all climbed on our horses and started along the trail.

"I hoped we might talk," Joanna said, riding up beside me. With

Arthur and Lance gone, Christopher kept up the rear.

"What's on your mind?" I glanced at Joanna and it was like looking in the mirror. She was at the door of her calling. In the next week or two, it would knock, and I knew she would answer. I'd always wondered how she felt those moments before it all began. Now I could find out.

"You aren't like other women I've known. All they care about is marrying, having children, and keeping a home. While there isn't anything wrong with that, it isn't me. It isn't what I think about. I know my destiny is much different - that my life isn't my own, the way theirs is. But my life belongs to my people. And I've consigned myself to that." She spoke quietly, her focus on the road in front of us.

"What does that feel like?" I asked, sincerely hoping she could help me figure it out. .

She was surprised by the question. "I - " She paused. "It's like the weight of the world rests on my shoulders. It's heavy, nearly unbearable, but also exactly right."

"You aren't afraid?"

"Yes. Every second of every minute of every day since I realized what I was meant to do." While she spoke she seemed so small and so innocent, yet she was larger than life as well. "But what would I be if I gave into my fear. My country needs me and I must not let them down."

Her words went deep into my soul. The world needed me and I couldn't let them down.

"What about you?" she asked. "How is it you haven't eaten since we left, you speak to wolves, and know a dragon? Your destiny is as great as you are. It's beyond my comprehension, but I'm willing to listen."

Tears filled my eyes. I didn't know why. Maybe it was because she saw me for who I was or that she was interested if me for the sake of knowing me not because of what she could gain. Whatever the reason, I wanted to tell her everything. "Are you sure?"

"Oui. Start at the beginning and leave nothing out. I've a feeling your story will be unforgettable."

"You asked for it." I wiped at my eyes, forcing back the tears before they fell onto my cheeks. Then sniffled. "My name is Jasmine, as you know, but what you don't know is that I'm the daughter of the vam - " A shadow passed overhead sending our group into darkness. I looked and saw the golden dragon flying overhead. "Abernathy?" He dove and twirled, ascending high in the air before coming down in a spin. "What is he doing?"

"You really do know the dragon then?" Joanna wore an expression of complete interest.

"I know him, yes." Abernathy seemed to be having fun. Flying like I'd never seen him fly before. It was exciting to watch. He seemed so free and I wondered at his exuberance.

Christopher rode up on the other side of me. "Here, he doesn't have to worry about planes, helicopters, satellites, or radar. He isn't a blip in the sky to be shot down. Instead he's the greatest terror," he whispered.

My mouth fell open. Christopher was right. I hadn't thought about that before. Living in the modern age must've been such a difficulty for him. "He must be loving it here."

"What are planes - and radar?" Joanna asked, leaning over to make eye contact with Christopher.

Christopher smiled. "A plane is a large apparatus that flies in the sky. Radar is used to track it."

"That makes no sense," Joanna said, but leaned back. "I have a feeling it's better if I don't know," she said to me.

I laughed lightly. "You got that right."

The golden dragon circled above us, expelling smoke so that he created a circle in the sky.

Adam took his bow and a quiver of arrows from his pack and

aimed one into the sky.

"Adam, don't," I said, though I wasn't too concerned. Abernathy could take care of himself.

"It's toying with us," Adam said.

"No, he isn't. He's just having fun," I responded.

Abernathy flew out of the circle and forward where he landed in a clearing a few hundred feet ahead of us. The ground shook when his clawed feet touched down sending a flock of birds into the sky and a group of prairie dogs into a frenzied panic. They kept popping up around him and sniffing the air before disappearing. Abernathy allowed the dust to settle before shaking his mane. One of the prairie dogs appeared right in front of Abernathy. The animal gave Abernathy a stern talking to. Abernathy smiled, exposing all of his sharp, white teeth. Then he bent his head toward the animal and blew smoke into the creatures face. The frightened animal flipped out of his hole before skittering back underground.

Christopher had been watching too and a burst of laughter sprang out of him. It was really funny, but I didn't want to worry Adam or Joanna.

"Stay here." I urged my horse forward without waiting for the others to respond. Adam, who seemed to be in shock, still had his bow cocked and aimed in the dragon's direction. "Put that away," I shouted as I zipped passed him. I didn't wait around to see if he obeyed. It was highly unlikely. The trees thinned out the closer I got to the clearing. My horse also became more skittish, slowing down, its ears flicking back and forth. He obviously smelled the dragon and didn't like it.

Ten feet from Abernathy, the horse would go no further. He whinnied and rose up on his hind legs and then bucked. I could've hung on, but thought it better if the horse kept his distance. So I used the horse's momentum to shoot me into the air. I sailed over its head and landed directly in front of my large, golden friend. "Abernathy," I said, placing my hands on my hips, trying hard not to smile. "You're

freaking everyone out. What's going on? Come to take us back to our time?"

"No, Jasmine. I've come to tell you that the vampire queen is close by. I should've realized she would be around since Adam is changed soon. Perhaps we need to speed things along and get you to the crown piece. If Sharra meets you, she may try to kill you."

"Why? She won't know who I am, right?"

Smoke exhaled from his nostrils. "No, but it won't take her long to figure out the truth about what you really are, even without your wings. You were created from the seven magics. If I can smell the magic on you, she will be able to as well."

I stood beside him and patted his neck. "I guess you're right." I didn't bother to mention that was what I said from the beginning. At the sound of a snapping twig, I turned. Adam, Joanna, and Christopher were on their horses and riding toward us. "Why don't you fly Christopher and I to the Chateau de Chinon?" I asked, needing to hurry. "We can send Joanna and Adam back to their village."

He grinned and a trail of smoke filtered through his very sharp teeth. "True. Is that what you want? Have you had enough of Joanna and your grandfather?"

I blew out a frustrated breath. "Joanna is amazing. I'm so glad I actually got to meet her. Though we haven't done a lot of talking, I've seen her in action and consider her one of my heroes."

"She is an incredible young woman," Abernathy agreed, eyeing the rest of the group though they were still out of earshot.

"She is. She's so sure of herself. Even though she isn't an expert swordswoman or, according to worldly standards wouldn't be considered to be exceptional, it doesn't matter. She knows she's special and doesn't doubt what she believes to be true. She's committed and determined. I admire her very much." I pulled my braid over one shoulder, feeling anxious.

"And what have you learned?" Abernathy's golden eye studied me,

waiting for my answer.

"That there is only one person who can save the world from darkness and that's me. I need to have confidence in my abilities and move forward believing in myself."

"Very good," Abernathy said, pressing his face into me, knocking me off balance. "I'm proud of you."

I hugged him. "Thanks."

OceanofPDF.com

FULL OF LOVE

STILL MORE THAN twenty feet away, Adam, Christopher, and Joanna climbed off their horses and tethered them to some nearby trees.

Adam didn't look happy. I could guess the reason. Once again, I put his love into harm's way. It was a wonder he still had hair.

"Don't go near it," Adam said to Joanna, speaking about the dragon.

She sweetly pulled herself from his grasp. "Jasmine is near him and she's fine. The dragon seems to know her and like her." She touched Adam's worried face, caressing away the worry. "I'm going over to meet the incredible creature."

Adam opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Abernathy, who watched them as I did, chuckled. "How has meeting your grandfather been?"

"Weird," I admitted, watching the three of them. Christopher stayed back, biding his time with the horses. "Adam looks like my grandfather, but doesn't act like him."

"He's changed a lot since this time, that is true, but his heart is the same, still full of love. He's just found a way to share that love with many instead of just one."

"You're right." I hadn't thought about that.

"Adam Henry, come here. I won't bite," Abernathy growled to Adam.

At the dragon's booming voice and the use of his name, Adam fell back, landing on his butt. "What madness is this?"

"No one is mad here." He shuffled to the side and took one giant step toward my grandfather. I stayed out of his way but moved toward the group with him.

Adam scuttled into a standing position, and pulled his sword. Fear etched into every crease on his face. His body was tense and his hands shook slightly.

Joanna left Adam's side.

"Joanna!" Adam followed after her, though he obviously didn't want to.

She stopped just a few inches from Abernathy's nose, a look of wonder on her face. "You are amazing." She reached out a shaky hand and touched the soft part of his nose.

"I like this one," he said. Then he added, "The feeling is mutual, Miss d'Arc."

"How do you know me? Have we met before?" No fear creased her features. She was the most courageous woman I ever met.

"We have not, brave child, but I've been to the future and seen your life play out. And what a glorious life it is." He nodded to her.

A tentative smile curled her lips. "You've seen my life? Perhaps you'll tell me how it ends?"

"Non, that would not do, chéri. If I shared, you would no longer be required to make choices and that is the best part of anyone's existence. I will not take that away." He chuckled causing smoke to escape his nose. "You understand, Joan?"

"Joan?" She tilted her head to one side as though debating. "I like it and yes, I understand." She came around and placed a hand on his neck. Abernathy breathed in. "Warm," she said, moving her hand away, but just for a moment before replacing it. "Amazing." And your scales? Mon dieu. They are lovely."

I was astounded at how calmly Joanna took the whole situation. She was impressive. If I hadn't grown up in a life filled with supernatural creatures, I don't think I would've been as calm. A quick glance at Adam told me he wasn't handling the situation nearly as well. He hadn't moved from his spot. His eyes darted from Joanna to the dragon to me and back to Joanna.

"You're like a circus freak," I said to Abernathy softly.

"That's me." He chuckled, sending deep rumbles through his body.

Joanna had both hands around one of his scales. "It's warm and light and dazzling - the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"She's taken with you," I whispered.

"As she should be," he joked.

I couldn't blame Joanna. The dragon really was a sight.

"Jasmine wants me to fly you to Chinon, which is probably for the best, but I think we should celebrate her birthday first."

"Your birthday?" Joanna asked. "Why didn't you say anything?" She touched my shoulder with her free hand.

"My birthday was several days ago," I said, giving Abernathy a curious look.

"It was, but I didn't get a chance to celebrate and eighteenth birthdays are important." The dragon winked.

Christopher rushed over, using his vampire speed. Adam didn't even notice. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"If that ant, Arthur shows up, I'll put him in his place," Abernathy said.

"Of that, I have to doubt, but what about Sharra?" Christopher asked, gritting his teeth.

"That could be an issue, except I'm here. She won't make a move to harm anyone while I'm around." Abernathy flopped to the ground. "I need a nap. Wake me when it's time to eat."

At his words, Adam came forward. "What do you intend to eat? Not the horses." He still held his sword.

"No, not the horses. I saw some wolves hunting deer to the west of here. Three or four of them should tide me over."

"The deer or the wolves?" Adam asked. His sword dipped a little.

"Either." Abernathy chuckled.

I figured he was joking, but knew I needed to make it clear. "The wolves are off limits. They are Locanis," I said and quickly glanced at Joanna and Adam. They heard me and I knew Joanna, at least would have more questions.

"I know they are Locanis," Abernathy replied, smacking his lips together. "Werewolf meat is delicious."

Joanna gasped, stepping back from him.

Adam ran to Joanna and put an arm around her, his sword out in front of them.

"I'm kidding," he said, resting his head on his front paws.

"Did you say there were deer to the west?" Christopher asked, changing the subject.

"That's right."

"I'm going hunting. Adam? Joanna? Jasmine? Want to join me?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll stay here with Abernathy," I said.

Joanna nodded. "If you men think you can handle the hunt without us, I'll start a fire." She smiled to let Adam know she was okay.

"Are you sure? I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay here." Adam eyed the dragon.

"She'll be fine." Abernathy closed his eyes. "I'm going to sleep." To prove his point, he was snoring in seconds.

Christopher came over to me. "You going to be all right?"

"Definitely. Thanks for asking." I rolled my eyes and punched him in the arm playfully.

He kissed my cheek. "If Abernathy hadn't brought up your birthday, I would have. I even brought you a gift."

"No, you didn't." That was a nice surprise.

"Yes, I did. I'll give it to you later. Happy birthday, Jasmine."

"Thanks." I hugged him, grateful for the recent changes in our relationship. He seemed to really be trying. It felt nice. With my mom,

dad, and Troy taken, and Laeddin no longer required to be around me, I needed a friend, and I was grateful for him.

Once Adam and Christopher rode away, Joanna came over. "Want to collect rocks while I gather firewood?"

I knew she meant rocks for the fire so that it wouldn't spread into the dry field. "Sure. But, I'll catch up. I need to get my horse."

"Bon." She went over to her horse and the two of them headed into the trees.

I went the other direction. My horse was on the far side of the clearing eating grass. I glanced back, making sure no one was watching, before using my vampire speed to get to the horse quickly. "Easy," I said, when my horse reared. "Calm down. You're okay. The big dragon might look scary, but it won't eat you. You have my word."

"And I know how well you keep your word."

The voice surprised me. He sounded familiar, but that was impossible. Still, my vampire abilities went into full supernatural mode as I tried to find who was speaking. "Who's there?" I couldn't see anyone. "Come out," I demanded.

OceanofPDF.com

A LITTLE AWKWARD

"STILL BOSSY, I SEE."

Instantly, I knew who it was. "Laeddin."

He appeared in front of me like a breath a fresh air. My horse whinnied and tried to pull away, but I held his reins keeping him steady. My heart raced. "What are you doing here? How did you find me?" I was happy to see him though.

Laeddin wore a muslin shirt with the sleeved rolled up, blue jeans and brown shoes. His cuff tattoos were gone and I knew that was because he was free. No longer a genie tethered to a bottle or a cave, but able to roam wherever he wished.

"It wasn't too hard."

"I'm glad you're here." I hugged him. It felt only a little awkward. "It's so good to see you."

"And you," he said, stepping out of my arms. "I'm grateful for what you did." He shoved his hands in his front pockets. "At first I was upset, but it means a lot to know you cared so much for me."

"Of course," I said, tugging on the reins of my horse. "I do care about you." That was true. And I always would. "Did you want to meet Joanna?" Confusion rushed through my heart. I believed he and I were friends. But he'd been gone quite some time. Not because he had to be, but because he didn't want to be around. That hurt my feelings.

"No, thank you for the offer. But I just came to bring you something."

"Oh, okay." I gritted my teeth. "So you're just popping in and then poof, disappearing again." I walked away, frustrated and upset.

"Hey." He came up beside me. "I can't help with this for the same reason Abernathy can't. It isn't our destiny. It's yours. All I can do is

give you my support and assist you if you need it."

"Well, that's stupid," I said, my irritation growing. "The world is in chaos. I'm barely eighteen. Don't you think it would be better if you or Abernathy took care of Sharra?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't. You may not understand now, but you will." He stopped. "Let me show you."

"No, you know what? Don't bother." I picked up speed, looking for rocks as I went. I nearly tripped over one. Stopped and picked it up, placing it in the horses satchel.

"Jasmine, I'm sorry," he said softly. He stopped walking.

I sighed, glancing back at him, and let out a heavy breath of unease. "Me too, Laeddin." I went over and hugged him again. "And I wish you the best. Always."

"I know," he said, squeezing me tight, as though his life depended on me. "But thankfully I'm not in the business of granting wishes any longer." He winked and I laughed.

I hadn't meant to say wish, but it'd come out anyway. "Okay, what do you want to show me?"

"Your future." He let me go.

For some reason seeing my future terrified me. "You can do that?"

"Of course." Then he shrugged. "The future is always changing depending on a person's choices, but as of this moment, I can show it to you. I think you'll like what you see."

That lifted my spirits. "Really?"

"Yep. Here, give me your hand." He held out his hand for me to take.

I hesitated, unsure whether I really wanted to see it, but decided I did and put my hand in his. Immediately, I was swept away.

I saw myself as though from above. In the vision or whatever, I stood in front of Sharra. All of the jewels were on my head. So that was good. I collected them all. Sharra spoke, but I couldn't hear what

she said. Then we fought and she was defeated, her body lay on the ground, crumpled and bloodied.

"I defeat her," I whispered, in awe. Seeing the blood turned my stomach. I didn't want to kill anyone.

"That's right, Jasmine. You win."

While I watched, Sharra's body dissipated. In an instant my wings returned to my back. Joy filled my heart. "I get my wings back."

"Of course."

The vision changed and I saw my mom and dad. They were safe as is Troy. I hugged my parents. Kissed Troy. We were all crying, but happy tears.

The vision shifted again and I was in my grandfather's back yard. There were hundreds of creatures of all kinds there, sitting is white chairs facing a white gazebo decorated with thousands of pixilettes. "It's a wedding," I said, wondering whose it could be.

Then I saw my dad walking me down the aisle. "What? It's mine."

I glanced back at the gazebo again and saw Troy there in a white tuxedo with black trousers and a matching black bow tie. He looked so handsome it made my heart hurt and it felt like my heart would break all over again.

"Did you want to see more?"

"Yes," I whispered, a hand covering my mouth.

The vision shifted once more. Three children played in the yard of the family castle in Sharra. Two boys and a girl. The boys looked like Troy while the girl looked like me. As they played, the boys would randomly transform into dragons while the girl made her wings appear and disappear at will as they flew through the air and ran in the grass. The scene was so beautiful it made my heart ache. Tears ran down my face. "Is this real?"

"It can be," Laeddin said. "You just need to believe it." His voice turned determined. "I know you can do anything, Jasmine. I've never

doubted and neither should you."

"Thank you," I said and the vision was gone.

"You're welcome." Laeddin hugged me again. "If you ever need me, all you have to do is say my name. I'll be there."

I wiped the tears from my face. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Laeddin," I said, but he was already gone. A harsh laugh escaped my throat as I tugged the horse forward. I still needed to find rocks for the fire.

"Jasmine," Joanna called.

I turned. She was looking at a formed rock circle for a fire.

"How did you get the rock circle done so fast?" she asked. In her arms, she carried a handful of sticks and dropped them in the center of the large rock ring.

"I didn't - " I paused. "Laeddin." It had to be. He'd done it for me. "I'll help you collect more firewood."

"Thanks, but why are you smiling?" Joanna had a curious look on her face.

"Oh, I didn't realize." I giggled, surprising myself, and put both hands over my mouth and nose.

Abernathy opened his eyes. "Jasmine, what are you up to?"

"Nothing. I just discovered something about myself."

"Is that so?" the dragon asked.

I didn't respond, but checked on our little group.

Abernathy seemed content to let me go without answering his question.

It was dark and the sky shone clear. Millions of bright stars twinkled above.

We set up our shelters and started a fire. Adam, who hadn't said much since the dragon landed, still kept to himself.

He sat beside Joanna, staring at the flames licking the wood like a

hungry animal.

I had no way to guess his thoughts, but couldn't help thinking of the man I knew.

It occurred to me that time and choices really could change a person. Adam was proof of that.

Joanna seemed content, at peace even. I admired the way she handled all of life's challenges. Nothing seemed to bother her.

I wondered if her lack of fear was because of righteous purpose or that she was coocoo for coco puffs.

OceanofPDF.com

A RAINBOW

CHRISTOPHER SAT NEXT TO ME, our backs facing Abernathy, who had gone back to sleeping.

They hadn't been able to kill a deer, or even find one, though Adam mentioned wolf and deer tracks.

Adam and Joanna ate food from their packs.

Chris and I didn't have any, and that was okay. It wasn't necessary.

Abernathy had mentioned celebrating my birthday, but he snored softly as though he didn't remember that we had plans.

I'd heard plenty of stories from my mom about him over the years. For the dragon, sleeping wasn't out of character.

Celebrating with Adam, Joanna, Abernathy, and Chris would be nice, but I wouldn't mind if we didn't celebrate at all.

Nothing could compare to what Troy did for me.

Making the unicorn blood cake and proposing marriage.

My heart sank for a moment at the thought of him. How I missed him. But then I remembered the vision Laeddin showed me. He let me see my future. And what a future it would be. Everything was going to be okay. I would beat Sharra. I would marry Troy and we would have children.

My future seemed so bright in comparison to the present. But the only way to get there was by doing what had to be done here and now, and that meant getting the last two pieces of the crown.

A surge of urgency lifted me off my feet. "We should go," I said startling the others, including Abernathy who lifted his head mid snore.

"It's late," Adam said. "We don't want to travel in the dark, especially with the wolves so close." He picked up a stick and stuck it

in the fire, watching the end burn.

"Right, I get that, but Christopher and I can fly there on Abernathy." I glanced at the dragon to see what he thought of the idea.

"I think we should wait until morning," Abernathy said, smacking his lips.

"Fine. Then I think I'll go to sleep." I patted Christopher's shoulder as I passed him.

"Hang on," Abernathy said, readjusting. "I still need to give you your birthday present."

Adam stood, pulling Joanna up with him as though he were threatened.

"What's wrong, mi amour?" Joanna gave Adam a concerned look.

"Nothing. Just making sure that thing doesn't squash you or burn you to a crisp."

Abernathy barked a laugh. "I won't squish anyone, Adam Henry." He smacked his lips. "Jasmine, princess of Sharra, do you trust me?"

"Of course."

His throat vibrated, almost like a purr.

I took that to mean he was happy and that made me smile.

"Good," he said. "I'm going to put out the fire for a moment, so I need everyone to move to the side of me out of the way."

Adam and Joanna moved, as did Christopher and me.

Abernathy faced the fire and blew with a force like a gale wind until the flames went out, leaving us in darkness, except for the stars. "Jasmine, please come over here."

"It's difficult to see," Adam said.

"Not for long," Abernathy replied.

I could see just fine and went over to stand directly in front of the dragon.

"Now hold still," he said.

"Okay." A shudder of nervousness ran through me. I had no idea what was about to happen.

Abernathy took another deep breath and sent a blast of fire at me.

I gasped in fear, thinking I would be charred crispy. The dragon's fire hit me, but it didn't hurt. "What is this?" Abernathy's flames danced along my skin, burning away my clothes. There was heat, of course, but it wasn't unbearable.

"What are you doing to her?" Adam asked, taking a step forward, but unable to move further. It was an instinct to protect, even if he didn't like me. It was nice to see that his kindness and courage went deeper than just protecting Joanna, though she came first.

"Watch," Abernathy said when he stopped sending fire at me.

The flames continued to lick all over me until my body was engulfed. My terror subsided and as I watched, the flames changed from red's, orange's, and yellow's to the colors representing the seven magics. It was beautiful.

"What does this mean?" I asked, my eyes wide with interest.

"That the magic and strength you were born with is still there. You have the power within you - all that you need and more."

"But my wings - " I began.

"Were an extension of you, yes, but you can see the seven magics still reside inside of you," he went on.

Tears filled my eyes. The colorful flames were proof. "Thank you, Abernathy," I said.

"You're welcome. I thought it important for you to physically see all that you possess on the inside is still there."

I nodded, wiping away my tears.

Acknowledging Christopher, he added. "You'd better be ready to cover her up once the flames goes out."

"Oh, absolutely." He ran over to our shelter and came back with

my cloak.

"Happy birthday, Jasmine." Abernathy turned away, resting his head on his paws, going back to sleep.

I shook my head, deciding I agreed with my mom. I liked Abernathy, in spite of his quirkiness.

"What am I looking at?" Adam asked softly, his shock evident in his voice.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Joanna smiled wistfully.

I smiled back, unable to speak.

"Sure, but how? Why?" Adam shook his head. "I feel like nothing makes sense anymore."

"For me, it's as if life finally does makes sense." She snuggled against Adam's chest. "That probably is confusing to you, but in comparison to the visions I receive, this is extraordinary, and I feel somewhat normal." She kissed him gently on the lips.

Adam hugged her. "My Red, I don't understand your visions, but I respect them because they are part of you, and I love you."

"I love you, too."

The flames surrounding me died and I turned away from Joanna and Adam. Christopher had my cloak and wrapped it around my shoulders. "Thanks," I whispered. Turning back to Joanna and Adam, I said, "I'm turning in. "Night."

"Night," Adam said.

Joanna ran over and hugged me. "Good night, my friend." She kissed my cheek. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," I said, and watched as she went back over to Adam.

With his arm around her, they walked over to her shelter and went inside.

"Night, Abernathy."

The dragon grunted a response and then began snoring.

I went to the tent. Christopher held the tent flap open and I went inside.

"Let me know when you're decent," he said.

"Will do." I quickly put on my other pants and a white shirt. I didn't have another pair of boots, which was unfortunate, but I'd worry about that in the morning. "You can come in," I said, going over to my blankets and laying on top.

Christopher came in. "You've had a busy day," he said, falling into a sitting position beside me.

I laid back. "Yeah."

"Who knew you had a rainbow inside of you?" He smirked.

I couldn't hold back a smile. Hope burned within for the first time in a long while. "Not me," I said.

"You still have the seven magics in you," Christopher said. "The power is still there," he added reiterating.

"I guess so."

"You are more powerful than you believed." Christopher studied me like I was an odd bird.

"I think you're right." I stared up at the ceiling, thinking about how far he and I had come since I first met him all those years ago. "What do you do for the vampires?"

"That's a weird question," he said.

"I mean I know your job description. You're in charge of the vampires, but what do you normally do when you aren't going on weird quests with me?"

"I help vampires in whatever capacity they need. I also make sure they stay out of trouble." He lay down beside me.

"Oh? You must have some stories," I said, closing my eyes.

He chuckled easily. "Oh yeah. The other day, I had to deal with a vamp in love with a chayot."

"Yikes. How did that end?" My mom had stories about Gabe and

the chayot. They were all about the humans and most despised supernaturals, especially vampires.

"The angels wanted to kill the female vampire as well as the love-sick chayot, but I convinced them that it was possible for them to love each other, keep their secrets, and obey the rules."

"It was that easy, huh?" I couldn't believe it, surprised he didn't have to share a horror story.

"Well, no it wasn't that easy. I nearly had to tell your mother we would be going to war with the chayot. It almost became a real life Romeo and Juliet, but I helped their leader to see that it would all be fine, and he grudgingly agreed to let the couple alone."

"Sounds intense."

"It was, but I enjoy helping the vampires out."

My heart softened. "What about you? Any vampires who've caught your eye?"

He laughed again. "Let's not talk about me." He sat up and pulled something from his pocket. "Here."

"What is it?" I took what he held. It was wrapped in fabric and tied with twine.

When I undid the bow, the fabric fell open to reveal a dragon carved out of wood. I gasped. "Christopher." I held it up, studying the perfectly carved scales and the wings that reminded me of Troy. "You made this?" It was a question, but I knew this was what he'd been carving earlier.

"Yes. Do you like it?" He gave me a soft smile.

"I love it." I hugged him as tears threatened. "So much." I sat back on my bedding and looked at him. "This is the best gift," I said, wiping at my eyes.

He lay back down. "If you're happy with dragon boy, then I'm happy for you," he said. He was sincere but sad and again I thought about how much I wanted him to have his own happily ever after.

"I am happy with dragon boy," I said and laughed. "He asked me to marry him." It felt good to tell someone.

"And you said yes?" He closed his eyes, but I heard the pain.

"I did."

He rolled onto his side, away from me. "Then I guess we better get him back in one piece."

"And my parents too," I added, laying down, clutching the dragon against my chest.

"Happy birthday, Jasmine."

"Thanks, Chris."

OceanofPDF.com

HER VISIONS

IN THE MORNING, Abernathy offered to give us a ride to the chateau. I wanted to say yes. Adam wanted us to say yes as well. He was so done with Chris and me. But Joanna wanted to stay with us. She wanted to see it through to the end. And whatever Joanna wanted, Adam made happen. I wanted Joanna to stay with me as well. So I thanked Abernathy, but told him we would ride.

"Very good, vampire. But remember what I said."

I knew he meant Arthur and especially Sharra. "I will."

The dragon flew away, his large golden wings sparkling in the sunlight, like an apparition in the clouds. I watched him go feeling only a little sadness. Mostly I was ready to complete my mission. Get all of the crown pieces and go after Sharra.

Joanna urged Adam to pick up the pace. I went along happily, in an effort to get us to the chateau sooner rather than later. That day and the next went by without any incidence.

Chris and I mostly kept to ourselves, even during breaks.

I could tell Joanna had more questions, but she didn't seek me out. I knew it had to do with Adam. They spoke often, mostly about me and Christopher, and all they had witnessed the last few days. They both agreed the dragon was incredible.

The biggest strain between them was that Joanna wanted to see our journey through to the end, and Adam did not.

During our afternoon break the following day, I heard Joanna tell Adam about her latest vision. She'd had it the night before. An angel came to her and told her the time would soon come that she would need to lead France.

"What do you think of her visions?" Christopher asked. He'd

obviously been listening in on their private conversation, same as me.

"I believe her and I believe in her. Joanna is eccentric, but she isn't crazy. I feel we could've been sisters had we been born in the same time - and to the same parents. It's like she's me without the vampire abilities, the wings, or the magic. If she can do what she does now and will do in the future without all I have, then surely I can do what I need to do. It's possible." I paused, leaned over and smacked him on the arm. "Especially since I have you to help me out." Memories of what Laeddin showed me yesterday came back, sending a jolt of happiness into my heart. I could do this.

"Thanks, Jasmine. I appreciate the vote of confidence." He smiled. "I'm determined not to let you down."

"I know you won't."

Adam turned around in his saddle. "We will be at the chateau by tomorrow afternoon." He trotted his horse off the trail and over to some random shade trees. Three of them stood in the center of an open field. The stream still ambled by not to far from the trees. "Let's take a break," he said and climbed off his horse.

I wanted to continue on and brought my horse to a stop.

Adam noticed and sighed. "The horses need to rest, Jasmine."

"Fine." I nodded, urging my horse over to the trees. Once they were tethered and happily snacking on wild grass, Joanna and I went to the stream and filled some containers for the horses as well as ourselves.

"Are you nervous now that we are close to Chinon?" Joanna sipped some water from her hands.

"A little," I admitted.

She smiled. "Did you ever think when you first started this quest that you'd wind up here? She stood., rubbing her hands along her arms.

"Not in my wildest dreams," I admitted.

"But it's okay, right? That you're here with me?" For the first time, I

saw a look of concern cross her face.

"It's better than okay." I set down my water and wiped my hands on my pants. "I'm especially grateful I had the chance to meet you."

"I feel the same way." She hugged me.

It surprised me how physical she was. When I was younger, I studied Joan of Arc. From what I read, I believed her to be more guy than girl, but she was totally girly and she loved to fight, wear pants, and do all the things a man could do. "You remind me a lot of myself," she said, meeting my eyes.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"We should be going." Adam came over. He glanced at Joanna and then at me. "You two really do make a pair." I saw a glimmer of a smile pull on his lips before he cleared his throat. "We have a lot of ground to cover before nightfall."

I patted Joanna's arm, picked up the water and carried it over to the horses. When they had their fill and Joanna and Adam ate a snack, Christopher climbed on his horse and patted the horse's neck. It whinnied in response. "Who's a good boy? Huh. Who's a good boy?" Christopher asked in a soft voice.

I shook my head and got on my horse. "Who's a good boy?" I patted my horse the way Christopher had.

"Um, yeah." He cleared his throat and laughed. "Your horse is a girl," he said.

"Really?" I peeked at the horse's undercarriage. "How can you tell?"

"Surely you know how to tell a difference between a boy and a girl?" He chuckled again.

"Oh, right. Fine." I looked away, embarrassed. "Yes, I know."

"You sure?"

"Stop it." I giggled.

"Let's go, then," Adam said.

Adam and Joanna and their horses got back on to the trail.

Christopher and I went after them.

"We'll be there soon," Christopher began. "Are you ready for what you have to do when we get there."

"Yes. Of course. I'll have to find what I'm looking for. That could take another week." I hadn't meant to sound so frustrated, but I hadn't realized I was upset until the words came out.

"There must be a way to speed up the process?" Christopher's voice was quiet.

"Well, in the past I've been able to sense it when I'm close, but I have to get close." I shook my head. "What if there are miles and miles of tunnels under the chateau? That's what I'm worried about."

He reached over and patted my hand. "It'll all work out."

"I gu - "

Three Locanis appeared to the right of us, their enormous bodies rushing to cut us off from Joanna and Adam. "Hang on," I said to Christopher as I rode over to Crayith. "What's wrong?"

"It's Gilved. We found him last night. He was dead. Drained of all blood." As he spoke, he growled, baring his teeth.

"Oh, no. Crayith I'm so sorry." There was no point asking what happened. If he was drained of blood, then it had to be a vampire. "I hope you don't think Christopher or I had anything to do with that."

"That's exactly what we think." He bent his head, ready to attack.

"We didn't," I said as my terrified horse reared and backed up.

Christopher was suddenly beside me. Before I had a second to think, using his super speed, he slid in front of me, and uppercut Crayith in the mouth, sending the wolf flying backward.

I snapped out of it just as Emery came at me, her teeth bared and the hair on her neck raised. "Stop," I shouted as I put Emery in a chokehold. "I can promise you; we did not do what you're suggesting." A quick glance revealed Adam and Joanna were far enough ahead they didn't know what was going on with us and I was glad. I didn't

want them getting hurt.

"It doesn't matter which of you blood suckers did it," she said as she snapped her teeth, trying to get away. "All of you deserve to be destroyed."

Crayith righted himself and circled me and Emery. "Let her go, Jasmine or I'll shred you."

"I told you we cannot die," I said.

Christopher sent the other Locanis into a heap and ran over to me. Crayith turned and snapped at him. "Well now that's not entirely true, is it?"

I loosened my grip on Emery, releasing her. She trotted over to Crayith. The Locanis leader faced Christopher while Emery kept her focus on me.

"It's rarely accomplished," Christopher began. "So I would suggest you stop now, or I'll have to stop holding back and destroy you."

"Keep talking, leech," Crayith said. "She told us how to kill you."

"She?" That confused me.

Crayith went over and nudged the other Locanis up. Emery joined him and the three of them stalked toward us.

Just then, Joanna looked back and saw what we were dealing with. She shouted to Adam before turning her horse and coming back for us.

"Don't hurt the humans, please," I said to Crayith.

"We won't." He shook his head in obvious frustration. "If it wasn't you, then it was the vampire, Arthur. Gilved is dead and was tossed aside like he meant nothing. We cannot stand for that. He needs to pay. You all do. The sooner the world is rid of vampires, the better."

"I believe that is why we were sent to this realm," Emery said, grinning manically. "To destroy all of the bloodsuckers."

If they only knew.

"Joanna, stay back. Don't go near them," Adam yelled as he urged

his horse to move faster.

"What if we help you find Arthur and bring him to justice?" Joanna asked from behind.

Her sword was drawn and her long read hair had fallen from its braid so that it fell around her face like a bright, red fire. She looked fierce, as though she could take on the world. In that moment I believed she could right any wrong. Conquer any injustice. More than anything, I wanted to follow her.

Crayith noticed too. He straightened, and a hushed reverence came of him and the other two wolves. "What do you have in mind, warrior?" he asked her.

"We will find Arthur, have him arrested, and make sure he never sees the outside of a jail cell for the rest of his days." She bowed. "You have my word."

Crayith nodded. "I believe that is your intention, but you must understand something about your companions. They aren't what you believe them to be."

Joanna stood up straight, relaxing her sword. "What do you mean?"

Adam came up beside her. He held the reins of his horse as it strained to get away. Adam didn't seem to notice, just fought harder to keep the horse in check. "You shouldn't make promises you cannot keep, Red," he said.

She gave him an intense look that said it all. "I will keep my promise to them or die trying."

Adam allowed his shoulders to slouch a moment. "Very well, Joanna." He straightened, then faced the wolves. "I am with Joanna. We will find Arthur and bring him to justice." He stuck his sword in the ground in front of him and knelt on one knee. "You have my word."

"Yes," I agreed. "We will do what it takes. Christopher is a Hunter. Between all of us, we can find and defeat Arthur."

"But first we need to find him," Christopher said, the voice of reason.

"We can help with that," Emery howled.

Crayith joined in. "Follow us."

OceanofPDF.com

KING ARTHUR

WE LET the wolves track Arthur until we came to a thick forest just outside the city of Vaucouleurs. It was nearly midnight. Millions of stars shone in the night sky. When we reached the forest edge, Crayith and the other wolves stopped.

"He's in the village," Crayith said. "I can smell him."

Christopher leaned forward. "I can hear him. Jasmine, we need to get in there." He stepped from the trees.

"Agreed." I turned to Joanna. "Stay here. We'll be back." I paused. "Please. It isn't safe for you to come with us."

She wanted to resist. I could see it on her face. Finally she nodded. "Are you sure? Adam and I can be of great help."

Adam looked uncomfortable. "I feel partly responsible for bringing him out with us."

"Don't worry about it. We'll handle the situation. Stay with Crayith." I looked at the lead wolf. "You'll make sure no harm comes to them?"

"You have my word." The wolf bowed.

"Thank you." I followed after Christopher. He reached the edge of the village and was trying to act casual, although he wasn't doing a very good job. There was only one other person outside and he was retching behind a water barrel. Also, Christopher was tall and lean and looked like an Adonis. Like the town Adam and Joanna came from, this village was small. It smelled of burning wood and animal droppings. "Where is he?" I asked when I came up alongside him.

"There." He pointed up on the roof of the building. Music poured from the ground floor entry. "It's a tavern." He stopped and faced me. "Why don't you let me handle this alone?"

I hadn't shared my beliefs about who Arthur was, but in that moment, I got the feeling he already knew. "What are you going to do?" I knew Joanna wanted to bring Arthur to justice, but the only way to do that without killing a vampire was to place it in a tomb and starve it.

I'd seen the inside of the mountain called Athwana Meyana. It was an elfish term meaning Dark Soul's Sleep.

Within, the mountain was filled with vampires and other supernatural creatures who had done a great wrong. The tomb was their justice.

The creatures weren't dead, but they weren't alive either.

My mom said it was an endless torment.

I shuddered as I thought about what that must be like. I hoped I would never find out.

My mom took me to the mountain and showed me inside once.

Sharra had done the same.

It seemed like the right time to voice my concerns about Arthur. "I believe Arthur is the same vampire Sharra wakened from the tomb."

"You think?"

I told him what I'd remembered. He listened intently. "All the more reason I should go after Arthur alone."

"No. Chris, I'm not going to let you do that."

"Jasmine, I know you want to help and I appreciate that, but you're eighteen years old. I've been dealing with vampires for nearly fifty years."

I placed a hand on my hip and was about to say more, but there was a scream.

"Please, stay here." He ran into the building where the scream came from.

I waited several minutes, feeling uncomfortable. Using my vampire hearing, I tried to find Christopher's voice among the patrons in the

building he'd gone into.

It was difficult, but I finally heard him. It sounded like he was on the roof.

Then I saw him. He was standing near the edge.

"Come on, Arthur. Let the human go," Christopher said.

There was a cracking sound and I knew Arthur broke the human's neck. Anger boiled through my veins. This guy needed to be put away.

"I thought you were using Lance to feed. What happened to him?" I heard Christopher ask.

"The Locanis killed him." Arthur tossed the dead human off the roof.

I ran and caught him before he hit the ground. His eyes were open and stared at nothing. "I'm sorry," I whispered, closing them.

"Didn't you kill one of theirs?" Christopher returned.

"I did, but it wasn't my intention," Arthur growled.

"And what was your intention? Keep him as a pet?"

"Perhaps. I'll guess you'll never know." Arthur laughed but it wasn't one of mirth. It chilled my veins. "Now I suggest you let me go or I might have to go after your little vampire girlfriend. And you don't want to see what I'll do to her."

"I don't think you understand who you're dealing with, Arthur. Do as I say and this doesn't have to be painful." Christopher's voice sounded lethal.

Their conversation wasn't going to end well.

I knew Christopher could handle himself, but I didn't want to leave anything to chance. I refused to lose another that I cared about.

And over the past few days I truly had come to care about Christopher. After setting the dead man down carefully, I used my vampire speed and ran away from the building.

Turned and gauged how high I would need to jump to land on the roof. I could do it. At least I used to be able to.

Arthur was laughing again.

He and Chris circled each other.

I watched as Arthur went after Chris, but the Hunter moved out of the way at the last minute and got Arthur by the neck.

"Good, but not good enough." Arthur slipped from Christopher's grasp. "Surely you must know who I am. Have you never heard of King Arthur of the round table?"

"Your history means nothing to me." Christopher went after Arthur but the vampire dashed out of the way, jumping off the roof and onto the ground with a thud. He studied me, his eyes narrowing with malice. "Vampire girl."

"Arthur you've broken the law and must be put down," I said, trying to sound like the princess I was.

"Surely you don't think I care about whatever law you're talking about. I work for the Vampire Queen, Sharra, and she has no such law. In fact, she believes we should be ruling this realm as well as our own land. And that means if I need a feed on a frail human or a werewolf, then so be it."

For a moment, I forgot I was back in time. He was right, of course. During this century, Sharra had ruled, not my mom. From what I learned, Sharra cared only for vampires.

"Why don't you join me? Together we can have a great time roaming the world, taking what we want." His eyes narrowed further. "Strange, though." His head tilted to the side. "Sharra would've had to change you, yet I smell no lingering humanity. Makes me wonder how old you are." He crossed his arms, waiting for me to respond.

While he was talking Christopher jumped off the roof and worked to get behind Arthur.

I decided to keep the vampire talking. "As a human, you believed in equality and cared deeply for all men and women as long as they were honest, forthright and courageous. Why have you changed so much?" I kept my hands at my sides, trying to seem relaxed.

He snorted. "I know what you're doing. I know Christopher is behind me and that you're trying to stall, but it doesn't matter. I will answer your question." He gave me an odd smile. "The reason is simple. Lance. He came to Camelot, stole the trust of my men, and the heart of my dearest Guinevere." He closed his eyes a moment. "As you might imagine, I was devastated that one man could cause so much of an upheaval in a land and a kingdom, especially since I believed their hearts and minds to be true." He shook his head. "But Sharra showed me it's impossible for such a thing to exist. Every human has evil within them, including me, and given the proper motivation, that evil will take over."

I thought about his words. "You may be right, but that doesn't give you the right to destroy humanity before they have the opportunity to change, to become who they were meant to be."

"It gives me every right." His face contorted in a ferocious sneer. "Now I'm done talking." He whirled on Christopher, grabbed him by the neck, and sank his teeth into one of Christopher's shoulders.

A look of surprise came over the Hunter, but he quickly squashed that and began to fight, kicking and punching, but Arthur hung on.

He was stronger than Christopher.

As I stood there frozen, the fight slowly went out of Christopher. If I didn't do something, Christopher would be drained of blood and while he wouldn't be dead, he wouldn't be alive either.

At the thought, the frustration I felt turned to fury. He would not harm Christopher. I ran forward and with power I didn't know I possessed, pushed Arthur away from Chris. "Stop," I shouted.

Arthur wiped his mouth, eyeing me shrewdly. "Fine. I'll take your blood instead." He came at me. His speed had increased and I guessed it was from Chris's blood. Arthur grabbed my shoulders. I shoved against his chest, but he was strong and pulled me to him. I watched his fangs grow and knew he would sink his teeth into my neck in moments. I glanced at Christopher. He was greatly weakened by the

blood loss and was still on his knees.

The tips of Arthur's fangs pierced my skin. Revulsion came over me. Could I stop him? All of the confidence I felt since meeting Joanna waned slightly.

"Jasmine, are you well?" I recognized Joanna's voice. I couldn't let Arthur hurt her or Adam. If I didn't do something now, they would both be killed. Arthur wouldn't spare them.

My fury built into a white-hot wrath.

Abernathy's words came to mind: I have the power within.

At that thought, the seven magics rushed to the surface and I knew what I needed to do.

"You will not harm another creature," I said quietly, and sank my fangs into his bare flesh where his neck met his shoulder.

He let out a surprised gasp, his fangs momentarily leaving me. In that moment, I grabbed hold of him, yanking him to me, and drank as though I'd been starved for centuries. I would drink him dry.

His head came up and he fought against me. "Let go of me," he cried, using all of his force, but I had the power of the seven magics at my full disposal. That meant I was stronger, faster, and more well equipped to handle Arthur or anyone. In that moment I thought I might even be able to defeat Sharra. A mangled growl escaped my throat and I sucked harder.

His blood tasted like Christopher's, but I also tasted new blood. I guessed it must've been from the human and the Locanis. The shifter's magic was in there too. Different. And while I wouldn't say it was gross, it reminded me a lot of the taste of troll blood.

Arthur's body weakened. His hands went slack. I nearly had him drained. It wouldn't be too much longer. I opened my eyes and saw Christopher watching me. His eyes shone with profound curiosity and I wondered why, until I saw that my body emanated the same glow as what Abernathy had done to me a few nights ago. The seven magics were pouring out of me.

I was surprised and my confidence grew as I sucked the rest of the blood from Arthur's body. When I finished, I withdrew my fangs, holding Arthur's body away from me. His eyes were closed, and his body was ashen. He looked empty, like a husk.

Revulsion overwhelmed me and I thought I might throw up.

Christopher noticed and came up behind him. "Let me take him." He grabbed Arthur under the arms and I let go.

"Where are you taking him?" I stepped back, feeling lightheaded. I'd never drained a vampire before.

"To Sharra." He glanced beyond me.

I turned to see Joanna, Adam, Crayith, Emery, and the other Locanis watching me. Looks of horror, disgust, surprise, and fear sat on their faces. Even Joanna was scared and unsure.

"I won't be gone long. I'll be back by morning." He looked like he wanted to say more, but with the audience, decided against it. Instead, he turned, and holding Arthur took off.

I knew as a Hunter, he had a way to get into the realm of Sharra without the necklace Silindra gave me, so I let him go.

The others stayed in place, like they were waiting for me to make the first move. I didn't know what to think. By the looks of them, they didn't want to be around me. Making a split decision, I ran into the woods, passing them as I went, and didn't stop until I came to a clearing on the other side.

"Abernathy," I called. "I need you." He said he could hear me. I leaned against one of the trees and waited.

My mind ran over all that I had done as I dropped down in the dirt and closed my eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

I'M A MONSTER

FROM WITHIN MY MIND, I witnessed Sharra torturing Troy.

Troy screamed. His body kept shifting from human to dragon form.

"Now tell me you don't love Jasmine. Tell me you wish to see her dead and I'll let you live," Sharra said.

"No," he said through clenched teeth.

Sharra touched the orb on the tip of her staff to Troy's abdomen. He screamed again, writhing in pain. His arms were in shackles and a large chain hung them up above his head. She went to him and cut a line along his neck with one of her nails.

"Stop it," I shouted, reaching out for him, though I didn't know where they were and I probably wasn't even in the same realm.

Sharra turned like she heard me.

She wore all black, her collar lace, and it came to just under her chin.

"Jasmine. It's so good of you to come. Look at Troy. You can't want him to suffer so much. Hurry, dear, or he'll be dead before you can bring the gems to me."

"You promised that we could trade," I said, though I was hesitant. "The crown for Troy and my parents. You promised." Wetness from my eyes fell on my cheeks.

She gave me a cruel smile. "I think even if I killed Troy, you'd still come and trade your parents for the crown. The half dragon dying won't change that." She cut him across the forehead. Blood dripped into his eyes.

"I'm coming Troy," I said, hoping he could see me. "I'm coming and I will save you." As I spoke, I felt my body fill with the seven magics and radiate from me.

Sharra turned from Troy, and she fully focused on me. "What's this?"

MY EYES OPENED IN A FLASH. It was still dark outside.

If possible, it felt even darker than before. I sat up. It immediately became clear the reason why. Abernathy had arrived and lay beside me.

His giant body giving off immense warmth and blocking out any light.

"Abernathy," I said, standing, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"Jasmine. You called for me?"

"Yes." I sighed in relief. "Thank you for coming."

"Where's the Hunter? Why has he left you alone?"

I quickly explained all that happened since he left. "I think even Joanna is disgusted with me after what I did," I said when I finished.

He nudged me with the tip of his great nose. "Perhaps, but you did what needed to be done."

I nodded. "I know, but she must think I'm a monster and it hurts to think she doesn't like me anymore."

A laugh rumbled deep in his throat and a wisp of smoke escaped his nose. "I understand, but does it matter? You've learned all I hoped you would learn from her and you saved them too. Shall I fly you to the chateau?"

I didn't respond right away, but fell against him, allowing my body and cheek to enjoy the warmth of his scales. Memories of the looks of Adam, Joanna, and the others' faces crossed my mind. The look of abhorrence and fear on Joanna's face was the hardest to take. She'd been able to handle werewolves and dragons, but seeing a vampire drain the life out of another vampire had done her in. I sighed, saddened. "Yes. Thank you, Abernathy," I said, sad I wouldn't get to say goodbye. I climbed up and situated myself at his neck, above his

wings.

"Ready?"

"Yes." Despair over the way things ended with Joanna weighed on me, but I couldn't help the jolt of excitement at the idea of flying again. It'd been too long.

Abernathy must've sensed my eagerness. "You realize all you need to do is believe you deserve your wings more than she does and they'll return to you, right?" He walked to the middle of the clearing. His wings flapped once before we were lifted off the ground.

"So you've said." But I didn't believe him. Or maybe I didn't think I deserved them.

"If only you believed in yourself as much as I do. Then you would be flying on your own right now."

The vision of the future Laeddin showed me appeared in my mind. I had my wings then so I would get them back.

Just believe, I told myself. But nothing happened.

"Very well. Hang on." Abernathy sounded disappointed.

As we flew I looked down at the valley below, searching for Joanna, Adam, and the Locanis. I found Adam, Joanna, and the horses in the middle of the woods. They'd set up camp, but weren't asleep. They sat by each other. Both held their swords as though prepared for a battle. I guessed it was because of me. What I'd done pushed them both over the edge.

"I think you're misreading the situation," Abernathy said.

I didn't answer. It was obvious I wasn't and the dragon was trying to alleviate my melancholy.

In the distance, I saw the city of Chinon. It was much larger than the villages. Dozens and dozens of houses had been erected all around the chateau de chinon, which stood enormous and sprawling in the city's center. Flags danced in the breeze, snapping and cracking lightly.

"Where will you land?" I asked, searching for a good spot.

"There is a garden on the west of the chateau. I can land there though I'll destroy many of the flowers. But you'll be on your own until Christopher returns. I won't be able to stay."

I had a thought. "Why don't you just get close and I'll drop down? Then you won't have to land."

"A very good idea."

Since he'd known about the garden off the chateau, I wondered if he knew more. "Any idea how to get under the chateau?"

"Well, since you asked, yes, I do."

"You're kidding." I hadn't expected him to know the answer.

He chuckled, causing his whole body to rumble. "Where the garden meets the castle there are hundreds of climbing vines crawling up that wall. At the base, near the back corner is a rock, which protrudes just slightly out from the rest. Find it, press it, and a hidden door will be revealed. Get in that way." By the sound of his voice, he was fairly proud of himself.

"And how do you know that? You're too big to have figured it out on your own."

"Well, I'm sure if you think about it, you'll figure it out, not that it matters." I could hear the smile in his voice.

With a burst of affection, I leaned over and hugged him. "Thanks, Abernathy."

"You're welcome."

We came to the garden, which sprawled over nearly the whole quarter of the town. He got low. "Jump, vampire."

"Thanks again. See you soon."

He grunted. I brought my left leg over and slid down off his body. For the briefest moment I fell through the air and had a sensation where I believed I could catch the wind and fly, but I landed on the ground with a thud.

I looked up and waved.

Abernathy came around so that his large head was near mine. "Be quick about it. You aren't the only one in the castle."

I hadn't thought about that. "I will."

The dragon flew away. I ran over to the wall. It was as Abernathy said. Climbing vines covered nearly the entire expanse. I went to the side near the back wall as he said. The greenery was so dense, the foliage made it hard to see the rock that stuck out further than the rest. I searched until sunlight started to shine in the sky.

Any minute, gardeners and others who worked in the castle would be getting up to start their day. I needed to hurry.

"What are you doing?"

I froze a moment, worried I'd been caught, but glanced back and saw that it was Christopher. Relief washed over me. I was happy to see him. "Hi." My body sagged with relief. "Did you handle Arthur?" I asked, going back to running my hand along the wall, hoping to feel the rock Abernathy mentioned.

"I did. He's sealed away and won't be a bother to anyone for a very long time. If we're lucky, forever."

"You know that's not true," I said. In our present Sharra awakened Arthur. He would be back to causing trouble or he already was.

"I know." He crouched down beside me. "So what are you doing?"

"Abernathy told me there was a lever along this wall to open a hidden door that leads under the castle."

"What's it look like?" he asked, searching too.

I shrugged. "He said it sticks out further than the others, but it's difficult to tell with all of these vines."

"Hmmm." He thought a minute and then started at the edge and began running his hand along the base, where the grass met the wall. "Aha," he said, pressing in.

"You found it?"

To answer my question, a door groaned open. It wasn't very tall, but it was wide enough and high enough that we could enter if we bent over.

I gently pushed aside the vines that hid it and stepped inside. There was a stairway that went down deep. "Let's go." I ran down the steps, moving rapidly.

"Don't go too fast. That might effect your special sense or whatever you need to locate the crown."

But I shouldn't have worried. The crown pieces already embedded in my flesh began to burn. I reached the bottom of the stairs and had to choose whether to go left or right. I went right. Immediately, the burning subsided. "This way." I went left.

"How do you know?" Chris followed right behind me.

"The gems. They stopped scorching my skin when I went right. This way they're searing something fierce."

"Got it. Well, then lead the way homing pigeon."

"Nice." I looked back and gave him a dirty look.

The tunnels under the chateau were the same as the other places I'd been to collect the pieces of the crown. It was also a labyrinth. The pungent scent of rotting dirt radiated the strongest along with other putrid smells I didn't want to think about. It was pitch black. The sounds of beetles, spiders and other creepy crawling things skittered all around us.

I reached the end of a tunnel and had to make another choice. Going right, the gems burned more strongly.

"Someone is coming," Christopher said. He still walked behind me because the corridor was too slight for the two of us to walk side-by-side.

"Let's hurry up then." I sped up. Halfway down was a door. The jewels burned so hot my eyes watered. "Goodness. Ouch." It felt like knives stabbed into my head. "The crown piece is in here."

OceanofPDF.com

PAIN IN MY HEAD

I PUSHED OPEN the door and went inside. "Wow, these really hurt. It's never done this before."

Christopher took my arm. "Maybe because you're nearly finished collecting them all?"

"I don't know." I fell to my knees.

"Whoever is down here with us will be upon us soon. I'm going to go slow them down. Hurry." He went to the door and ran into Adam. "What are you doing here?"

Joanna pushed past him and came over to me. "Hey, Jasmine." She looked devastated.

"Joanna?" I held onto my head with one hand. "I thought you - "

"I was. Afraid of you, if that's what you were going to say. And I thought you a monster." She shook her head. "I'm guessing some of your kind are, but not you. Just as Ansel Grafton is a human monster, Arthur was a bloodsucking monster, but not you." She knelt beside me. "I'm sorry, Jasmine."

"No." The pain in my head was so strong I thought I might die. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

"Never you mind. Just tell me how I can help."

Adam and Christopher were still talking in the doorway, but because of the pain I couldn't hear what they said.

"Jasmine?" Joanna asked.

"I need to dig up a box," I said.

"Okay." She looked around the room. "Where should I start?"

"I'm guessing right where I'm kneeling." I tried to stand. Joanna helped. She moved me out of the way. With the sharp edge of her sword, she stabbed into the dirt.

"Joanna, what are you doing?" Adam asked.

"I know, Adam. Treating my sword like this is blasphemy, but it has to be done. You can sharpen the sword when we return home." She didn't look at him, but kept digging while she spoke.

In what seemed like record time, Joanna had the box. "Don't open it," I said when she went for the latch. "Please," I added, sorry I spooked her.

"Okay." She handed it to me.

"Thank you for your help, but I need to do the rest." I looked at Christopher for help. I didn't think the assassin would go after anyone except me, but I didn't want to take any chances.

"Let's go. Jasmine needs some privacy." Christopher tried to round Adam and Joanna up. Joanna moved to stand next to Adam, but they wouldn't leave.

Christopher shrugged. "Do your thing, Jasmine."

Black spots danced in front of my eyes. If I didn't hurry I thought I might pass out. "Just stay back and no matter what happens don't interfere. I've done this before and it'll be fine."

Joanna looked worried. "Okay," she said.

Adam nodded, but looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here. Soon enough, he would realize the supernatural was more than just an irritation. He would become one of us. As would Joanna.

I opened the latch. As expected, the assassin appeared.

Blades formed in my hands with along with the lightning.

"Welcome Jasmine. I've been expecting you," the assassin said.

"Will you tell me where the final piece of the crown is buried?" I hoped so. I didn't know if I could win a battle. The throbbing pain pierced so strong; my limbs shook. I tried to stand, but my legs wouldn't support me.

"I was created to protect the elven crown at all costs. Though code demands I do my best to slay you, I will tell you where it lies." He

came forward and whispered the location in my ear.

"Why am I in so much pain?" The words slurred as they came out.

"It is because the crown is nearing completion. After you retrieve this piece, there is only one more. Soon you will possess all the power and your body must be prepared. The pain will subside in a few days' time."

That was good to know.

"But now we must fight. And you must destroy me. Lift your swords." He stood back and raised his.

I followed, but it was difficult. His blades came down on mine. The assassin knocked me to the ground. This wasn't good. The only way my future could come to pass was if I was there to be part of it. Digging deep, I drove away the pain and pushed back with my swords.

"That's it." He whipped around, sending one booted foot against my cheek. My head snapped and I fell to the ground.

Christopher came over. "Jasmine."

"Do not help me," I said through gritted teeth. "I must be the one to defeat the assassin."

Christopher helped me stand. "I get that, but it's my job to keep you safe. If I feel like there's even a chance you can't defeat him, I'll step in."

"No," I said. "Stay back, damn you." I glared, hoping that would convince him. "I mean it." Bucking my courage, I turned back to the assassin. "Let's finish this."

"Agreed, vampire." He dropped his swords to his sides. "I have fought enough."

At the opening, I ran forward, stabbing both swords into the place where the assassin's heart should be. He fell to his knees. I withdrew my blades from his chest, and then sliced off his head without any hesitation. He fell back, turning to dust. When he vanished, so did my

swords.

Without a second thought, I opened the box and picked up the gem. As soon as it touched my skin, it dug in, making its way up my body and to my forehead. The power was palpable. Pain blazed against my skin with such force I could hardly see.

With heavy lids, I turned and studied Joanna. Her features weren't full of fear like they had been before. This time she looked at me with awe. "I hope to be like you someday, Jasmine," she said, stepping forward, and taking my hand.

I tried to smile. "Thank you for seeing our pursuit through to the end. You're the most courageous person I know." My knees buckled and I fell to the ground, dragging Joanna with me. Adam grabbed onto her, keeping her upright. She released my hand, touching Adam's.

"You were very brave," Adam said, a look of puzzled wonder shaping his face.

"Thank you, Professor Pops."

He gave me a strange look, but I couldn't be bothered to understand why.

Christopher raised me with one arm, then walked me to the wall where he left me.

"What are you doing?" Curious I watched as he went over to Joanna and Adam and say something to them before returning to me and lifting me into his arms.

"Take me home, Chris."

"Right away."

I closed my eyes, no longer able to keep them open. "Good-bye," I whispered, then relaxed my face against Christopher's chest. His skin felt cool against the burning heat and I sighed.

One more to go, I thought.

At some point I realized Chris and I were riding Abernathy. He and

the Hunter spoke quietly about things long forgotten. Their talk wasn't of our mission or my destiny, but about things that didn't matter. It almost felt like they were making up and I was glad.

Christopher had betrayed my mom and dad, but he hadn't betrayed me. He'd saved me, helped me, and given me back my vampire abilities. Plus, now we were friends. I would be forever indebted to him.

OceanofPDF.com

25 DAYS UNTIL TOTAL DARKNESS

I WAS BACK IN SALEM. I knew by the way the bed felt beneath me. I also knew I wasn't conscious.

Dreaming maybe.

Of Laeddin.

While my body continued to heal.

Laeddin was still in the past and hiding behind a tree in the forest, watching me as I spoke with Joanna.

Two dark entities appeared and swirled around Laeddin.

"Look, he truly cares for the girl."

"Yes. Isn't it sweet?"

"What's going on? Who are you?" Laeddin asked, spinning in a circle, trying to keep his gaze on both of them at once.

"We are called the Unknowns," one said. They continued to churn and Laeddin spun in a circle, working to keep up.

"Yes, but we are known. You've heard of us, right?"

"I suppose."

"Why did you show the girl her future?" one of them asked. The only thing that made sense about the forms was that they each had two eyes and they blinked languidly.

"Especially when what you showed her isn't true," the other said.

"At least not entirely," responded the first.

"You're making me dizzy. Stop." Laeddin closed his eyes to get his bearings.

"Tell us," they said together.

"I told her what she needed to hear so that she could become the person she needs to be."

"The genie lied."

"How quaint."

"Should we punish him? He's given her an edge. It doesn't seem fair."

"What could we do? Force him into servitude again."

"No," Laeddin shouted.

"He wouldn't like that."

"Apparently not."

"Hmmm, then what should we do?"

"Only time will tell."

"Yes, and we have an eternity."

They laughed in sync as their forms dissipated and the vision shifted.

THE UNKNOWNS WERE in a cave with Laeddin. The genie used a pick-axe to dig into the earth. All around them was the scent of rich soil. Laeddin's breathing was ragged and his heart beat fast.

"Look at him, the poor dear. Should we force him to keep this up? He seems so forlorn without his magic," she said.

"If not this, then what? We need to keep him busy so he doesn't try to escape," he replied.

"Why don't we simply erase his memories and give him a new purpose?" She grinned as she spoke.

He joined in. "Have I told you how much I love the way you think?"

"I believe so," she said, floating away from the genie and toward the other end of the cavern. "But what of the vampire child?" she asked in a whisper.

"She's going to fail. I feel it. All of that power and she won't use it." He shook his head dejectedly.

"Shall we wager?"

"On whether she defeats Sharra or not? Yes. I'm game, but what is the prize for winning?"

"My love. You won't win. I believe she will find the power within when the time is right. If anything, it's all too easy. I believe we should throw another pebble in her pond."

"Interesting. What are you thinking?" He came close, their eyes meeting as their wispy forms became corporeal.

"What about the League of Huntsmen? There are a few of the bloodlines left. We could encourage them to take up arms against the girl."

"You are so bad."

"Then you're in?" she asked breathlessly, excitement permeating from her.

He winked. "Winner gets to decide what we do with the genie."

"Deal."

WHEN I CAME out of it, I sat and looked around. Everything seemed normal. I knew the Unknowns were real, but what I experienced had to be a dream. Laeddin had to be okay.

My body was no longer in pain and I got out of bed. After a quick shower, I dressed in jeans and a tee shirt. A quick glance in the mirror revealed the new gem in my forehead. It shone brightly. I braided my hair and twisted it up in a bun. Went to the closet and grabbed my favorite boots and socks. While I put them on, I noticed Gatsby. The gray cat was curled into a ball on my pillow.

"Hey, kitty kitty." I scratched his head.

He opened one eye. "You're feeling better then?"

"Much." I sat beside him.

He stood and rubbed against my arm. "Glad to hear it." He jumped off the bed and went to the window. It was open and he hopped onto the ledge. "You know where the last piece of the crown is, right?"

"That's right."

"Gonna tell me where it is?"

"I will, but first I need a little time." I knew it was urgent, but while the pain was gone, I still felt exhausted.

"Fine." He walked along the ledge to the edge of my house and jumped onto a nearby tree branch. "I'm glad you're okay, Jasmine. I was worried."

"Thanks." I closed the window and ran down the stairs.

Christopher was sitting on the couch and stood. "You're awake?" He smiled, holding out his arms.

I hugged him. "Yes, and I want to go see my grandfather." I moved around him and opened the front door. "Let's go."

There was a tank with soldiers parked at the end of my driveway.

"Are we allowed to walk around outside?" It looked like the sun would be setting anytime, but it was three in the afternoon.

"Yes." He took my hand, shut the door, and we went down the stairs, heading in the direction of Adam Henry's house.

At the door, I knocked, suddenly feeling nervous. Professor Pops answered. He gave me a giant smile and I jumped into his arms.

There he is, I thought.

My grandfather.

The man I knew and loved.

"You were there, weren't you?" he asked, and I immediately knew he was talking about my visit to France.

"Yes," I said, my eyes watering. "I've missed you," I said when he released me. The smell of cigars clung to him.

"And I missed you." He seemed as anxious as I was to discuss what happened.

"We should talk. I have questions about you, Joanna, and how you became a vampire." I stepped into the foyer and waited.

He chuckled. "Good, because I have answers." He paused. "I think."

"Adam Henry, it's good to see you again." Christopher came in and stood beside me.

Usually Pops would have a dismissive look on his face for Christopher, but this time he gave him a warm smile. "It's good to see you too. Thank you for taking such great care of my granddaughter all those years ago."

"You do remember," I said. Even though I'd been in France yesterday, for Pops, it'd been hundreds of years.

"If we're talking about France, then the answer is yes. Of course I do." Professor Pops shut the door and headed for the kitchen.

Christopher and I followed. I felt a beat of happiness. Everything was going to be all right. Laeddin had shown me my future. I had Professor Pops and Christopher to help me. With them, I could do anything.

Then I remembered the vision or dream. The Unknowns said Laeddin lied. That he showed me only what I needed to see. They made a wager and one of them hoped I would lose. But that couldn't be. Because if it was, then that meant Laeddin was their prisoner and I had to hope that wasn't true.

"Jasmine?" Pops asked, a look of concern on his face.

I shook off the dream. "You know, I thought Joanna was incredible," I said as we made our way into the living room."

"Oh, well she felt the same way about you."

"I want to hear all about it."

OceanofPDF.com

DESPERATE ANXIETY

As I sat in the living room and waited while grandfather took a call, I couldn't help but lose myself in my thoughts and all that happened to get me to this point.

A moment.

That was all it took to define my life and affect the whole world.

When I made the wish all those days ago, I'd been a selfish, spoiled, arrogant child. I wanted to believe I changed since then.

Grown up.

And that all of the moments since then proved I was different, but none of that mattered if darkness consumed the world and Sharra got her way and was able to rule all realms.

Exhaling, I contemplated the space around me, even though I'd been here dozens of time before. The task took my mind off the stress weighing heavily on my shoulders.

Pops' living room was something else.

Large and filled with eclectic furniture.

A wall covered in windows was at our back, the thick red drapes closed.

Christopher and I occupied the extra-large leather sofa while Pops sat in a wingback chair to the right of me.

An ornate grandfather clock stood in one corner telling me I would have to go soon.

Normally, a painting that looked like it came from the crusades hung on the wall in front of me. At the moment though, the painting had divided in two to reveal a television.

On it various news channels were broadcasting the chaos happening around us.

Countries no longer feuded with each other.

They were too busy trying to control their own residents as well as the akuma and rogue supernaturals. Military forces all over the world had their hands full trying to keep peace. The chayot helped too, but even they seemed outnumbered.

The human realm was a mess.

People were looting. Battles had broken out over land and food. It was the same in other realms too, I was sure.

Darkness was coming and no one knew why. People didn't know what to do or where to go.

Before my grandfather got a phone call, we'd been discussing all that was happening in the realms and what we could do.

But we hadn't had a chance to discuss France. Pops hung up and tucked his phone in his pocket, studying me intently.

His glasses balanced on the end of his nose.

I still wondered if he wore the glasses out of habit or if he really needed them to see. As a vampire, he aged very, very slowly.

The man had been alive since the fourteenth century.

"What are you thinking about?" Pops asked after a moment.

"Nothing. Troy." He was constantly on my mind. I couldn't stop fretting about him. I'd worn a scar in my cheek from the constant chewing. My fingers fiddled with the dragon charm carved for my birthday.

"What's that you've got there?" Pops asked.

I showed it to him. "It's a dragon," I said, smiling. "Christopher made it for me."

"You're very talented," he said, speaking to Christopher.

"Thank you, sir." Christopher cleared his throat.

Pops nodded before giving me a look that was filled with both compassion and understanding. "We will find him and save him.

Besides, he's half dragon. He's tough."

Professor Pops picked up his glass filled with amber liquid and took a drink, his eyes flicking from the jewels on my forehead to the way my cheek moved as I gnawed on it. "Are you hurting?"

I snorted internally.

That was a loaded question.

Physically I was fine.

But my insides swirled with desperate anxiety.

Laeddin had shown me an image of my future and it had been wonderful, but according to Pops, Laeddin's magic couldn't be fully trusted since it came from Sharra. Again I thought of the dream. And again I dismissed it. "I'm fine." I crossed my arms, hugging them tight against my torso.

"You sure?" Christopher touched my arm.

I glanced at him, hoping the grimace on my face resembled a smile. "Sure. I'm just ready to get this over with, you know? I want to find the last piece of the crown, defeat Sharra, and rescue my parents and Troy. I want things back the way they were."

"Is that all?" Christopher oozed playful sarcasm, but his eyes remained worried.

I chuckled. "Yes, and more," I admitted.

"Like getting those back?" He glanced at my back and I knew he was talking about my stolen wings.

"Yes." I shuddered at how much I missed them. "Especially those."

He patted my arm. "Good to hear."

My grimace became a genuine smile and I covered his large hand with mine.

"It'll happen. You'll see," he said, every ounce of his face covered with confidence in me.

I nodded, scooting closer to him. Christopher was a friend I treasured and loved. Not romantically. That part of my soul was

reserved for Troy. But Christopher had become like family.

"What do you think of all of this?" Pops indicated the TV as he removed his glasses, setting them on the end table next to his chair. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

On the screen, a newscaster was detailing a story about a man who'd been caught kidnapping children and locking them in cages like animals in an underground bunker. He claimed that if the world ended, he would have a way to continue the human race. There'd been two of all kinds of beasts down there as well. He called his bunker Steven's Ark. "Like Noah's Ark from the Bible," the man said, his hair standing on end like he'd been electrocuted multiple times.

The story made me sick, especially because I knew I was to blame for the craziness happening around us. All because I wanted to be normal and had made a stupid wish. Now the whole world suffered the consequences. "It's awful." I took a deep breath, held it a moment before letting it out. "But I'm going to fix it."

"You will," Pops said softly. "And we're going to help." He indicated Christopher as he spoke. "Aren't we?"

"Without a doubt," Christopher said.

"I know and I'm beyond grateful." I leaned over and took Pops' outstretched hand.

A blaring horn sounded outside, signaling curfew would begin soon. I stood. "We should go."

"I'll do some research on spells to keep the darkness from fully taking over, should we have a need for that. I'm going to reach out to Cindy. She knows more than I do. When it comes to spells, she is the authority."

Happiness shot through me. I missed my aunt Cindy. We weren't related by blood, but she was my mom's best friend. They'd been through a lot together. Now that I thought about it, it surprised me that I hadn't heard from Cindy yet. Her land of Polonias was most likely suffering the same fate as our world. "Have you heard from

Aunt Cindy?"

Pops stood, picking up his glasses and putting them in his pocket. "Yes, it's been a few weeks though, not since the chaos began. She and Gabe were doing okay, just dealing with the darkness creeping in on the kingdom, same as us. She intended to find answers and let me know. It's time I talk to her again. See what she's come up with."

"Thanks, Pops." I stood, hugging him tightly, enjoying the sweet tobacco scent from his pipe. Worry for Cindy added to the weight on my shoulders. I'd been so busy dealing with other things, I forgot about her.

After a few moments, he looked down at me. "I'm sorry I wasn't kinder to you in the fifteenth century. I didn't know you yet, and back then my every waking thought was centered on protecting Joanna." His face fell at the thought of her. Things hadn't ended well for them. The Joan of Arc had gone on to lead her nation's army and had eventually been executed; meanwhile, the Adam Henry she'd known and loved had become a vampire, enslaved to the Vampire Queen. It had taken him a long, long time to break free of her grasp and by the time he managed it, his Joanna was long dead.

I hugged him again. "No need to apologize. I completely understand and I'm glad to have known you then, too. It's helped me see you as more than just my grandfather."

He tapped me on the tip of my nose. "Time for you to get home. Text me when you're inside so I know you're safe, and be sure to lock the doors."

I gave him a look that said I could take care of myself, but he wouldn't have any of that. "I mean it."

"Fine. I will."

Christopher stepped forward and shook Pops' hand. "See you tomorrow, sir."

"Yes, you will." Then he glanced at me. "And you'll tell me where the final piece of the crown is?"

I didn't answer as I made my way to the door.

"She hasn't even told me, though I believe I might know." Christopher crossed his arms, pretending to look hurt.

"Don't worry, we will discuss it in the morning." Outside, I glanced up. The sky was so dark, it was as though an artist had doused it in black paint.

Troy's voice was clear as a bell in my head: I thought you'd never get out of there. I'm glad Pops is okay.

His words in my mind startled me so badly I tripped and nearly fell down the front steps.

Thankfully, Christopher caught me.

"Watch yourself," he said, surprised. As a vampire, clumsiness wasn't part of my nature.

I shrugged, unsure what had just happened. "Sorry. I'm just preoccupied, I guess."

I called in my head: Troy. But there was no answer.

Disappointment washed through me.

Maybe I was just so worried about him that I had begun inventing voices in my head?

I so badly needed to know he was okay.

There hadn't been a moment since he'd been taken that I hadn't thought about him and worried about him.

Christopher chuckled lightly. "It's fine. I understand. Makes me feel like I'm walking next to your mother before she became a vampire."

I gave myself a mental shake, giving him a smile.

There was nothing I could do for Troy until we found the final piece of the crown. But once I had it, nothing would stop me from rescuing him and my parents.

"I don't know what's wrong. But I'm glad you're here to keep me upright." I pushed Christopher playfully.

"It's my pleasure, Jasmine." He paused. "Have you ever heard the jokes they used to tell about your mom?"

"They used to make jokes about her?" That didn't sound pleasant. "Tread carefully, Hunter. Remember, she's my mom."

"They were silly and I never told jokes about her. Quite the contrary, I stood up for her."

Most of the time. Until it really mattered, and then you chose power over her, I thought.

But I didn't say that out loud.

Christopher had made mistakes, but without a doubt I knew he wouldn't betray me.

He had dozens of opportunities to do so but all he'd ever done was help me, and sometimes at great personal cost. "Okay, then let's hear one."

"What's the difference between Snow White and a tree?" He winked, trying not to smile, but his eyes twinkled in the streetlights.

"What?" I asked.

"A tree sways and Snow falls." He covered his mouth as a chuckle escaped his throat.

"That's bad," I said, unable to stop the smile pulling at the corners of my mouth.

"Yes, but you're smiling."

"Only because it was so ridiculous." We reached my house and I unlocked my door before going in. Christopher followed me, closing and locking the door behind him.

"Yeah, that's true." He paused, glancing sheepishly around the room. It was a quaint house, so unlike Professor Pops' in every way. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No." I didn't want to be alone.

"I can sleep on the couch."

I started up the steps to the second floor. "Why? That'll be so

uncomfortable. You can sleep in Lae - " I stopped. It wasn't Laeddin's bedroom any longer. It wasn't anyone's. Sadness swept over me and I couldn't help but think of the first time I'd come to this house. It'd been with him. We'd been like a family for a short time and I was so attracted to him. Between the scent of his blood and his physical attributes, I had acted like a lovesick teenager. But that hadn't lasted long. For one thing, he was old. Really old. I thought we'd been friends, but as he'd said more than once he couldn't truly be friends with his master? Then I met Troy. Things changed rather quickly after getting to know Dragon Boy. I'd eventually freed Laeddin, and Laeddin left. Even though he could've stayed with me if he'd wanted to. Remembering that hurt, but it was what it was. And I certainly wasn't infatuated with the genie any longer. Every part of me belonged to Troy.

My heart squeezed.

"Jasmine?" Christopher came toward me.

"You can sleep in the spare bedroom," I said, shaking away my thoughts as I made my way up the stairs.

"If you're sure, I just might do that. Thanks." He placed his hand on the stair rail and came up a few steps.

"Anytime." I turned and hugged him, forcing myself not to register the incredible scent of his blood pulsing at the vein in his neck. "Good night, Christopher."

"Night." He followed after me. "And don't forget to text your grandfather. The old man might blame me and I'm not in the mood to deal with his wrath."

OceanofPDF.com

DRAGON DREAM

I CLOSED the door to my bedroom, leaning against it. There was so much to do. I still needed to get the final piece of the crown. It was in Sharra - my home. I'd never admit it to Pops or Christopher, but I was nervous to return home again. What would everyone there think of me? It would probably be along the lines of what I thought of myself. That I was a coward. That I sucked as a daughter, a friend. That I was an arrogant, spoiled princess with no clue how to run a kingdom. But I couldn't let my fears stand in the way of what I had to do. I needed to defeat Sharra, which would stop the darkness. Once her spell was broken, the Akuma would vanish, and the world would go back to the way it had once been. I also needed to rescue Troy and my mom and dad. I would do whatever it took to save the people I loved.

Troy's voice entered my mind, accusatory and sad: He's sleeping over?

I jumped, my insides nearly zinging out of my chest as Troy's voice came into my head again, loud and clear. "Troy?" I frantically scanned the room even though I heard his voice in my mind.

Is that really you, or am I finally going crazy? I spoke the words into my mind.

Hearing his voice made me almost not care if I were.

I missed him so damn much.

Troy's voice was there again: It's me, Jazzy Jazz. You're not going crazy.

Tears filled my eyes and a sob cracked against my chest as a tidal wave of relief washed through me.

How are you able to do this? I asked into my mind. Sagged onto my bed and fumbled with my shoes before lying down and closing my

eyes.

I clamped a hand around the dragon carving as Troy's face floated up from my memory - his longer hair, glorious hazel eyes and the shape of his lips.

They were one of my favorite parts of him.

When he kissed me, I felt it everywhere.

Troy answered: It was Sharra who started it. She'd been trying to hurt me, saying all sorts of things, like you and Christopher were together-together -

We aren't. I promise you. Christopher is well aware of my feelings for you. I'm yours and always will be, I said into my mind, interrupting him.

Troy went on as though he hadn't heard me: And that you're drinking his blood and letting him drink from you. She said you loved it and that you love him.

He sighed and that single action nearly broke me.

I remembered the vision I'd seen of Sharra torturing Troy.

The way his body had writhed and the things she said. Commanding him to admit he didn't love me.

I wanted so badly to save him and had felt the seven magics fill me to overflowing. It was like nothing I experienced while awake.

A thought or feeling nagged at the back of my mind, telling me the power was there.

All I had to do was call it forth. If only I knew how.

I'm so sorry, Troy. I said the words into my mind.

Should I tell him? I debated, but only for a moment. He deserved the truth and I wouldn't lie to him.

I went on: But Troy, pieces of her story are true. I do drink from Christopher and he does drink from me.

I cringed as the words filtered into my mind.

Troy's comeback was quick, jilted: You love him.

I sensed his hurt as well as felt it and hurried to correct his misassumption before he could break our mental connection. I responded: Yes, but not in the way you think. I consider him family. He saved me after Sharra took you. I think I might've died if not for him. He rescued me. More than once, actually. But that doesn't mean I feel anything romantic for him. Not even a little bit. I love you so much I ache with wanting you and I always will.

When I finished speaking, I held my breath, watching the clock while I waited for him to respond.

I told him you asked me to marry you, too, I added.

Two full minutes passed before he spoke: I know, he finally said, his voice gravelly.

You do? I asked, releasing a big breath, relieved he didn't seem mad or upset about me drinking from Christopher.

Part of me was surprised as well. How could he know?

Troy continued: Abernathy told me everything.

Wait, your father? Did he rescue you? I asked in my mind.

Troy didn't respond immediately and I thought I mind lose my mind until he finally said: No, he said he can't, but I believe he is just too lazy to do anything hard. Instead, Abernathy appeared in a nightmare. Let me back up. He calls what he did a dragon dream. After I got over the initial distress of seeing his face in my mind, he told me it was time I learned all there is to know about dragon powers.

That had to be scary, I responded.

Sorrow and anger welled up inside me.

If Abernathy could save Troy, why hadn't he? Why not save my mom and dad too? It frustrated me to no end that he had all this power but refused to use it.

Troy went on: Yeah, like I said, it was damn traumatic. But, he

shared a lot of cool things with me and one of them was my ability to telepathically speak with someone I'm connected to.

Like me, I said into my mind and smiled.

Troy answered right away: Yep. I asked him if it would work with you. He said he didn't think so because we aren't related, but that I could try. So, I did, and here we are.

That's the most awesome piece of news I've had in a long time, I responded into my mind. Rolled on my side, facing the window and allowing the full meaning of his words to sink in.

The curtains were open, but it was so dark outside I couldn't see anything, even with my vampire vision.

Sharra and I were connected as well, but I pushed down anything that might allow me to see her. Had that been a mistake?

Perhaps I needed to try harder to connect with her, then I might be able to learn more of her plans.

Troy drew in a ragged breath and said: Right. Because even though I'm trapped in this horrible, smelly hole, I can still talk to you.

Are you all right? I asked.

It was a ridiculous question and I metaphorically kicked myself for asking. Obviously, he was alive and coherent, but definitely not okay.

I tried again: Sorry, dumb question. What did Abernathy say about Christopher and me?

I worked to keep calm, but I was an emotional wreck.

Troy said: It's okay. He told me all about your trip back in time and about why you have to drink his blood. In some of the visions, Abernathy showed you to me. It was wild, like I was seeing through his eyes.

I sat up as my mind raced: Wow. That-that's impressive, I said.

What if I could see my mom and dad in a dragon vision? I didn't dare to hope.

I asked Troy: Do you have dragon vision too? Can I see my parents

through your eyes?

The possibility was more than I could hope for.

Troy answered: I don't know. Not right this second. Sharra took them a while ago and she hasn't brought them back.

What is she doing to them? I asked in my mind, though I was scared to find out.

My guess was that she was torturing them.

Or worse.

Could she kill them?

My dad possessed powers none of us understood. And my mom had believed she killed Sharra eighteen years ago, but she hadn't.

Troy responded with deep sadness in his voice: I honestly don't know, Jazz. But they're tough and they have each other. They will get through this.

I stood and went over to the window. Up close, the trees in Troy's yard became discernable, as well as grass, bushes, and the fence lining the back yard.

Gatsby was walking along the top of the fence, his yellow eyes gazing at me. I raised my hand in greeting, but he didn't react. Instead he jumped off the fence into the yard behind mine.

"Ornery cat. Sheesh," I said out loud, flinching at the sound of my own voice.

You saw Gatsby? Troy asked.

I did. He's so hot and cold. One minute he's friendly and seems to care. The next moment he won't even acknowledge my presence, I answered Troy.

Then went over to the mirror attached to the dresser and studied my reflection.

There'd been a streak of teal in my hair when I first came here with Laeddin, but it was gone now. Had been for a while. I missed that too.

"Holy crap." I glanced around the room.

When Sharra had taken Troy, she also destroyed my room in the process.

Yet there it stood, just the same as always, like nothing had happened. Part of me wished there was something to show for the most painful experience of my life.

Troy sounded concerned: What's wrong?

I responded: My room. It's as though Sharra never destroyed it.

I opened my closet. Even my shoes were organized like they had been before.

Nothing was out of place. I glanced back at the bed and couldn't help but remember Troy and me kissing.

My birthday cake and the way he proposed.

Troy went on: If I had to guess, I would bet it was Abernathy who cleaned it up for you.

Or Laeddin. Fixing up a room would be easy for him. If he was okay.

Hang on, someone's - He broke off abruptly.

My heart stopped. Troy? Troy! What's wrong? I called into my mind.

He didn't respond and I feared the worst.

Had Sharra realized we were communicating and shut Troy up? She already said that she would do as she wished with him and we both knew I couldn't stop her.

Sharra knew I would come to her whether Troy died or not because she had my parents too.

Troy, I called again.

Lying back down on my bed, I took several deep breaths, trying to decide whether I'd been talking to myself the whole time.

Troy was back: I'm here. Sorry. Your parents were just dragged in by some foul looking demons and -

He didn't finish.

All sorts of horrible images filled my mind.

What had she done to them?

Are they in bad shape? The words were barely coherent as I asked them in my mind.

Troy sounded preoccupied: They've been roughed up. I'm going to try to help them. Talk later?

Please don't go, I cried.

Troy said: It's okay, Jasmine. I'll be around, but I need to help them.

Tears streaked down my cheeks, but I tried to keep my mental voice steady so he wouldn't worry about me. Okay. Tell them I love them, will you please? I said.

Troy quickly responded: I will. And Jazz?

Yes?

Troy's voice became soft and full of warmth: I love you forever and always.

The strain and the stress and the anxiety and the relief and the love all came crashing over me at once.

I held back a sob. I love you too. Forever and always, I returned.

When he was gone, I could sense it, like a fog lifting from my mind. His absence caused my body to shake. Reaching down, I covered myself with a blanket, but refused to sleep in case Troy tried to talk to me again. Tears soaked my pillow as I thought about all that had transpired and all that still needed to happen. Around three in the morning, I closed my eyes as the weight of my mental exhaustion took hold.

Moments later, I was whisked away and I sensed my wings and Sharra nearby.

OceanofPDF.com

PROPHECY

THE ROOM WAS enormous and bright.

Thousands of lights twinkled above, like pretend stars.

Sharra sat on a throne at the other end of the long black and white checkered floor.

"There's a prophecy you should hear, dear Jasmine. Let me tell it to you," Sharra said. Her voice was soft and steeling at once.

It penetrated my mind, though her lips moved as well.

"I don't want to hear any of your lies."

"Is that so?" She pounded her staff on the floor once and my body stiffened before it abruptly went lax.

Words I wanted to say couldn't be uttered as she took control. Like a puppet on a string, Sharra forced my legs forward until I stood in front of her. An eerie greenish glow spewed from the orb on her staff.

She leaned forward and flexed my wings. They beat against her back. Splendid and glorious. I ached at the sight of them.

"I'm not going anywhere." Her eyes glistened, like the shining feathers of a raven, dark orbs dancing with excitement.

"The prophecy goes like this: One shall rise, her wings more splendid than blackened midnight. Power beyond all comprehension shall be her veil, magic, her skin and sinews. With a heart like onyx and no soul, she will destroy those known as man. Their bones will be her stepping-stones. And woe be unto all if she takes the blood of her true love, for none shall stop her and all will wish themselves as dust before her." When she finished speaking, she pursed her lips, smug.

I stood there open-mouthed. What did she expect me to say to that?

"Are you ready to be my stepping-stone, Jasmine?"

"Never. I'm going to destroy you and take back what you stole from me." I fought against her magic, regaining power over my body as I pushed toward her, my feet crunching on rocky ground. Upon closer inspection, I saw the rocks weren't actually rocks, but bones. "What is this?" I recoiled, forcing myself not to move.

"Isn't it obvious? These are the bones of those I've already destroyed. Those you love will be added to the pile soon enough and you will happily allow me to take your body." She paused, as though debating what to say next. "Besides, the spell to bring forth a new child is nearly complete. I only need a few more ingredients and then all will be ready." She gave me an evil grin.

"You think too highly of yourself." I gritted my teeth, determined not to let her see how afraid I was.

She cackled. "You have such spirit. I feel it flowing into me from these wings you've given me." As she spoke, she stroked some of the feathers.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to destroy her. I wanted to exterminate her from off the planet. As I thought about it, the power I felt when I nearly drained Arthur pumped through me and flashed along my fingers, like dancing lightning.

Sharra stopped laughing and glared. "What are you playing at, child?"

Was that fear in her eyes?

My fingers returned to normal as I stared at them. "You tell me," I said, trying to act confident.

She waved her hand in front of her, the long, bell sleeves of her midnight swaying. Seconds later, I was back in my bed. I opened my eyes and glanced at the clock. Only fifteen minutes had passed.

Christopher knocked on my door. "Can I come in?"

I rubbed my eyes, sitting up. "Sure."

He came in, wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms, his upper

body bare. The scent of him filled the air and hunger seared my parched throat. "What's the matter?" He sat on the edge of the bed, resting a hand on my arm.

I swallowed hard. "It's Sharra. I saw her tonight. She took me somewhere."

"She what?" He searched the room, his body tense and ready to fight if necessary.

"Relax, she isn't here." I told him about the prophecy.

His eyes narrowed. "I've heard of it," he said when I finished reciting. "For a long while, I believed the foretelling was about you." He wiped a hand over his face. "You knew of the prophecy as well."

That was news to me. "I did?" I pulled the covers up tighter around me.

He nodded. "Do you remember meeting me eight years ago? It was outside the castle in Sharra. I was about to be pummeled by a troll. You called him Roland. Anyway, you told him to go get some Jasmine berries for a party. He left and you tilted your head, giving me a look far beyond your years." He paused, and I guessed he was lost in the memories.

But I wondered if he was losing his mind. No such memories existed in me. "No," I said, curiously. "I recall a troll named Roland, but I don't remember meeting you."

"How strange. It happened. A siren had me under her spell and commanded me to kidnap you and bring you to her. But as soon as I reached the castle, the spell wore off. You told me, and I quote, 'I'm created from the seven magics. I can do anything, know anything, and become anything.'"

I leaned back, shocked that he sounded so sure of a memory I didn't have, especially since it involved me. "I said that?"

"Yes." He patted my hand.

"That doesn't sound like me. I would've only been ten."

Christopher's pulse beat against his neck and I licked my lips. I didn't know why I was so hungry, but it felt like weeks since I had any blood.

He watched my eyes, one side of his mouth lifting in amusement. "I know. At ten you had more confidence in your little finger than most creatures have in their whole bodies over their entire lives."

I shook my head, unable to meet his gaze, my eyes still focused on his pounding vein. "What else?" I was distracted, not really thinking about what he said, but how good his blood would taste.

He moved closer so his neck was only inches from my mouth. "I believed you could read minds, for one thing."

I blinked, taking my eyes from his neck for the briefest moment. "You did?" I shook my head. "If only I could."

"You also told me to become the man I was meant to be." He swallowed as emotions I didn't understand surged through him.

The need in my throat grew. "May I?" I didn't wait for an answer, but pulled him to me as I sank my fangs into his neck.

He remained quiet, the only sound was of me drinking his blood. Heat filled my body, full of need, hungry and hot. I ached for the Hunter, the feeling so strong. Before I knew what I was doing, I climbed onto his lap, wrapping my legs around his hips, pulling his body tight against mine.

Christopher's body went taut. "Jasmine, what is going on?"

"I don't know," I said, licking the vein and trailing kisses up his neck, past his jaw, until I found his lips. I kissed him, desperate to feel all of him at once. "I want you."

"No." In one fluid motion, he pushed me off and I sailed back, slamming my head against the wall on the other side of the room. He shot me a look of concern but didn't approach. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know. What happened?" I shook my head, the previous few moments fuzzy. We were talking about a memory and then it was like

someone else took over my mind. I saw myself kissing Chris and my face got hot. No!

I told you, Sharra said in my mind, her voice jubilant. Her wicked laughter filled my head like a million buzzing bees. There is your truth, Dragon Boy, she said, spitting the pet name for Troy into my mind like dirty oil.

Jazz. Troy's hurt voice pierced deep into my soul.

Troy, I don't know what happened. I didn't mean it. I-I swear, I said into my mind.

Wiped Christopher's blood from my mouth and went on: It had to be Sharra. She and I are linked because she has my wings and she somehow controlled me, but I swear to you, that isn't what I wanted.

I glanced at Christopher, who was breathing heavily, though his eyes were filled with anger.

Troy's voice sounded as broken as I felt: I can't do this.

He's mine now, Jasmine, Sharra hissed. Her triumphant words echoed through my mind. Over and over until I thought I'd go mad.

Then, as suddenly as they appeared, they vanished.

"Don't go," I said, standing.

"You can't get rid of me that easily," Christopher said, his expression savage. "But what the hell, Jasmine? I know you're in love with Troy. I can taste it in your blood every time I drink from you. But the way you just kissed me tells a different story."

OceanofPDF.com

YOU'LL BE ALONE

I SAT ON THE BED, burying my face in my hands. "I'm so sorry." The words were meant for both Christopher and Troy, but I felt the emptiness again and knew Troy was gone. "It was Sharra. The link between us is growing stronger. She did that. Not me."

Christopher sat beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. I was torn between shrugging it off and burying my face in his shoulder and sobbing.

"I am in love with Troy, but I think I might have lost him after what I just did."

Christopher gave me a light shake. "Bull. I won't tell him and if you don't tell him, everything will be fine."

I leaned my head against his shoulder. "That's not true. He witnessed the whole thing."

Christopher stiffened, and I lifted my head. "Explain how that's possible."

I told him about Troy and the dragon vision and the telepathy. All of it while clutching the dragon dangling from my wrist like it was my lifeline. When Troy first contacted me, I'd been so excited, but Sharra had taken Troy's beautiful gift and turned it ugly, like she did everything else. "He'll never forgive me."

"I'm sure he will, once he understands that it wasn't your fault." Christopher took my hand in his.

"I doubt it," I said, pulling away and wrapping my arms around myself. Every time I thought I might have a chance against Sharra, she did something to prove me wrong.

"He asked you to marry him, right?" The corners of Christopher's mouth were turned down.

I nodded, unable to speak.

"Without a doubt, he loves you too. I'm sure what he saw you do was difficult, but it'll all work out." He sounded so sure.

"I hope you're right." I wasn't convinced. "But how could I let her get ahold of me like that? How could I do such a thing? To you and to Troy?" I stood, feeling the beginnings of a freak-out coming on. "I'm an awful, terrible person."

"No, you aren't." Christopher walked over to me. "You're kind and good." He pulled me into a hug. "Want to know what the rest of the prophecy says?"

I looked up. "There's more?"

"Oh yeah. But Sharra doesn't want you to hear it."

I sniffled and released him. "I don't know if I can handle any more."

"This you can handle, because I know it's about you. It goes like this: The Eternal Vampire will grind the Earth to powder between her fingers until a new child is born, and then peace and prosperity will return to the land of magics and man."

"So, you think I'm the new child?" I thought about the words he'd just spoken. "Because if so, then wouldn't peace and prosperity already have returned to the land of magics and man?"

He shook his head. "You know, for the longest time, I believed the first part of the prophecy was about you, but then when I met you, I realized there was no way you could do the evil things spoken of. That's why I know you aren't the Eternal Vampire. And the answer to your first question is yes. I do believe you're the new child and that you will accomplish all the prophecy says. I know it."

I wanted to believe him. I did, but I couldn't. If anything, I thought I very well could be the Eternal Vampire. Look at what I'd done? Wished away my wings, giving Sharra the power she needed to bring about the darkness and take over the world. Maybe I hadn't killed anyone with my own hands, but there were plenty of people dead

because of me.

Christopher went on, "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that predictions tell only a small fragment of the total outcome. You being born can't bring peace and prosperity by itself any more than holding a sword can slay a nation. It's what you do to wield the powers that will bring the prophecy to pass." He cupped my face with his hands as he spoke. "I wish I could help, make you see what I see, but I can't. I know that now. You need to choose to believe and then act. Only then can the rest of us follow." He watched my face, searching for what, I wasn't sure.

I pushed away his hand and walked toward the window. Gatsby sat on the ledge just outside, his head on his front paws and his eyes closed. "Maybe once I have the last piece of the crown, I can bring about peace. At least that's my hope." I didn't have any confidence - not in myself or in the future.

Troy! I shouted his name within the confines of my mind, frantic for him to tell me everything would work out and that he still believed in me. But he didn't answer, not that I expected him to.

"Maybe you're right," Christopher said, standing beside me. His closeness brought me some comfort and I was grateful for him.

I wanted to believe I was the person he thought I was. I really did, but I couldn't get there. Not yet. "Whether it's true or not, thank you for sharing. I needed to hear it and I so need your belief in me."

"Anytime." He rested his hand on my shoulder. "You need to get some rest."

I shook my head. It was highly unlikely I'd be able to rest again until Sharra was gone for good. "I can't. I need to be doing something." I found the amulet Silindra gave me and took hold of it. "We need to talk to Cindy."

Christopher hesitated. "She might be sleeping."

Time in Polonias passed differently that it did here. "Please. I can't be in this room another second." I knew I sounded like a whining

child, but if I stayed for one more moment, I thought I might die.

"All right. Cinderella might try to take my head off for waking her, but I'll do anything for you." His tone was light, but a hint of worry lingered in his eyes.

I couldn't help the smile that formed. "Let's do this."

"Good." He took hold of me and I thought of the land of Polonias, working to imagine the hallway just outside Cindy's bedroom.

It was difficult.

My mind kept wandering over what just happened.

How I kissed Christopher. It didn't seem real, but the heat on my face told me it was.

"Are we going?" Chris gave me a worried look.

"Yeah, sorry. I'm working on - " Before I had the chance to finish, a small white light began to form in my room.

It grew brighter until there was a pop, and a pixelette dressed in various shades of green appeared before us.

"Christopher, oh thank heavens. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Arianna?"

"Hi, Christopher." She waved, her whole body turning a lovely shade of pink. She glanced at me, but didn't acknowledge my presence. As the princess of Sharra, I could have her killed for the impertinence, but I banished the thought as soon as it entered my brain.

"What are you doing here?" He actually sounded happy to see her, which surprised me. Chris was rarely happy to see anyone.

"I have an urgent message for you. It's about the vampires in Sharra. A group of them found out about Sharra holding Snow and Dorian and are going after them."

"Great," I said, sighing heavily. "They're going to get themselves killed."

"Princess Jasmine," she said, bowing stiffly, finally doing her duty as a member of my realm. "I am Arianna."

"Good to meet you," I replied, crossing my arms.

Arianna flew toward Christopher. "What are you going to do about them? As leader of the vampires, it's your job to keep them in line and they are way out of line."

"I don't need you to tell me my job, Arianna." He removed his arm from around me.

"Oh my goodness. I'm terribly sorry. You're right. I'm just so flustered." Arianna glared at me. "I don't want to see another member of our realm hurt or wounded because of - " She had the good sense not to finish that sentence, but I did it for her.

"Because of me." I rocked back on my heels, returning her glare. "She's right, Christopher. You should go after them. They need to be stopped."

Christopher turned back and forth between Arianna and me. "If they come to harm, it'll be their own fault. I'm not leaving your side."

"But if they die, will you be able to live with yourself?" Arianna asked. Despite her other faults, the pixilette had a dramatic flair that I found endearing.

"I will not leave you," he said.

I could tell by the apprehension in his eyes that while his words sounded sure, he really wasn't. "Go after them. You have to," I said, taking his hands.

"But you'll be alone." The last word ripped from his throat and I knew how difficult it was for him to make a decision.

"It'll be fine," I lied and then stood up straight. "As Princess of Sharra, heir to the throne, I order you to do your duty and stop those vampires." My shoulders slumped. "If you don't, something worse might happen."

Christopher clenched his teeth together. "As you wish."

I reached over and hugged him tight. "Don't be mad. You know I'll miss you and when you're finished, you can come and find me. I'm still wearing the wooden bear you carved." As I spoke I showed him the bracelet attached to my wrist.

He relaxed slightly. "I'll take care of the idiot vampires and then return to you as quickly as possible."

"You better," I said in mock severity.

"Let's go, Arianna." He went to stand beside the pixilette.

She sat on his shoulder, crossing her arms. Right before they vanished, Arianna stuck out her tongue.

I shook my head in disbelief. Had I messed things up so royally in Sharra? If Arianna's treatment of me was any indication, then returning might be a really bad idea. "No." I couldn't worry about that now.

Troy, my mind softly called for him.

Wounded, Troy responded: I'm here, Jasmine.

He hadn't called me Jazz. My insides hissed with a combination of sadness and excitement. Because at least he responded.

I'm sorry, I said, determined to hang on to him. It wasn't me. It was Sharra. She made me do it. I spoke each word in my mind to him with earnest.

Troy laughed darkly: Since we first talked, Sharra has shown me what you were like as a child. The only reason I knew it was you was because of the wings beating against your back. That girl had tons of confidence. She could read minds, tell the future, do anything. And since I know she is you, then I have to wonder what you've been playing at this whole time. Because if you wanted to, you could save me now. You could save your mom and dad. You could stop the darkness and the Akuma. I bet you could even stop Sharra if you wanted to.

He paused, his breathing heavy before he went on: But that isn't

what you want, is it? You want to be the victim. You want to play the part of the damsel and let those who love you suffer.

Hurt raced along my veins as I spoke: Why would you say that?

Tears trickled down my cheeks as I fell to my knees.

Pain like I never experienced before ripped through my core.

I went on: Whatever you believe, that isn't true. I don't know that girl. But I do know Sharra is poisoning your mind. You have to believe I would never kiss anyone the way I kiss you. I would never -

Sharra's cackling laugh rang out through my mind: This is too much fun.

I gasped.

I should've known it'd been Sharra toying with my emotions and pretending to be Troy.

The words she spoken in his voice still hurt and I curled into a ball.

That she could enter my mind so easily was terrifying, especially since I didn't know how to stop her.

The need to give up sank deep in my soul. If I gave up, then this would all be over, wouldn't it?

If I let Sharra take me over, then she would have no reason to keep my mom and dad or Troy. She would have to let them go. Those gloomy thoughts went through my mind until it felt like they would consume me.

At some point, I thought about Cindy.

Grasping the amulet once more, I closed my eyes and thought about the hallway just outside her bedroom. It was long, with many doors on either side.

All were the same except the one Cindy and Gabe slept behind.

That one was painted gold.

As soon as my mind found her door, I focused on it and told myself that was where I wanted to go.

I clutched the amulet and whispered two words: Help me.

OceanofPDF.com

MOTHERLY IRRITATION

My head felt foggy.

Had I passed out?

Something I learned in the past few months was that it didn't matter how strong my physical body was, emotional exhaustion could still get the better of me.

I tried to open my eyes, but they felt so heavy.

Voices floated to me.

"Where did you find her?"

I knew that voice. It was my aunt Cindy.

Gratitude filled me and I knew I made it to Polonias.

"A guard discovered her on the floor outside your bedroom door. It's a good thing you heard the commotion and came when you did. Otherwise, with things as they are with this horrible darkness, the guards might have cast her into prison. Or worse."

"They wouldn't have been able to kill her." Cindy clucked her tongue with motherly irritation. "Bring her into my bedroom, please, and then you may go. I know you have a lot you need to do. Thank you for helping me. I spent most of the night enchanting more of the serum and my magic needs a break."

I felt my body floating through the air before it drifted gently down against something soft. Quilla must've been using her magic to lift me off the floor and carry me into my aunt Cindy's room.

"Of course. Shall I have someone go get Gabe?" Her accent brought a smile to my lips.

"No, he left early to help the men secure the perimeter and will be back when he can." Cindy's tone was brisk, but I could still hear the worry she fought to conceal.

"Very good, dear. I'll see you later."

"Thanks, again, Quilla."

As I listened to my aunt's exchange with her fairy godmother, Quilla, I debated whether to try to reach Troy again with my mind.

"Jasmine, can you hear me?" Cindy sat beside me.

I opened my eyes to find Cindy studying me, her face screwed up with worry. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. What's going on with you? Last I knew, you were searching for the pieces of the elven crown. I see you've found most of them." She lightly touched each of the four jewels embedded in my forehead. "Are you all right?"

"No," I said simply. "I'm really not all right. I still need to get the last piece of crown, but I'm hoping you can help me with something first."

"Anything. What is it, sweetheart?" Cindy brushed some hair off my face.

A bit of light shone through the window, lighting Cindy's beautiful bedchamber. An enormous glass chandelier hung from the center of the vaulted ceiling while sheer panels of blue and green arced from the light fixture and streamed down the upper walls. The matching furniture was upholstered and comfortable looking. The bed I lay on had a white bedspread with a handful of pillows covered in blue lace, satin, or ruffles.

I stood and tottered my way over to the loveseat situated in front of the fireplace, then sat. "It's about when I was a child."

"What about it?" Aunt Cindy gave me a look and I knew I came to the right place. She sat beside me. "Talk to me."

I did. I told her everything. Poured out my heart about Laeddin, my wishes, Troy, Christopher, the Gargoyle realm, going back in time, every last detail I could recall. She listened intently, only asking questions when I wasn't clear enough or if she needed more

information. By the time I finished two hours later, she appeared to be upset, even looked a little guilty. "You've been busy."

"It's been crazy," I admitted. Restless, I went to the window. It was midday, but there was barely any light left. Urgency filled my chest. I needed to finish. "But it is what it is. I'm to blame so it's my responsibility to correct all my mistakes." I faced her.

"Cinderella," a woman shouted from the corridor. "It's the Akuma. They've invaded the castle."

"Gabe," Cindy gasped, jumping up and running to the door before looking back to me. "Follow me." She went after the woman down the hall.

I rushed after them, dodging around people and creatures scrambling through the hallways, their faces grim. "Will you help me?" I asked, catching up to her.

"Not right now. There's only one way to stop the Akuma and it isn't going to be pretty." Her pace increased. "This way." She led the way up several flights of stairs. "I hoped the wards I gave Gabe and the outer guards would protect us against invasion. If the Akuma are beyond the castle gates, then that means Gabe, Leo, and the others failed." Her voice shook with worry for them.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Cindy. Where are your children?" Anxiety over them ate at my heart.

"They're someplace safe. Not to worry." She didn't look back, but kept going.

"I'm really sorry," I said again, feeling horrible.

"Shush, it's fine," she lied. I could hear the deception in her voice, but I didn't correct her. It was sweet that she was trying to protect my feelings.

A noise that sounded like a rushing wave filled the corridor, and I glanced over the railing to see the pestilence of Akuma swarming around the steps below us. They appeared as grasshoppers, but I knew them for what they were. Consorts of the wicked Sharra. One bite

carried a disease that would turn a person into an Akuma. With sickening awareness, I watched hundreds of them swarm a guard, biting him repeatedly. He screamed in pain, flailing and thrashing until he fell over the rail, hitting the ground with a sickening thud. Nauseated, I hurried after my aunt, wishing there was something I could do. At the thought, my fingers twitched with a need I didn't understand. The only way I knew to kill the Akuma was to kill the person who'd been bitten. "You're going to kill them?"

"No, I have a spell to reverse the curse, but it's in The Eye of Abernathy. I need to get it. The ingredients are up there as well."

"Wait, you can reverse the curse of the Akuma? Without killing?" I hadn't realized such a thing was possible unless Sharra performed the magic herself.

Cindy nodded fervently. "The problem is the spell isn't an inoculation. If you get bitten again, then you'll become an Akuma again. Several of my guards have been bitten and transformed multiple times and all I can do is reverse their transformation each time it happens." She reached the door at the top of the stairs and stopped. Then proceeded to say a few strange words before tapping the door five times. The door groaned as it opened on its own. The room it revealed smelled of old books, dust, and ancient magic.

I followed her in, unable to stop my mouth from falling open. The room was perfectly round, every wall covered with bookshelves all the way up the long, cone-shaped ceiling until it stopped at the point. Books lined the entire expanse. "This is incredible."

"Within these walls are the histories of all magic. I've been here eighteen years and still haven't read them all." She went over to one of the shelves, tapped the wood, and said some words. This time the shelves folded in on themselves to reveal a secret door. "This is where we keep the most dangerous books." After more magic words, the door opened. Wind blew loose strands of hair off my face. She said a word and the room lit up.

In the center of the room rested a white pedestal similar to the one in Pops' museum of the supernatural.

"Oh no." Cinderella dashed over to the podium.

"What's the matter?" I thought I knew, but hoped I was wrong.

Cindy faced me. "The Eye of Abernathy is gone."

My assumption was right and I internally kicked myself. I knew a little about that spell book from my mom. It contained the most difficult and scary spells anyone had ever seen. Witches had killed for it for eons until Abernathy finally took it and hid it away. Eventually, Abernathy had given the book to Cinderella and explained she was a witch. That had been more than eighteen years ago. According to my mom, the whole thing affected their friendship for a time.

I took a deep breath, trying to contain my panic. "If Sharra has the book then it's only a matter of time before she finds the spell she needs to finish creating the new child." If there was a bright side to all this, it was that Sharra wasn't as far along with her spell as she led me to believe. That meant I still had time.

"Oh no. Oh no. Oh no." Cindy took my hand. There was a look on her face I'd never seen before. "Whatever you do, don't let go of me."

"I won't." I gripped her hand in return, nearly crushing her fingers. Cindy was scaring the crap out of me.

"Good." She chanted a group of words that I guessed was a spell. Right before my eyes, a beautiful garden appeared on the other side of a magical portal. "Hold tight." She stepped through.

As I followed, I studied the enchanted opening. With my vampire eyes, I could see thousands of layers between the library and the garden on the other side, almost like I was looking sideways at a giant honeycomb.

I clung tighter to Cindy's hand, thinking if I let go, I might be lost. Finally, we stepped into the garden. Relieved, I glanced back the way we came. The library and all of the books were gone. A quick glance around verified that the castle was a ways off. We'd travelled quite far

in only the briefest of seconds. Cindy's magic was really something. "What is this place?"

She didn't answer, but ran over to a spot on the other side of an exquisite pool of water. A waterfall roared and splashed from high above us. "I'm too late." She sank to her knees, picking up some of the loose dirt around her and letting it trickle through her fingers in despair.

"Too late for what?" I stood beside her, eying the large hole in the ground in front of her, but unable to comprehend what was wrong.

"They've taken the heart of Polonias."

"Oh no." My mom and Cindy had told me that story too. How Abernathy infused the land with magic. "What does that mean?" I asked, confused.

Cindy stood and reached for me. "Abernathy changed the land, but it still possessed a heart, or the place where all the magic generated from. As you can imagine, since it's kept this realm going for many years, the heart contains a lot of powerful magic." She clutched her hands together. "If Sharra has taken it - " She didn't finish because the ground began to shake and a large crack split the land in two.

I tripped over some rocks. Cindy grabbed me and moved me out of the way as the crack widened, swallowing the ground where my feet had been moments ago. "What's happening?" Fear raced along my spine.

"Without the heart," Cindy said, pushing some wayward strands out of her face as the wind picked up. "The magic within the realm is failing." She sniffled. "Polonias cannot survive. The entire realm will crumble into nothingness and everything and everyone within will perish." Dirt whipped against my skin and into my eyes and mouth as she spoke.

I turned, hoping to see what was causing the gusts. It was Abernathy. The enormous golden dragon landed in the clearing a few feet away. "Abernathy!" At seeing him, I wasn't relieved, but suddenly

frustrated. If he would just stop pretending he did things for a wise purpose and use his power, he could fix everything! I marched forward, jabbing an accusing finger at him. "I've a bone to pick with you, dragon."

He chuckled, sending smoke curling out of his golden nostrils. It only made me madder, but he didn't seem to care. "I see. Well, pick later. You have work to do."

"Abernathy," Cindy cried, breezing past me and leaning into him. My normally confident aunt appeared small and broken.

It was then that I remembered Abernathy was Cindy's father as well as Troy's. I wondered not for the first time how many supernatural children the dragon had helped to create over the years. As I watched the two of them, some of my anger subsided followed by a surge of anguish. Did Abernathy love Cindy more than Troy? Was that why he'd come to her aid and not his?

"So many questions," Abernathy said, and I realized he was watching me and had possibly read my mind. "As I've said before, this isn't my fight. If I were to rescue my son and your parents, I would eradicate your destiny and that is something I will not do."

"But she's hurting them!" I couldn't help the gasp of despair that escaped in a sob. I felt as broken as Cindy looked.

"Then do something about it," he growled at me, smoke swirling from his throat in a waft of heat. "You are an original vampire, Princess Jasmine of Sharra. It's time to start acting like it!"

His words bit into my soul and I cowered beneath them. "I can't. I'm not strong enough." I fell to my knees, wishing I could ask Laeddin to make me disappear.

He shook his head in frustration. "You felt the power when you drained Arthur, didn't you?"

I nodded numbly.

"Well then call it forth. Use it like I know you can, like you've used it before." He lifted one of his clawed feet and touched my forehead.

The razor sharp tip pierced my skin just above where the jewels had embedded themselves in my forehead. In an instant, memories flooded my mind. It was like watching a movie on super-fast forward. For several seconds, I rocked and writhed as my body took in everything he showed me. I saw the memory Christopher had spoken of and remembered it like it was yesterday. Not only that, but I saw something - I couldn't believe it was real. My mom, dad, and Cindy standing in a circle while I sat in the middle of a seven-pointed star.

Along with my forgotten childhood memories, I also got flashes of Sharra torturing Troy. His thrashing form shifting back and forth between dragon and human.

Stop it! I shouted into my mind.

Sharra turned as though she had heard me: Have you found the final jewel yet?

Frustrated, I answered her in my mind: I'm working on it.

She stopped torturing Troy and walked away, leaving him shivering and gasping in his human form.

To me, she said: I won't stop until I have what I want so you'd better hurry.

Then she waved her arm and my mind went blank.

I shook my head as the pain of seeing Troy hurting raged along my spine. Mixed in with that were the feelings I had as a child. When it was over, I put my head in my hands. "Whoa." My head pounded like someone knocked a hammer against it. "Troy," I whimpered.

"What about him?" Abernathy asked, his gaze causing my head to pound harder.

"She's still torturing him."

The dragon raised his head and roared, sending licks of flames into the sky. When he finished, he looked at me. "And what are you going to do about it, vampire?"

I wiped at my face, rolled back my shoulders, and stood. "I'm going

to get my fiancé back."

"Good." His anger dissipated and he settled his head against his paws, his colossal eyes piercing me as I met his gaze. "What do you mean fiancé?"

Closing my eyes, I clutched at the dragon carving, unable to face Abernathy as I spoke. "Troy asked me to marry him," I said softly, hanging onto him for dear life.

He chuckled and shook his head. "Young love. So sweet." He closed his eyes a moment. "As a child, you were arrogant and difficult to control," he said, changing the subject.

I was glad he moved on. I wasn't ready to discuss the engagement, especially since Troy might have changed his mind after what he saw between me and Christopher.

Abernathy went on, "Your parents thought it best for you and for all realms if you reined in your powers. They had some of your memories removed. I advised against it. Secrets never bode well and tend to resurface at the worst times." He eyed me, inquisitive. "But now that you have them back, do you feel any different?"

"Confused," I said. "A little dizzy. But a bit more - normal." That was a strange word for me to use. But it was true. Like my own normal. The only thing missing was my wings. Still, I wanted more. More confidence. More power. More something. "A little - " My knees buckled as dizziness grew. I felt sick.

Cindy wrapped an arm around me. "When this is over, I want to hear more about the proposal, but for now, I need to tell you something." She looked guilty.

"What is it, Aunt Cin?" I pressed my palms into my eyes, trying to force away the nausea as she helped me to lie down in the grass.

"It was me who did the spell that took your memories," she admitted. "I'm sorry."

"It's - " I wanted to be furious, but that emotion didn't register. It was fine. Now that I had them back, I didn't have room in my brain to

be upset. I wanted to say that, but the dizziness became stronger and closed my eyes to stop the spinning. "It's too much." It felt like I was falling into a deep, dark hole.

I was falling or floating. It was hard to tell. Darkness was all around me and I didn't know which way was up. In the distance, I saw my mom. She lay on a bed. Heathcliff sat beside her. It looked like he was talking to her. I forced myself closer. Like swimming through space, I pushed through the expanse until I hovered above my mom. She opened her eyes. "Jasmine, you need to understand." She reached out. "Show her Silindra," she said.

"Show me what, Mom?" I asked.

"You'll see." She pulled me to her like she intended to hug me, but instead of feeling her body, I went through her and into her mind.

"Hello Jasmine."

The voice was that of Silindra. I recognized it from when we spoke in the gargoyle realm. "Silindra?" Confusion filled my heart. It was like her consciousness was inside my mom.

"You heard the story of how your mom's consciousness infiltrated my mind while I was alive. Our connection remained unbroken, even after Sharra destroyed my body."

That meant she'd been in there for eighteen years. For the briefest moment, I thought about what Sharra wanted when she talked about taking over my body. It was the same thing, wasn't it?

"No, Jasmine. It would not be the same. Your soul would be gone, if Sharra took over your body. She would burn out your soul so all that was left was your body. With your mom, it's different. She lets me hang out inside her mind and she even speaks to me, but it's still lonely sometimes. Now though, because of your mom." She paused.

"What?" I asked.

"Open your eyes."

Wary, I opened them. I no longer looked through my own eyes, but

those of Silindra. The original queen of the vampires.

Wings beat at my back and I shuddered at the feeling. Exquisite happiness filled every inch of my body. How I missed my wings! But before I could completely enjoy the moment, my thoughts dulled.

"You have all of your memories back," Silindra said. "And that includes my memories as well."

I didn't grasp what she meant. "Why are my memories and your memories connected?"

"You are an original vampire, same as me. Same as Sharra. That's why you are connected to her and that's why you and I are connected now."

As she spoke, my mind tangled with hers. No, it was more than that.

I became Silindra -

OceanofPDF.com

SILINDRA AND JASMINE

I, Silindra had been ruler of the vampires for over a thousand years. I ruled because of systematic planning, a shrewd knowledge of the citizens I governed, and the cunning to deal with other magical creatures in the world.

Like dragons.

Dragons and vampires coexisted peacefully, for the most part. While some of the human vampires craved dragon blood, the originals, like me, had no stomach for the foul-smelling creatures.

The oldest and most impressively magical dragon of them all was called Abernathy. He was kind of a prickly character but, once you got around his rough edges, he had the heart of a gentleman.

I needed to speak to him.

His cave reeked of mortality. A mixture of decaying flesh, bat guano, and seawater. Despite the thick darkness, I could make out the bones of the damned scattered on the dusty earth. Carefully I flew over them, but they were everywhere, and occasionally my bare feet brushed against one, sending whisperings of the life of the dead.

Noises echoed off the walls, adding to the bizarrely solemn surroundings. Rats scurried, squeaking angrily. There was a repetitive drip-dripping of water falling from stalactites clinging to the ceiling. And a mild, continuous rumbling reverberated from the sleeping dragon.

I bent to enter a low-ceiling cavern, making sure to tuck my wings more closely to my back. A startled bat caught its feet in my sapphire blue hair before flying away. Though I knew I had nothing to fear, I flinched.

Taking a deep breath, I crouched and continued.

The closer I got, the warmer the air became. Perspiration trickled along my hairline and lower back, making my fur stick together. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand.

Along the fringes of my mind bubbled strange memories of another time, filled with humans and places I somehow knew but couldn't place. The memories begged to be set free, but I didn't have the time to entertain them. I needed to find a way to stop my twin sister, Sharra, before she destroyed everything I held dear.

The rumbling, which sounded a lot like the purring of a giant cat, grew louder and louder. When I stepped into the dragon's chamber I stood up, straightening my spine.

The stunning golden dragon's snoring stopped. His languid saffron eyes blinked open and he studied me the way a bird of prey would examine its meal. I cleared my throat, waiting for him to acknowledge me with a salutation, as was custom. Though his head was more than double my size, I didn't fear being eaten. Dragons didn't like the taste of vampires, especially originals, like me. On the other hand, Abernathy might enjoy Sharra's fleshy, softened hide. Snorting in disgust, I rolled my shoulders back, allowing my wings to beat and expand.

Abernathy was a remarkable creature. Our wings were similar, though his were a beautiful metallic shade of gold while mine were black. The way he held them draped over his back reminded me of a glorious cape. On either side of his face and under his chin was a mane of wavy hair. The top layers of his scales shone metallic gold, while the scales underneath glistened in hues of amber and bright yellow.

He yawned, exposing his razor-sharp teeth as he shook his head. "Hello, Silindra," he said, his voice booming against my bones. "Nice to see you."

I bowed slightly. "Greetings, Abernathy."

The dragon rose, his scales clicking against each other as he

moved. With him on his feet I felt like an ant - small, insignificant, and easily crushed.

He returned my bow. "It's an honor. To what, or whom, do I owe this - pleasant interruption from my slumber?" He smacked his lips as though considering my nutritional value. I stepped carefully back.

"I need your help," I said tentatively, raising my chin. I refused to let the overgrown flying lion intimidate me.

"Of course you do," he responded. He sat on his haunches and the earth beneath him groaned in discomfort. Abernathy blinked. "Tell me."

I focused on his long black lashes. "My sister, Sharra, is ambitious and grows ever more greedy for power. I fear if she succeeds in her plans, the world as we know it will be lost and only those she deems worthy will retain magic." And I knew that meant her and no one else, at least not to any measurable extent. I paused, unable to meet his gaze, and took a secret breath.

A big part of me hadn't wanted to come. Doing so meant betraying Sharra. I loved my sister. Sharra and I were the best of friends for more than a thousand years, until she discovered humans and bent them to her purposes. Until she realized she could change them into a new variety of vampire and force them to do her bidding.

Until she decided she should rule instead of me. Remorse filled me and I shoved those feelings away.

To Abernathy, I continued, "We may drive her back for a time, but she'll return. She's strong-willed, her power grows stronger every day, and she's so determined." I swallowed. "I - We need a way to protect a portion of Earth's magic so it can't be muddled to suit Sharra's lust for power."

"I see." Abernathy's tail whipped and curled around his feet. I got the feeling he really didn't see, but wanted to mollify me. "You realize, dear vampire, life is evolution whether you want to believe it or not." He drummed his clawed paws on the ground, sending wisps of dirt

into the air. "Had a tadpole not longed to roam on land, it never would have become a frog."

I nodded. It was the same argument Sharra used, but that didn't make it right.

"Why do you want to stop what so naturally is?" Abernathy continued. "Unless you're worried creatures of magic will agree with her instead of you?" He gave me a knowing glance, and I cringed.

Clearing my throat, I steeled myself and tried to match his glare. The idea of losing one's magic made no sense. Why would someone willingly give up such a gift? Choose to mate with lesser creatures? Weakening their power. There was no rhyme or rationale behind the logic. Flapping my wings in frustration, I said, "The unicorns believed as Sharra does, and they are all but extinct, each generation their magic is diluted until the youngest no longer grow a horn and can't communicate with other creatures of magic. It's a disgrace! They are mostly horses now and they do the humans' dirty work." My words came out ragged, but that was the truth. It was despicable the things that happened in the name of evolution.

"Perhaps," Abernathy said thoughtfully.

I fisted my hands, the muscles under my fur straining from the pressure. Would he refuse me?

Abernathy exhaled, sending smoke out through his nostrils. I took another step back. "If you wish to save Earth's magics, there is much you must do. While I do not agree the horse is less of a creature than the unicorn, I do think there is merit to what you request. Saving magic will benefit all creatures."

I felt my shoulders relax. My wings vibrated in response. It didn't matter if he agreed with my beliefs or not, only that he told me what I needed to do to protect the world's magic from dying out completely. "You'll help, then?"

"Yes, Silindra, Queen of the Vampires. I'll give you what you desire, but remember, all choices come with a price."

"Thank you," I breathed, feeling a little giddy and wondering where the emotion came from. Usually I was exceptional under pressure.

Abernathy tossed his head back. "Hhhmmmmm. Aaarrgggghhhh. Hhhmmmmm. Aaarrgggghhhh." The noise trembled deep within the dragon's body. He pranced from one foot to the other, as though dancing. Then he rose up on his hind legs and let out a roar, breathing fire. Flames licked the high ceiling of the cavern. The bats died instantly, falling like black rain all around us. I leapt back, pinning my wings against the floor and the rocky wall. And waited.

After several minutes he stopped, turning his ferocious face my direction. An angry pain burned in his eyes. He opened his mouth and I had a momentary flash of fear that he would send his fiery breath my way.

Instead, something small rolled off his tongue and landed on the dusty floor beneath him. "Take that," he said, returning to his sitting position, looking as though he'd done nothing bizarre.

I hesitated. "What is it?" A hairball, I thought. Nasty.

"Go on, it won't bite."

Yeah, but it might be oozing saliva and other disgusting dragon-stuff, I thought, gingerly standing over it.

Abernathy chuckled, his eyes twinkling merriment. "Go on," he prodded.

Cautious, I picked it up. It was warm and, thankfully, slobber free. It looked like a topaz gem shaped like a teardrop. A grey-black substance swirled within. Holding it between my thumb and first finger I peered at it more closely.

"What is it?" I asked, hearing the wonderment in my voice.

"That, dear Silindra, is a piece of my soul."

I gasped and almost dropped it. "Why?" To give away a piece of one's soul was a travesty.

"In order to save magic, you must combine my soul with six other magical elements," Abernathy answered.

A vibration began within my body, and I knew he spoke the truth. "And they are?" I asked, pressing the gem into the palm of one hand.

"The horn of a unicorn, the strength of a troll, the heart of a fairy, the essence of a vampire, and the blood of a Hunter - but not just any Hunter. When the time comes, you'll understand what I mean."

I nodded.

Two different shrieks came from the nethermost part of my mind. I sucked in a breath, surprised. I hadn't made the noise, but what had? Shaking my head, I tried to rid myself of the clutter. After a thousand years of living, I thought I'd experienced everything, but there was something new happening inside me.

Abernathy spoke, "Do not fight what is meant to be. You have two young vampires within your mind. One will rule sooner and the other later. They will restore the magical balance to the Earth when the time comes." Without waiting for my response, he lay down, curling his back toward me. Within seconds he was snoring again.

With the gem firmly in my grasp, I retreated from the cave. A part of me worried about keeping the dragon's soul safe. In the wrong hands, it would destroy lives. With the elements combined, whoever wore the gem would possess more power than all others, including the dragons.

Excitement shot through my heart.

I would be the most powerful creature in the world.

OceanofPDF.com

18 DAYS UNTIL TOTAL DARKNESS

SILINDRA SEPARATED herself from my mind so that I could sense her once again, though I remembered all she'd just shown me as well that my mother had been in her mind too. We shared the experience, which I found wonderful. It also seemed impossible. Silindra's body had died thousands of years ago, but I could feel her.

"See, your conflict isn't new, Jasmine. You and your mom have more in common than you know and it was time you realized that. And you have her power as well as your father's. You must defeat my sister. To do so, you'll have to sacrifice everything. It's the only way to bring balance for those who have died at her hand and for those you love. It won't be easy. In fact, it'll be the most difficult thing you've ever done, but you must or the world will be forced to bow down to my sister and all will be enslaved to her vicious whims."

"I understand," I said.

"Good."

Her voice left my mind and I woke. Opening my eyes, I was no longer in Polonias. I was back at home.

Gatsby jumped onto my bed and stretched. "You've been with Silindra for seven days. I had to battle those disgusting Akuma in this realm while you were asleep. If you see singe marks, don't blame me, just realize I saved your life while waiting for you." He yawned. "And I'm exhausted." His claws dug into the blankets. "But hopefully you are now ready to do what must be done."

A surge of newfound confidence filled me. "I am." Then I blanched. "I think." I still had to find the magic within myself and I believed I could do that by first going home and collecting the final piece of the crown. "Definitely," I said, getting out of bed and rolling back my shoulders. "Where's Cindy?" She had been upset because of what had

happened to the heart. "Is Polonias still in one piece?"

"It is, for now - " He paused a moment. "But she had to do something she didn't want to," he said, walking onto my stomach and lying down.

"What did she do?" I searched his furry, gray face.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with." He jumped off the bed and went to the open window of my bedroom. The cat bounded through the air.

I ran over and peered out as a shadow passed over me. And I saw the flicker of Abernathy's golden tail.

"I'll meet you in Sharra," he said from far above, though I had no trouble hearing him.

I closed the window and took hold of the amulet around my neck. A rush of Silindra's power - of my power - coursed through me.

Silindra's voice echoed in my mind I felt it in my bones: You don't need the amulet, Jasmine.

And then I heard Abernathy's words: You have the power within.

Taking a deep breath, I released the amulet and closed my eyes.

"I can do this." I pictured my bedroom in Sharra.

The rock walls held together by mortar. The jade green bedspread covered in wistful green and black pillows.

A painting of my parents and me hanging on one of the walls. I loved how my mom and dad were looking at me while I hammed it up for the artist. I took a deep breath and remembered the smell of the flowers beneath my windows and the way the birds and insects chirped first thing in the morning.

Then I thought of my bathroom and Zenny.

I missed him as well as my best friend, Abrea. For the briefest moment, my soul longed for the time before I met Laeddin and made those wishes.

There was a slight breeze and when I opened my eyes, I was back

in my room, standing beside the rocking chair.

Reaching out, I dragged my fingers along the familiar frame. Emotions I hadn't expected overwhelmed me.

How I missed my home!

Though I needed to hurry, I took a moment to sit in the chair my nanny, Ciana, had rocked me in as a child.

Memories I'd long forgotten swirled through me.

Like when I was ten and my mom made me mad. "I hate you," I'd shouted, flying away from her. In my room, I determined to run away to the human world.

Slamming the door, I'd used magic to create a suitcase like one I'd seen in a magazine. The suitcase was round and covered in orange and yellow flowers. Without care, I threw clothes inside and then sealed it shut, not with my hands, but with magic.

"With magic," I whispered, sitting up, as understanding dawned on me.

That tiny feeling squirmed its way to the tips of my fingers.

I held them up, studying them, waiting for the ease of the magic I had then to appear now.

Not only did I have my recovered memories to prove it existed, but I also knew what I'd done when Arthur had gone after Christopher and then me.

Magic and power had overtaken me.

The feeling still scared me a little.

"There is magic in there. I know it." I touched each finger to my thumb, hoping the magic would spring to life as it had when I drained Arthur.

When nothing happened, I slumped back into the chair and closed my eyes. There were so many memories, it was difficult to wade through them.

The first thing that came to mind wasn't a memory though, but the

vision Laeddin showed me of Troy and me.

It didn't even matter that the Unknowns said Laeddin only showed me what I needed to see.

Lie!

Nor did it matter that Troy was mad at me.

That was my future. I wanted it and I would do all I could to have it.

"Jasmine, I felt your return," Ciana said, shaking me from my momentary happiness.

I blinked, trying to get my bearings.

She wore a dress from the fifteenth century. The lace collar went all the way up to her chin and was the same color as the skirt, a deep purple. Her hair was up in a bun.

But she was a traitor!

"Get away from me," I said, pushing out of the rocking chair, my breathing heavy.

Fury filled my chest, the same fury I felt when Arthur nearly drained Christopher.

It raged forth, ready to fight.

Ciana betrayed us, not only me and my mom and dad, but all of Sharra.

And like Arthur, she deserved to be shut up in the cave of lost souls.

I felt my teeth grow in my mouth and then paused. Maybe she didn't know that I knew she betrayed me and I wondered why Sharra hadn't told her.

"Jasmine, what's wrong?"

My eyes narrowed as I studied my former nanny. Was Ciana pretending? That was a possibility. But if not -

Could I use her lack of knowledge to my advantage?

With a deep breath, I forced down my fury and allowed my fangs to recede.

"Sorry, you woke me from a dream." I tried to smile. "Hello, Ciana." It was an effort to keep my voice pleasant.

"My dear, where have you been?" She rushed over, concern filling her stark face. I fought the urge to step back in disgust. "We've all been so worried. There's pandemonium in Sharra. Do you know where your mom and dad are? Because of your parents' absence, the council believed they left us."

She appraised my appearance as she spoke, touching the sleeve of my black shirt, checking out my boots, and tugging at a piece of wayward hair before her eyes landed on the gems buried in my forehead. "Isn't that pretty? A new style?"

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself not to call her on her crap. She knew what the gems were and she knew Sharra had my parents.

She probably even knew where they were. "I don't," I lied, stepping around her and heading toward the door.

"I was told there was a rogue group of vampires going after my parents. Do you know anything about that?" I had to divert her attention away from me while I tried to think about what information I could garner from her.

"It's a rescue mission is what I've been told." She faced me, clasping her hands together tightly.

"What of Christopher? Have you seen him?" The Hunter was supposed to have stopped the rescue mission.

"Yes, he went after them." Her eyes danced with joy I hadn't seen in her for years. "Isn't it exciting?"

I growled as some of my pent-up anger escaped. "Actually, it isn't, Ciana. What if they get hurt? Those vampires have no idea what they are getting themselves into."

Ciana tittered softly. "But they're vampires, Jasmine. If they get

into trouble, I have every confidence they can take care of themselves. Besides," she paused and went to the window, pushing back the curtain to gaze at the gardens below. "Christopher will help them."

There was something about the way she spoke of Christopher that had me worried. "His job was to help them return to Sharra." I opened the door. "There's something I need to do before he returns. Perhaps you can help me?" It was a long shot. Or maybe not. Sharra wanted me to collect it for her before I went after my parents and Troy. If Ciana knew where the final piece of the crown was, I wanted her to tell me. As I studied her, I thought it possible that was the reason she'd come to my room in the first place.

"Oh, what is it?" She gave me a motherly smile.

I wanted to smack it off her face. "There is one more gem I need to collect. It's a piece of an elven crown created a thousand years ago. Have you heard of it?"

She gasped, feigning surprise, and I saw the façade she wore cracking. "I have." She clapped her hands. "In fact, I know where it is. Would you like me to show you?"

"I would. Let's go." I held open the door, indicating she should lead the way.

She spoke as we walked. "You know, I'm so glad you're here. Perhaps before we go you'd like to call a meeting with the council. I'm especially sure the trolls would be anxious to hear your thoughts on what is happening." At her words, I paused. She must've sensed it because she stopped and looked back. "Is that a yes?"

"No, take me to the crown piece right now," I ordered, moving again.

"Very well, princess." She started down the hall toward the staircase. Her light footsteps echoed.

My hands were clutched together in fists. I felt like a lamb being led to the slaughter. Questions filled my mind. Would Ciana try to take me to Sharra as soon as I collected the last piece? Did she intend

to kill me and take the pieces to Sharra herself? What would I do if she went after me? Could I call forth the power I felt with Arthur and use it to drain Ciana? I didn't know. My powers were there, but I still wasn't sure how to control them.

Ciana led me out of the castle. "Where is it?" I asked, moving so that I walked beside her.

"I bet you can guess. You were always good at games as a child." She gave me a sideways glance, her eyes watching me.

"Athwana Meyana," I said, surprised as the words left my mouth. In the tomb. The same one where Arthur had been buried before Sharra wakened him.

OceanofPDF.com

VAMPIRE MAGICS

OceanofPDF.com

ATHWANA MEYANA

SOMETIMES THE BIGGEST villains we fight are the ones we create within ourselves.

Not saying that was always true.

Sharra was the big bad for sure but I was suffering from a serious lack of confidence.

Maybe it was because of all I'd done. Making a wish to take away my wings as well as other things. There were consequences for my choices. Big ones. Including the darkness swallowing realms and the akuma.

Could I defeat Sharra and save everyone?

The question was on a continuous loop in my mind. It had been weeks since I met Laeddin and made my first wish. Days since Laeddin left and I fell in love with a half dragon. Troy. It seemed like a lifetime ago since he proposed and I accepted. Part of me didn't believe that moment was real, but a figment of my imagination.

Only a few hours ago, I left Pops and Joanna in the fifteenth century. There I got to know Joanna and my grandfather a little more. There I also drained the vampire Arthur before Christopher took him and imprisoned him in the Athwana Meyana - the supernatural prison in the realm of Sharra.

It was a lot and I still had so much to do.

I forced my thoughts back to the present as my former nursemaid Ciana and I used our vampire speed to rush from my family's castle in the realm of Sharra to the base of Athwana Meyana. Arthur was no longer inside the prison. Sharra had wakened him after she took my wings.

The grand mountainous tomb stood majestically in the distance.

Covered in trees, shrubs, and plants in every shade of green, Athwana Meyana gave off a deceptively welcoming vibe. The closer I got, the more tangled the greenery until Ciana slid to a stop at an unassuming wooden door nestled in the mountain's base.

I thought again of Arthur, out in the world, ready and eager to do something horrible, if he wasn't already.

As Ciana faced me, I debated what to do with her. Obviously, she was helping me find the final piece of the elven crown because Sharra told her to. But once I found it, what then?

"The last fragment is inside. Good luck, young one," Ciana said and moved to run away.

"You're just going to leave?" I was irritated with the vampire, but grateful too. She didn't intend to try to force me to go to Sharra. I guess she figured she didn't have to. I would go to the original vampire when I had the entire crown because she had my parents and Troy.

Still, now that I knew what Ciana had done, her treachery, pain lanced my heart. Ciana had been my nanny for years, and was practically family. "I can't believe you betrayed me for her," I added in a whisper. Sharra had been around for thousands of years. If anything, her evil had grown over time. The original vampire was awful and deserved to be extinguished. For good. It made no sense to me that anyone chose to follow her, especially not Ciana. When I was young, she had been kind and fun and such a good caregiver.

"I loved you, Jasmine," Ciana said quietly. "You were like my own child, but I made my choice a long time ago and can't go back on it." Her shoulders slumped before she ran off with a whoosh.

Wind brushed against the wispy hairs clinging to my face and I sighed, rolling back my shoulders. It hurt watching her go, but I couldn't focus on that. There was work to do. Determined, I stepped to the door. The gems embedded in my forehead warmed, causing some pain. At least Ciana told the truth about the location. With little effort,

I pushed aside the vines covering the door and turned the handle. Before I was able to pull it open, a rustling sounded from the direction where Ciana had gone. Hope filled my chest. Had Ciana changed her mind?

It wasn't my nanny, but an enormous female troll. Her nose flared and she lumbered toward me like a charging bull. She was infected by the akuma pestilence. Her eyes were empty. She bared her teeth, sending spittle out of her mouth.

I dodged at the last moment, using my speed. Stopped and whipped around. I didn't want to kill her, but I would knock her out.

No more death, I thought darkly.

But before my thought had time to filter, a blade sliced through the troll's neck, severing her head from her body. She teetered for a moment then dropped to her knees, her head rolling down her chest before hitting the ground and progressing forward.

Shocked, I covered my mouth and looked up to see who had slain the troll. The culprit was dressed in a brown tunic and trousers. Her flaming red hair blew out around her like a raging fire while vivid blue eyes sparkled against her freckled face.

"Joanna?" I said her name, but thought I must be imagining things. "Is that you?" I clutched at my chest.

"Bonjour, Jasmine. It's been a long time." She gave a small curtsy as she wiped the troll's icky blood off her sword and onto one pantleg before sheathing the blade.

I was in shock, to say the least. I knew how history recorded Joan of Arc's death. Burned to death by fire. Not once, but three times, just to make sure she was dead-dead. "I thought you were - " I didn't finish but continued to stare. "How can this be?" I finally tried again, the need to retrieve the final section of crown momentarily forgotten.

She came around the fallen troll and pulled me into a hug. "As I'm sure you read, the Cardinal of Winchester ordered me to be burned at the stake." She squeezed me tightly. "But as you know, I was a

revenant and could not easily die." She pushed me away, kissing each of my cheeks before hugging me again. "After I lived through the fires not once but twice, I escaped. To save face, the Cardinal burned a wild cat and revealed the ash to his people, telling them it was me." She released me and shook her head as long ago memories surfaced before she steeled her face. "But that is no matter." She smiled. "It is so good to see you again. Five hundred years is too long to go without talking to you." Her smile grew.

My mouth opened and closed as I tried to think of what to say. For me, it didn't feel like five centuries. I'd only just left her. "I - But Pops, I mean Adam Henry, does he know you're still alive?" Joanna was the love of his life. To my knowledge, he'd never loved anyone since.

Her features dimmed. "Non, it was better that he believe me dead."

I wanted to ask, "better for whom", but simply nodded. "Why reveal yourself now?" I hoped that didn't sound rude, but I was curious. She had to know I would tell Pops when I got the chance.

Joanna clucked her tongue and glanced back toward the trees. "I am here to help you, Jasmine. This darkness is affecting everyone. Once we knew - " she paused, as though debating how to finish.

Something was different about Joanna. I wasn't sure what, but I felt the need to be on my guard around her.

Joanna indicated the door at the base of the mountain. "The final piece of the elven crown is inside, I gather?" Her gaze traveled up the wall as far as one could see before she returned her focus to me.

I didn't ask how she knew about the crown. Having been around more than half a millennium, she probably knew a lot. "That's right. I must find it and then find Sharra and hopefully restore light to the world." Just another crazy day, I thought darkly.

Joanna clasped my hand between both of hers and her face softened. "This is your destiny, Jasmine. From the moment I met you, I knew our paths were intertwined and that we would meet again one day. Much has changed since our last encounter." A shadow crossed

her features before it vanished and she placed a fisted hand over her heart. "I am here to assist you in any way."

I was glad to see her, but I didn't know what help she could be. "It might be dangerous," was all I said. Last I knew, Joanna was a revenant because she refused to drink from her true love. Unless - I studied her more intently and drew in a breath. Her scent revealed the truth. She'd become a full-fledged vampire. "Joanna?" What had she done? The person I'd watched defy Sharra to her face was no more, replaced by the woman in front of me. Somehow I knew she was a vampire, but she was also more than that. What, I didn't know, but she was filled with something like light.

She waved her hand, dismissive, and glanced over her shoulder. Obviously, she knew that I knew what she was, but she didn't want to discuss it. "I've waited for this moment for hundreds of years. If I die, then I die. I'm ready. But not until you have succeeded in defeating Sharra. Understand?" While she spoke, others dropped from trees and came out from behind enormous boulders until there were a dozen people spread out behind her, all of them carrying multiple weapons. None of them looked friendly.

They were the reason Joanna was being vague.

Immediately on high alert, I bared my fangs.

"It's okay, Jasmine," she said. "These are my warriors. We call ourselves the League of Huntsmen."

I'd heard that name once before and recently. In the dream with Laeddin where the Unknowns spoke about me. The Unknowns made it seem like the League of Huntsmen would work against me. And if the League was real, then it stood to reason the Unknowns really were holding Laeddin captive. I swallowed down my anxieties. "Hello," I said, my voice hoarse, and clenched my hands into fists. The Unknowns loved to lie and to play tricks. Creatures of Earth, specifically supernatural creatures, were just playthings to the strange beings. Regardless, I would be on my guard with these warriors.

"You needn't fear them," Joanna added. "They are here to help, same as me, and I trust them with my life." She grasped the forearm of the lead warrior then turned. "This is Elkin. He is my second."

Elkin put out his arm and I grabbed hold the way Joanna had done. "Good to meet you," I said. His scent revealed he wasn't a vampire, but a chayot. How odd that he would team up with a vampire.

Chayot were created solely to defend humans.

That meant they mostly dwelled in the human realm.

Except for one, the chayot I met didn't like other supernaturals, especially vampires.

A quick glance at the other warriors verified they were a mix of vampires and chayot.

Such an unlikely combination.

"And you," Elkin replied, glancing at Joanna. "Joan has told us stories of your visit to France and your friendship with the great dragon, Abernathy."

"That was quite the experience." I thought of Joanna watching as I drained Arthur and cleared my throat. "Thank you for coming, but this next part I must do alone." My gaze flicked to each of them, curious about whether I could escape so many if they weren't on my side.

The answer was no. Still, I forced down my worries and went over to the door, yanking it open with all my strength. "Do not follow," I said, hoping I sounded confident enough.

Joanna put a hand on my shoulder. "Whatever your apprehension toward us, you needn't fear. We will remain outside until you return. Our task is to guard the door until you finish."

"I appreciate that," I said, lifting my chin and going inside.

OceanofPDF.com

HOT AND COLD

THE DOOR CLICKED SHUT behind me and I sighed. Hot air filtered along my skin and brought with it the stench of decay. The gems on my forehead burned hotter, giving the room an eerie glow. All around me were thousands of honeycomb shaped coffins, home to supernatural prisoners required to serve out their eternal existence within.

I walked across the room, my boots striking the dirt floor with a rhythmic dull thud. Once I reached the other side, I noticed my head hurt less. For the next several minutes, I played a not very fun game of Hot and Cold, except my version was more like Pain and Less Pain.

If the final piece of the crown was buried with one of the undead, it could take me months or years to find it. An overwhelming sense of foreboding filled my chest as I thought about Sharra and Arthur and -

"Arthur." I searched the cavern for his crypt. "Is it possible?" My voice echoed around the room, but I didn't pay it any attention.

Was that another reason Abernathy sent me back in time? Not only to meet Arthur, but also as a clue as to where I would find the final fragment of the crown. Inside Arthur's crypt? It was as good a place to start as any.

Closing my eyes, I thought back to all those days ago when Sharra took my wings. I'd flown with her inside this very mountain. She opened Arthur's coffin, and - My eyes flashed open. I knew where to go and started to climb.

Arthur's resting place was way up. As I traversed over the cells, I thought about the time I'd spent in the vampire's presence. He had no qualms about killing. Humans were food, like ants to the anteater.

According to the lore Laeddin shared about the elven crown, the pieces were buried a thousand years ago. Had someone moved the

piece to Arthur's coffin? If so, I could guess who.

Dirt and grime covered my hands and got onto my shirt and pants as I climbed, but I kept going. The farther up I went, the harsher the gems on my forehead burned until my eyes started to water.

When a sharp pain stabbed between my eyes, I knew I had arrived.

Rolling my shoulders, I opened the cell. The metal bars screeched with a cacophony that could wake the dead. I hoped not literally.

The vampire's coffin was already open. Gingerly I lifted the folds of black fabric that lined the inside, searching for the crown with my hands. When I didn't find it right away, I ripped away the cloth and panels, but still it wasn't there. Which meant it must be under the coffin.

Frustrated by the pain burning between my eyes, I growled and shoved the coffin out of the cell, sending it sailing down to the damp earth where it splintered into thousands of wooden pieces. Wiping my hair off my face, I squatted and took a deep breath. The hexagonal cell smelled of ancient soil and strong magic. As my fingers grappled with the ground, the magic stung me and I flinched. Each time I clawed away the dirt, it would move, but only for a second before resettling in its original place, like I hadn't dug into it at all.

After several tries, anger creeped along my back. The magic from the soil seemed to be leeching my strength and a cold chill moved up my hand to my wrist and into my arm. Tears blurred my eyes. I screamed with fear as black dots filtered along my vision. Dizziness overwhelmed me and I fell back, landing on my butt while my head smacked against one of the prison walls.

Was this how the final assassin would fight to stop me? It made sense that the last assassin would be the strongest. If I got the final piece, the power of the crown would be mine. The assassins were created specifically to stop that from happening.

Or was this the magic of the cave fighting against me?

Possibly both.

Nauseous, I rolled onto my knees and wretched. Nothing came up. The dizziness grew so strong, I felt my body roll until I was on my back, staring up at the ceiling as it spun. That just made me sicker and I closed my eyes.

"Jasmine," a voice called, but it sounded so far away.

I worked to sit, to search for the voice, but couldn't manage the position. Peeling my eyes open, I recognized the voice. She sounded like Silindra. "Where are you?" At one point, I'd gone back in time and spent seven days with her, just as my mom had. When that experience was over, I had believed Silindra was gone, but perhaps I was mistaken.

"I didn't leave your mind, Jasmine, just quieted myself," Silindra whispered. "See, once I was allowed inside your mind, I kept part of myself with you and part with your mother." She paused and I let that sink in. "Now relax and allow your subconscious to find me. As we're original vampires, we're connected."

She'd said that before. "Okay." I unclenched my hands, letting them fall to my sides as I worked to calm my nerves and reach out for her.

"That's it," she encouraged.

Resolute, I urged the tension from my shoulders, arms, and thighs. My spirit separated from my body. And like the lock on a treasure box, I heard a click. Opening my eyes, I saw I was no longer in Arthur's cell, but in a garden. One I recognized. It was one of my favorite spots, especially when the flowers bloomed, filling the air with the sweet scent of vanilla and honeysuckle.

I glanced around, knowing I was behind our family castle in Sharra.

Silindra stepped into view, walking slowly, a lovely smile on her bewitching face. Her teal blue hair was loose and long, and her wings - her glorious teal wings extended behind her. "I hope it's alright we meet here. Once upon a time, long ago, this was my favorite garden in all of Sharra."

"Mine, too," I said, and swallowed as an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia rushed through me. My parents had brought me out here when I was a child. I missed them terribly.

Around Silindra's neck hung a pendant. It dazzled red and pulsed as though in possession of its own heartbeat.

She noticed my eyes on it and grabbed it in one hand, yanking it from her neck and holding it out to me. "This is the final piece of the crown. The gem contains all of the seven magics. It is the same pendant used by your mother to destroy Sharra eighteen years ago. Obviously, Sharra didn't die, but that's because your mother isn't an original." She pressed the gem into my hand. "Combine this piece with the other pieces of the crown and it will work for you, dearest Jasmine."

Even in my spirit form, I felt the power of the gem pulse against my palm. The magic traveled the length of my arm, into my shoulder, up my neck and face where it stopped on my forehead. I couldn't see it but I knew it was next to the others, a portion of it buried into my skin. "You're the final assassin?" I asked, confused.

"Not necessarily, no. When the elves created the assassins, they were something different. Entities filled with magic that would demand those who touched the crown piece fight them."

"And you fought the final assassin already?" The words left my mouth, but something began happening with the gems. My forehead started to blister, the pain excruciating. Grabbing hold of my head, I bent over, breathing heavily.

Arms came around my shoulders. "Jasmine?" Silindra spoke my name and I sensed her worry.

I tried to respond, to stand, but found myself on my knees. It was impossible to keep my eyes open. Dizziness and nausea made it impossible to see or hear, as though I'd been tossed into a vortex of pure pain.

"Get away from her," Silindra said, her voice steely.

I didn't know who she was speaking to, but I felt Silindra's arms tense around me.

"You cannot be here. She already has the final crown piece. It's over, assassin." Silindra's spirit moved to block the assassin from reaching me.

"I must complete my duty, Original," the assassin said.

With strength I didn't know I possessed, I pressed my hands against my head and forced myself to stand. The assassin's dark form was menacing, both swords drawn and at the ready.

"I can do this," I said to Silindra through clenched teeth. My fangs were out and I felt them bite into my skin. "I must." As I stepped from Silindra's grasp, twin blades formed in my hands. They shimmered as red lightning flicked along the edges. Rolling back my shoulders, I widened my stance, preparing for the assassin's attack.

He came at me. I darted out of the way but couldn't focus. The pain in my forehead and the lightning around my sword had me seeing reds and blues and yellows until all the colors of the gems sparked around my weapons and surged through my veins. Or maybe it was the other way around.

"You cannot defeat me, assassin," I said, my voice not sounding like my own.

"Of course not, but I must obey and die." He leaped into the air, both sword tips aimed at me. As he came down, I blocked his swords with my own, sending sparks and the smell of melting metal into the air. His sword shattered into thousands of pieces, like glass from a broken windshield. The assassin looked at his hands, then looked at me and fell to his knees. "Finish it, Jasmine." He lifted his chin, exposing his neck.

I didn't hesitate, but crossed my swords and pulled, severing his head.

There was a gasp from behind me. Silindra was still there, clearly surprised by what I had done. I faced her as the gems on my head

settled slightly. In my mind's eye, I watched a crown begin to form and take shape. When it was finished, I touched it.

Silindra smiled, her shock giving way to happiness. "Now you can go to my sister and save the world." Her form swirled into nothingness and dark spots formed in my vision once more. I was no longer in the garden in Sharra, but also nowhere else either.

Inky darkness was all around me. I searched for a light - for something to tell me where I was and where I needed to go, but there was nothing to see.

"She did it," a female voice said from somewhere in the distance. Which direction was impossible to tell. Without knowing how, I knew the female voice was one of the Unknowns.

"With help," the male added. "Silindra is becoming quite the nuisance."

I thought about responding to the two of them, but I knew doing so was a waste of my time. My opinion wouldn't matter to them. I was their toy and nothing more.

"There is still much Jasmine has to do and I'm still betting on Sharra. After what Jasmine's mother did, the former vampire queen's desire for revenge burns more brightly than this one's need to defeat her," the female said.

"Jasmine has the elven crown. She has her memories back. With those two things, there is nothing that can stop her, not even Sharra, and you know it," the male said, his voice only slightly harsh.

"I know that and you know that, but Jasmine doesn't. She still believes herself a child. In her heart of hearts, she's still the victim, not the champion the world needs." The female giggled.

It surprised me the Unknowns weren't aware I could hear them. Maybe they couldn't see me, either. I glanced down at my hands. There was nothing. I was nothing. A wave of relief washed over me. If I became nothing then those I loved would be safe.

But no. I thought of my mom and dad and Troy. They needed me.

If I didn't save them, no one would.

"Once Jasmine loses and she dies, we can give magic its rebirth and this time do it right. As of now, there is too much out of our control and that needs to end," the male said.

"Yes, my darling. Jasmine is the key. The only thing holding all magics together. She must lose." She let out a slow growl. "That Snow White and her mate created Jasmine in the first place still burns me up," she added and I heard the bite in her words.

"Agreed. We must make certain Jasmine does not gain the confidence she needs to use the magic she possesses. She must die and when she does, so will all magic. Right now, there is too much out of our control and that needs to end," the male said.

I didn't want to die. I wanted to live and to love and to make the world a better place. Somehow, I wanted to make a difference for good. A memory or a vision of a time I didn't remember filled my mind.

My parents were surrounded by shadows that were whispering to my dad. My dad had a look of horror on his face and he took hold of my mom's hand. "The shadows say if Jasmine dies, then so will all magic. We have to protect her at all costs."

My mom leaned against his chest and said, "We will keep her safe."

In that moment I understood exactly why my parents had asked Cindy to hide away my power when I was young. I'd been too flamboyant with my magic and too confident in my use of it. Their worry for me led them to lock away most of my magic and all of my memories of using it. They did it to protect me. And even though their plan didn't work, I felt their love and understood their reasons.

Despite what the Unknowns said, I would somehow stop Sharra and I would live.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE CROWN

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" Laeddin's voice pierced through my soul.

My heart pricked with pain. My genie was the Unknowns' prisoner. I almost spoke his name, but I covered my mouth - or tried to. The Unknowns didn't know I could hear them. I was at an advantage because I knew their plan. They wanted me dead so they could start over. I wouldn't let that happen. Somehow I would get back to my body. I would save Laeddin and everyone else. As Joanna said, it was my destiny and had been since the day I was created.

"The genie wants to fight back," the male said, interrupting my thoughts. "How amusing."

"I know what to do about him - about all of them," the female said.

Laeddin, I cried out in my mind, desperate.

"Can the girl hear us?" the male asked, surprise in his voice.

"That isn't possible," the female responded.

But it was. I wanted to rub that in their faces. But all at once, there was a whoosh and I was immediately back in my body. Hands rested on my shoulders and my head lay on something soft.

"Jasmine," Silindra said again. "You are fine, young one."

I opened my eyes to see her glorious face staring down at me. "Silindra?" I croaked.

"That's right."

"But how?" That was impossible. Her body had been destroyed a thousand years ago.

Silindra shook her head. "I do not know. Nor am I sure how long I will remain and there is something I must tell you."

I tried to sit up. "Tell me," I said to Silindra, growling away the lingering pain in my forehead.

"You're angry with me?" She looked surprised, her eyes blinking several times.

"You knew about the crown. You knew what I needed to do all along yet you didn't say anything. Instead you treated me like a child. It's frustrating." I stood, cracking my neck.

Silindra smiled and patted my hand. "Don't be angry. Your mother had a vision about the elven crown more than a year ago and knew you would need to collect the first four pieces before I could give you this one. She knew about the crown, too, but understood you would need to do most of the work finding it on your own in order to learn for yourself how to use it. There is an order to things. Your mom and I knew that and now you do as well." She got to her knees, staring at me innocently.

"I suppose," I said and blew out my breath. My legs were shaky and I leaned against the opposite wall.

Silindra stood as well, her vivid teal wings fluttering lightly.

I gritted my teeth, working to find my center. "So now what?"

"Now you must listen." She took my arm and together we went to the edge of the prison cell. We jumped down and landed with hardly more than a thud. Then she released me.

My nerves jittered. What more did she have to tell me?

"Do you remember the story of the time my sister and I went in search of the wish dragon?" She clasped her hands together as her wings beat lightly behind her.

"Of course." My mom told me that story many times when I was little. But now I was distracted by the way Silindra looked. "Wait, why do you look human? What happened to the body you were so proud of?" One thing my mom always emphasized when she spoke of Silindra was that the original vampire loved her furry, almost ape-like body. I'd seen the pictures, too, in the book from Pops' Museum of the Supernatural.

Silindra's features became sad. "Alas, that body is no more. When I

was slain all those years ago, that form was stamped out and will never return. Since I've been in your mother's mind all these years, I'm guessing all I can imagine is a form like hers - like yours." She glanced down at herself. "It isn't all that bad, especially since I still have my wings." She glanced back at them, stroking one side, the same way I used to when I had my wings.

Tears pricked against my lashes, but I shook them away. It was no use crying over something I couldn't change. My wings were gone. End of story. "That makes sense."

"But this form is better than nothing." She wiggled her toes. "Don't tell Sharra, but I actually don't mind it at all." She paused and ran her hands along her bare arms. "Though sometimes I do get cold." She shook her head. "Anyway, about the wish dragon. He is still alive and continues to dwell deep in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea."

"Okay," I said, confused about why she was telling me this.

"You must go to him and demand a wish," Silindra said, glancing down at her hands.

My stomach lurched. The past had proved I wasn't good at making wishes. "I don't know, Silindra." The power of the crown coursed through me, sensitive like a new skin. Even my insides felt different but despite that power, I felt raw and untamed. Certainly in no shape to find a water dragon and make a wish. "Making wishes is what got us into this mess in the first place," I reminded her.

She clucked her tongue. "Not so. Sharra would've returned with or without your wishes and she would've brought the akuma, too." She waved her free hand as she spoke. "But that is neither here nor there. When you find the dragon, you must wish Laeddin free from the Unknowns. They are being most unkind to him and he needs your help. Surely, after all he's done for you, you are willing to help him."

I had tried to help him more than once and he wasn't happy with me. Beyond that, the Unknowns had him. They were the creators of all supernatural beings and even more powerful than Abernathy.

Surely they didn't have to answer to my wish. "Did you know they took Laeddin's magic as well?"

A cloud passed over her face. "I didn't know that. When you make your wish, make sure to include that he will have all of his powers back as well."

I nodded though I was still doubtful. "The Unknowns are all powerful. They don't have to answer to a dragon, do they?"

Her eyes twinkled with glee. "They most certainly do. See, the Unknowns created all supernatural creatures." She paused and I waited. "Except dragons. They came into exitance the same time as the Unknowns."

I didn't know that. From what I learned at the Seven Magics Academy, the dragons were part of the seven magics and the Unknowns created all original creatures whose power extended from the magics, including dragons. "But I thought the Unknowns created the seven magics?"

"They did, that is true, but they didn't create dragons themselves. Their magic comes from their souls." She crossed her arms, proud that she still had secrets to reveal.

I thought about what she said. That meant the dragons had been around for a very long time. "I see," I finally said, though I really didn't.

Silindra went on, "That is why Abernathy doesn't meddle. And that is why Netherby, Abernathy's water brother, keeps himself under the sea." She shook her head as sadness caused her bottom lip to tremble.

"So if I wish Laeddin free, why won't the Unknowns just imprison him again?"

Silindra smiled. "Because the magic that returned his powers won't be from them. It'll be from the dragon and dragon magic is out of their control." She clucked her tongue again, her happiness returning. "They can manipulate. They can still interfere, but they will never be able to take Laeddin's powers away ever again." She grabbed hold of her long

teal colored hair and brought it to one side, twisting it nervously. "I know Laeddin was hesitant to intrude in the past, same as the dragons, but if you free him, he will help. I just know it."

I wanted to believe her, but I had my doubts. An image of Troy and me and the future Laeddin showed me filtered into my mind. My heart lurched with hope. I wanted that future more than anything. I wanted to marry the man of my dreams. I wanted to have children of my own, and I wanted to defeat Sharra so she couldn't hurt anyone I loved ever again. I nodded. "Okay, I'll do it," I said, rolling my shoulders back. "And then I will go after Sharra."

"Good." She smiled, and it took my breath away. Her body began to shimmer. "I'll still be in your mind as well as Snow's," she said. "But now I must go and recuperate for a time."

"Netherby," I said, thinking she'd forgotten. As soon as I said his name, I was no longer in the mountain, but at the mouth of a cave, deep in the ocean.

OceanofPDF.com

INTO THE CAVE

As a vampire, I didn't need to breathe, but the pressure caused my ears to pop. It was uncomfortable. The red pendant I used to travel from place to place was still around my neck. It bobbed up and tapped me on the mouth. I tucked it into my shirt collar where it stayed for a moment before smacking me in the mouth again.

Some of my hair came loose from my braid and swirled around my head like black tentacles. I tried to push them away but to no avail. Using my feet, I kicked forward, heading inside the mouth of the cave.

A school of fish, their skeletons and sharp teeth glowing beneath their iridescent skin, zoomed toward at me so quickly, I thought they would smack into my face. Before the inevitable happened, they darted around and disappeared into the eerie water. Usually when a group of fish swam away, it was because something bigger was after them. With that thought in mind, I peered carefully around. Blue light gave the inside of the cave a peculiar glow.

The ground was covered in white sand interspersed with thousands of colorful gems and gold coins. I guess it was true what Kenmei said about all dragons: they loved their treasure.

Without much confidence, I swam deeper into the cave. The gems sparked to life as I went, lighting my way. Farther and farther I swam until the cave opened into a much bigger cavern. Off to the right and taking up most of one side was a white dragon. Instead of clawed feet, he had fins, and a long tail like flower petals.

The ground rumbled and two blue eyes the color of midnight opened at once and fixed on me.

"I suppose you're here for a wish, little vampire." He shook his stark white mane, making it dance in the water while his fins and tail hovered - he looked like a blossom floating on water as he swam over.

"That's right," I admitted in awe. He was a stunning creature. More striking even than Abernathy.

"Very well. What is it?" His large head was so close, my eyes began to cross and I had to swim back to be able to see him clearly.

I thought about what Silindra said and what Laeddin told me about wishes. There were always consequences. Would he be grateful to be free?

Twin sets of bubbles escaped the dragon's nostrils. Inside them was smoke. I didn't think a water dragon could breathe fire, but maybe I was wrong. As they floated up, I saw that pictures formed inside each bubble. The foremost held two female vampires and I knew at once they were Silindra and Sharra when they were younger. The next bubble held creatures I didn't know. More bubbles left his nose, and those also filled with smoky pictures of things and places I didn't recognize.

"Vampire?" he said again, licking his lips over his very large mouth. "Make your wish so that I may get back to sleep."

I swallowed back a sudden burst of irritation. As with Abernathy, this dragon could make things right with the world, but he chose not to. Grinding back a retort, I made my wish. "I wish for Laeddin to be freed from his captors and his genie magic returned," I said quickly, clasping my hands together nervously.

Netherby blew more bubbles and pushed away from me, swimming over to his corner. "That is your wish?"

"Is that too much?" I sank to the ground, my boots brushing against the sand and the gems on the cavern floor.

"Not too much, but too little."

I was confused. "What do you mean?" Had I not said the wish right? If that was the case, I wasn't surprised. My wish making skills sucked.

"I'm just surprised you didn't wish Sharra destroyed instead of wishing to save Laeddin, especially since there are billions of lives

who will suffer because you didn't think bigger."

I was taken aback. He was right. Why hadn't I thought bigger? Silindra told me what to wish for and I didn't even question her. Surely she had considered the rest of the world. "Can I change my wish?" I asked softly, already knowing the answer. It was too late. I'd made my wish and there was no takebacks.

"I'm afraid not." He curled up into a ball in the far corner of the cave. "Your wish is my command," he said languidly and closed his eyes.

I floated there a few moments before it occurred to me he was done talking. "But where is Laeddin?" I asked, only just realizing I wasn't speaking with my mouth but in my mind.

"He is in Salem, Massachusetts, in your mother's old house, awaiting your arrival, dearest vampire." One eye blinked open and for the briefest moment he reminded me of Abernathy. "You have the power to travel from here to Salem within you, but I sense you aren't confident enough to use it yet." He sighed. "Use the necklace Silindra gave you and go. Otherwise, I might decide an original vampire without wings would make a delicious snack."

My mouth fell open and water filled it. I closed it and quickly kicked my way out of the grand cavern and back into the smaller cave before exiting. Believing myself far enough away, I grabbed hold of the pendant and thought about the little house in Salem, picturing my room and the window with curtains dancing in the breeze, Gatsby jumping onto the ledge and curling up on my pillow.

Moments later, my ears popped and I was back in my room, dripping seawater on the wooden floor. Dashing from the room, I call out for Laeddin.

"Jasmine?" He exited the master bedroom, astonishment on his face. "How did I get here?"

I rushed forward to hug him, but Laeddin put out his arms to stop me.

"You're wet and - " He took a small breath, wrinkling his nose. "You smell like the sea."

I glanced down at myself and took in my soaked clothes and my boots. "You're right," I said.

"You wished me free, didn't you?" he asked. This time there wasn't disappointment on his face though but relief and even happiness.

"Yes," I admitted quietly, hoping I did a good thing.

He took my hands in his. "Thank you, Jasmine. With all of my heart, I thank you. Serving the Unknowns - " He paused again and shuddered. "I'm sorry I was such a terrible genie the first time, not to mention a horrible friend. This time, I promise you I will serve you to the best of my abilities."

That didn't make sense. He wasn't supposed to be my servant, only have his powers back. "What do you mean?" I asked, confused. Then I saw the tattoos around his wrists. After all we'd been through together, after using my final wish to free him, we'd come full circle. We were back where we started. "I'm so sorry." I failed in the wish department once again. "When I made the wish, it was that you would have your powers back and be free of the Unknowns. I didn't realize Netherby would do this." I hung my head, feeling terrible. Had Silindra known this would happen?

"Not to worry. I am as I was meant to be." He gave me a gentle smile. "Better serving you than serving the Unknowns."

"Then I have three wishes?" Perhaps Silindra did have the right idea. With Netherby I had one wish. With Laeddin I had three. I could wish Sharra imprisoned or defeated or something where she no longer had power to hurt the world and everyone in it.

Laeddin tilted his head as though thinking. "I actually don't know. You may have three or thirty-three hundred." He closed his eyes a moment. "I might be your servant for eternity. The connection is strong." He peered at me. "Can't you feel it?"

OceanofPDF.com

SMELLY AND GROSS

I CLOSED MY EYES, trying to sense the bond, but detecting nothing. "No," I admitted. Christopher had believed we were meant to be together. Now Laeddin might be tied to me forever. Where did that leave Troy and me? Suddenly, being free of Laeddin was the only thing that mattered and I blurted out the words, "I wish you free. You are no longer required to serve me, genie of the lamp." I was proud of the way I worded my wish. But as soon as the words left my mouth, I realized my selfishness. I didn't want him to be my servant, but I needed him to help me defeat Sharra.

His eyes grew big. He knew my mistake too. "Why?" he asked.

Nothing could be done as the black tribal tattoos around his wrists shimmered a moment before returning to normal.

Laeddin's shoulders slouched and he stared at his wrists. "Your wish didn't work." He was astonished but also relieved. "Strange. I don't know what happened. Maybe I'm out of practice. Try another wish, but this time wish for something of value."

I didn't utter that I believed he was of value and that wishing him free was important to me too. Still, I knew what he meant. "I wish Sharra imprisoned, never to bother the world again," I said in my most commanding voice. Again, I was pleased with my wording.

His tattoos came to life for a moment before returning to normal.

"Is she imprisoned?" I asked, hopeful.

Laeddin ran a hand through his hair. "I'm afraid not."

"What's going on?" I crossed my arms as desperation filled my heart. "Make my hair teal," I shouted, demanding. His tattoos flashed, but my hair remained black.

He shook his head wryly. "This is very weird."

Before we could talk more about the situation, there was a knock on the front door. "Who could that be?" I growled and ran down the stairs, yanking the door open. The shadow of a person filled the entryway as the mostly dark morning sky filtered through the edges.

"Tell me you remember all of your memories," Christopher said, sweeping me up into a hug then quickly putting me down and looking at himself. "You're wet." He worked not to make a face.

"Yeah." Glancing back at Laeddin who was at the top of the stairs, I said, "I'm sorry. I know I'm smelly and gross, but - " I needed a shower. No doubt about it. There just wasn't time.

Laeddin shook his head. "Allow me." He flicked his hand and I was immediately dry.

A quick look down revealed I still wore what I had on before except now my clothes were clean and dry. I glanced at the mirror in the living room and saw that my hair was no longer wet and it was pulled back into a loose ponytail.

"Thank you, Laeddin," I said, grateful for his kindness but also distracted by what I saw in the mirror. What held my attention was the elven crown. Made of gold and silver metals twined delicately together, there were five points, each holding a gemstone, with the largest stone in the center.

Without realizing what I was doing, I reached up to remove the crown. But when my fingers brushed the metal, the crown vanished. "Oh no," I whispered. Had I destroyed it? That would be just my luck. I leaned in closer to the mirror.

"Think about the crown again," Christopher said, shutting the door behind him. "It should reappear."

I swallowed and did what he suggested. Sure enough, the crown reappeared. "Thank you." Relief washed over me and for the briefest moment I thought I looked like my mom. I said her name in my mind.

Silindra's voice cut through my own thoughts and her image appeared in the mirror as she spoke into my mind: If you want to tell

her something, I can get her a message.

I stared back, concealing my astonishment over her sudden appearance and responded: Tell her I love her and that I'm coming for her and Dad, please.

I sniffled and fought to keep emotions from spilling out.

Silindra said: I will. Oh, and she also said to remind you that if you die, all magic dies with you. I can't believe the Unknowns want to kill us all, she added, the words catching in her throat.

No pressure, I responded softly.

She nodded and her face disappeared from the mirror.

"You alright?" Christopher asked. "You look like you're all up in your feels." He winked, tucking his hands in his back pockets.

I tried to smile, but couldn't find it. "I'm fine," I said, working to sound like I meant the words.

"Good." He stepped closer, eyeing me warily like he wasn't sure I told the truth. "And you have all your memories back?"

I didn't respond right away as my mind flicked through the recovered remembrances. It was like watching a movie on fast forward, except I was the main character. As each moment passed, I saw myself, and a whisper of recollection blew through me.

"You shouldn't be here," Laeddin growled at Christopher.

"Yes, he should. He's my friend," I returned, only slightly perturbed. Then to Christopher, I answered. "I think so." As I spoke, a memory of helping Cindy with her magic came to mind. In the recollection, I sounded wise beyond my years. As I filtered through the memory, I tried to find the confident girl within, but she was nowhere to be found.

"Do you remember the time I tried to bring you to the siren." Christopher walked over to the couch, sitting heavily, his eyes still trained on me.

Laeddin crossed his arms like a bouncer at a club.

Christopher glared, finally acknowledging the genie. "What are you doing back? I thought I'd seen the last of you." His eyes fell to the tattoos around the genie's wrists and he gritted his teeth.

"So did I," Laeddin began, "But evidently I'm not that lucky."

Tension pulsed through the room and I came to stand between them. My head bobbed back and forth as I debated what to do. At any moment, Sharra would realize I had the crown and if I didn't go to her, then she would force me. If that happened and I wasn't prepared and then I failed in defeating her, all would be lost. The Unknowns would kill us all. I needed a plan as well as more than one backup plan. As I carefully studied each of them, it was clear they both cared for me, but they wanted to stop Sharra too. They were my friends and my allies. I could trust them.

In that moment, I remembered Joanna and her League of Huntsmen. "Crap!" Were they still standing guard outside the mountainous tomb? Probably.

"What?" Laeddin and Chris asked at the same time.

"Nothing." I wouldn't tell them about Joanna. Not yet. I needed to focus on what to do next.

"I need help with Arthur," I said, focusing on Christopher. I needed to discover what Sharra's plan was for Arthur, and then the evil vampire needed to be taken out. If anyone was capable of accomplishing such a feat, it was Christopher. He'd already fought the vampire once. He could do it again. "Have you heard anything about what he's up to?" Then I glanced at Laeddin. He might have heard the Unknowns say something.

The genie shook his head. Whatever Sharra's plan, the Unknowns didn't seem to care enough about it to discuss it.

"I have, actually," Christopher said, interrupting my thoughts. "That's why I'm here. Arthur is secretly trying to round up supernaturals to back him in a power play. He's got the siren - the one I tried to bring you to - " His voice trailed off.

A jolt of understanding shot through my veins and for the briefest moment, my confidence from my childhood returned. The siren's magic couldn't affect me. An instant later it was gone. I wasn't that vampire anymore. I didn't have my wings and I'd made terrible, narcissistic choices. "Like they would support him instead of Sharra?" That wasn't good. If he and Sharra fought, my parents and Troy could be in even greater danger.

"If what I'm hearing is true, then yes." Christopher ran a hand through his hair. "I'd like to go after him. The group of vampires that were going to rescue your parents is waiting for me to lead. I think," he paused a moment as though considering his words. "I think I can stop Arthur."

I was relieved and so thankful. He knew what I needed even before I did. "Yes," I said, hugging him. "That is exactly what you need to do." I didn't know why but tears pressed against the back of my eyes as I spoke. "Thank you, Chris."

He squeezed me tight. "Anything for you."

I buried my face in his neck, beyond grateful for Christopher's friendship. "I appreciate you so much." Saying the words caused a knot to form in my stomach. Could I defeat Sharra without him? Would I have to? I hoped not, but if Arthur was building up his own army, then it was even more that important Chris stopped him.

He kissed my cheek. "I'll leave right away."

"Thank you." I pushed him away so I could see his gorgeous green eyes. "Capture and imprison Arthur if you can, then come back to me. I may need your help." If I'd learned anything in the last few months it was that asking for help was a good thing.

A smile lit up his whole face and he touched the bear on my wrist. "I will."

I hugged him again. "You are one of my dearest friends, Chris. Thank you," I said and squeezed his hands.

He nodded and went to the door. I went with him. "Stay safe,

Jasmine. You are the Eternal Vampire and the supernatural world needs you."

"You, too."

I watched him walk at a human's pace past the half dozing National Guard unit on our street as he headed toward Pops' house. There were lots of trees and plenty of forested cover on Pops' property, which would give Chris the opportunity he needed to use his vampire speed once out of sight.

OceanofPDF.com

A VAMPIRE GENIE

ONE OF THE guards snapped to attention when Christopher passed. The guard glanced at me, his hands hefting a machine gun as it rested slightly against his chest. I waved at him and then felt like an idiot. The uniformed guy didn't return the gesture but moved away to the other side of the tank.

Once both he and Chris were out of sight, I closed my door and faced Laeddin.

His features were twisted in grim worry. "What would you have me do? Since my abilities aren't working properly, I can't be much help."

I tucked my hands in my front pockets. "I don't need to wish if you meant what you said about helping me as a friend. That still stands, right? Your magic is powerful, more so even than mine. Together we can take Sharra and save my family." As I spoke, a wave of hunger washed through me and I felt dizzy. How long had it been since I last consumed blood? I didn't know.

"Of course I will," he said and paused, glancing at my lips. "You need blood, don't you?"

I worked to force down my hunger. There wasn't time.

"Here." He sat on the couch and tilted his head. "Go ahead. Take what you need. It's the least I can do." A wry smile crossed his lips.

"You're sure," I said, feeling slightly embarrassed as I sat beside him.

He nodded.

"Thank you." I took his wrist instead of going for his offered neck. The reason was simple. If Sharra showed me to Troy again, I didn't want him to see me drinking from Laeddin that way. The position was too intimate.

Taking his wrist into my mouth, I sank in my fangs directly over the tattoos.

A rush of magical blood filled my mouth and I sighed.

Since he'd been brought back with Netherby's magic, his blood tasted slightly different than before.

A little like Troy's, but not enough to be the same.

There was also Laeddin's genie magic. As I allowed his blood to fill me, I savored both magics.

And that's when I saw Troy. Through the dragon connection as Abernathy called it. My beloved lay on the floor, naked. His bottom half was shifted into dragon form, while the top half was human.

Troy, I called out in my mind.

He didn't move and I tried again.

Troy! I silently prayed he wasn't dead. That I wasn't too late.

He lifted his head and turned so I could see his handsome face. My heart ached at the sight of him.

Jasmine? he asked, his voice inside my mind.

Yes, I said, sucking more deeply against Laeddin's wrist. Then I continued: It's me. I have all five pieces of the crown and I'm coming to save you. I promise.

He lay back down, this time on his back, and rested his hands behind his head. He asked: Whose blood are you drinking this time? Is it Christopher's again? Or someone else?

I flinched at the hurt and anger in his words.

Laeddin's blood, I admitted.

A scowl crossed his features and he said: It seems I'm always sharing you with someone.

I know and I'm sorry, I responded, forlorn.

But this wasn't the time to wallow and I added: You can be mad at me after you are safe. For now, please fight. I am going to rescue you

and my parents. And when you're free you can go on with your life and forget all about me. Okay?

Saying the words shredded my heart. I wanted Troy to love me anyway, but that was selfish.

He gave me a grim smile and said: If that is your wish, vampire.

Then Troy turned away and cut the connection between us.

Despair filled me and I was about to release Laeddin's wrist when I saw the spirit of Silindra in my mind's eye.

She seemed afraid.

What's the matter? I asked her in my mind, when she held out her arms for me to see.

Look, she responded, her voice was full of wonder and even a little fear.

That was when I saw them. Tribal tattoos on each of her wrists. They were the same as Laeddin's.

I shouted into my mind: What the hell?

She responded and blew out a frustrated breath: There are always consequences to a wish. Because you and I are bound, either Netherby or the Unknowns or both thought it a great idea to connect Laeddin and me to each other instead of connecting him to you. I didn't expect this.

As she spoke, I wondered whether or not she was lying. Because, now she could wish for a body and live once again without the need to hide inside my mom's mind or my own.

Before I could question her, Laeddin shoved me off him, looking weary. "You'll drink me dry, Jasmine."

"Sorry," I admitted, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"I'll survive," he said, and then stopped, tilting his head in question. "What is it? I can tell something is wrong." He grabbed my shoulders, holding onto me like I was a lifeline.

"It's - I know why my wishes aren't working." I stood and walked

over to one of the kitchen stools, in need of space.

"Tell me?" He wasn't hopeful, but worried.

I didn't have a chance to respond.

Silindra uttered her first wish in my mind: My first wish is for a human form with teal wings, long teal blue hair, sky blue eyes, lips red as rubies, and a perfectly sculpted womanly body.

"Jasmine, what - " Laeddin stopped and ran a hand through his hair as he tilted his head. "Someone made a wish and I am bound to respond." As he spoke, his tattoos glowed.

Between Laeddin and me there began a swirl of twinkling lights, a combination of the seven magics, as a body began to form.

With honey colored skin, the noticeably female body was taut and strong and lean, as Silindra asked.

Teal hair grew from her head, long and wavy.

The body spun so I witnessed her face forming, one so beautiful, I ached to look on it.

Once her arms, hands, breasts, fingers, toes, ankles and feet were all formed, the twinkling lights stopped.

She hovered there a moment before there was another pop and large wings the same color as her hair appeared on her back. She was beyond stunning.

Silindra's spirit left my mind with a jerk and I somehow felt it rip from my mom's as well.

When the magic finished, Silindra opened her eyes. She blinked several times and smiled, clapping her hands and jumping up and down. "I'm alive!"

Laeddin stepped back, surprised by the overexuberant woman who had appeared out of nowhere.

"It worked. Glory be, it really worked." Silindra spun in a circle before rushing forward and hugging me. "Can you believe it? I'm no longer just an essence in your mind. I'm actually here and I have a

body once again!"

I patted her naked shoulder uncomfortably. "It's wonderful, Silindra. Um, but let's get you some clothes," I said and started up the stairs.

"Nonsense, Jasmine." She smiled and her whole face lit up. "I'll just wish for some." She turned to Laeddin. "I wish for clothes that fit my body and will be easy to maneuver in."

Laeddin's wrists glowed.

"Your wish is my command," he said and bowed as though he had no control over his actions.

Frustration oozed from my pores. "Stop using your wishes, Silindra. You only have one left!"

"Not true." She glanced over at me as a pair of tight gray pants and a yellow shirt covered her.

After a few moments, gray boots similar to the ones I ruined when I went to speak with Netherby appeared on her feet.

"I believe I possess unlimited wishes." A shrewd look spanned her face.

I crossed my arms, trying to calm down.

I didn't know what was happening, but she might be right. "How do you know?"

Silindra didn't respond, but Laeddin did.

"Because she is also a genie." He held up one of her wrists, exposing the tattoos there. "The tattoos are the tell. I am beholden to her and she is beholden to me," he said, dropping her wrist like it felt funny.

Some of the joy left Silindra's face. "I am no longer a prisoner inside Snow and Jasmine's minds, but it appears I am still trapped." She clenched her hands into fists and stomped her foot.

"Why did this happen?" Her smile vanished and she gave me an accusatory glare like this was somehow my fault.

I shrugged. "You were there. You heard my wish. I did exactly what you said I should do." I wanted to add that I should've wished for something else, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Consequences always accompany wishes. You know that," I added, coming over to stand between them.

"Jasmine's right," Laeddin said. "I don't know why but when Netherby returned my powers, he also connected the two of us together." He shook his head in confusion. "I'm sure the Unknowns had something to do with this turn of events as well."

Silindra's features turned furious. "I wish to be free from Laeddin," she shouted.

The force of her wish sent her flying backward into one of the bar stools.

She landed with a loud crash."

Laeddin's tattoos flared at the same time Silindra's did, but nothing happened.

"I wish to leave Laeddin and go to Sharra to confront my sister," she said through clenched teeth as she pulled herself to her feet.

Their tattoos flared, but both she and Laeddin remained.

How weird, I thought.

Silindra could wish for things like a new body and clothes, but if she wished to break free of Laeddin, it didn't work.

"I think you two are bound to each other for good," I whispered, sensing the rightness of my words.

"You can use your power for anything except being free of one another." I gripped my hands together, wondering what all this meant. "Laeddin, wish yourself free of Silindra and see what happens."

Laeddin nodded but didn't wish right away.

From experience, I knew he was carefully considering his wording.

"I wish the bands that hold Silindra and me together be loosed so we may be free from each other."

That was a good wish.

Both sets of their tattoos glowed, but it was obvious they were still bound.

"I am sorry, Silindra," he said, studying her a moment.

"But it is evident our bond cannot be broken." He shrugged and looked at me.

"That's why, when you made a wish, it didn't work. Because I am not connected to you any longer. Instead I am Silindra's master and she is mine. Whatever wish she commands, I must obey, and vice versa."

He sank onto the bottom step, defeated. "I'm sorry, Jasmine, but I don't think we can be of much use to you until we figure out how to use our powers together."

He glanced at Silindra. "Would you be willing to come to my realm with me?"

She gave him a look full of frustration. "Fine."

"Wait." I wasn't ready for them to leave.

Silindra was alive again for the first time in a thousand years. That was a big deal.

"Are you still a vampire?" I swallowed. "Do you crave blood?"

Silindra looked thoughtful. Then she opened her mouth, revealing her fangs.

Still a vampire and now a genie as well.

"I really don't like this." She crossed her arms.

"But you're alive," I said, trying to help her see the positive. "You're here. Not dead. Not just hanging out in my mind, but really here." A vampire with genie power. I didn't know if that made her stronger than when she was original vampire. Maybe she had a combination of both. There was no way to know or even guess without more information. Laeddin was right. They needed to do some research.

Silindra smiled again. "You're right, Jasmine. I am here. Thank you

for helping to bring me back." She hugged me again then faced Laeddin. "Do you think there we can discover what I am?" She shook her head. "I highly doubt it."

"You're probably right, but we need to at least try before we help Jasmine. Figuring out how our new magic works could make all the difference. Agreed?" His gaze flicked between Silindra and me.

"If you think going to your realm is the right thing to do, then I'll follow. But we must hurry. Jasmine needs all the help she can get to fight against my sister." Silindra brushed some of her hair off her shoulders before wrapping an arm around my waist. "Jasmine, we will be back to help soon. Stay safe. And maybe you should talk to your Professor Pops about figuring out a way to control the elven magic within the crown. Every time I touch you, I feel its power. If I were less powerful of a supernatural, I would probably be dead."

Laeddin nodded. "I felt it too."

"Okay." Speaking of Pops reminded me of Joanna. I needed to get back to Athwana Meyana.

"We will figure this out and be back to help. I promise." The look on Laeddin's face and even Silindra's showed me they meant every word.

"Good," I said, but struggled to believe them. It could take a thousand years before they figured out how to work their magics together.

Just as they vanished, someone knocked on my door. I guessed it was one of the guardsmen. He probably heard Silindra crashing around. I quickly turned on the TV before opening the door a crack. "Yes?"

"Is everything alright in here? I heard some unusual noises." His dark eyes studied mine as though searching for any sort of deception.

"Oh, sorry. It was just the TV. I had it up too loud, but I turned it down." That lie wasn't bad. The guard seemed appeased.

He squinted, causing his eyebrows to scrunch together. "Okay,

then. That's fine. Good day."

I watched him walk back to the oversized green tank.

Once the door was closed, I sank to the floor, resting my head on my knees and working to regain some equilibrium. A lot had happened in a very short amount of time. But my friends were doing their part. I needed to do mine. That meant first going back to the land of Sharra and finding Joanna.

Rolling onto my knees, I clasped the gem in one hand and thought of Athwana Meyana, the Cave of Lost Souls.

OceanofPDF.com

SEVEN HUNTSMEN

As soon as I was back inside the cave, I sensed something was wrong.

Sounds of fighting echoed beyond the exit.

Panicked, I yanked open the door just as an elf with long silver hair and empty eyes fell into me, knocking me back so my butt hit the ground.

I didn't want to kill anyone else. That was the last thing I wanted to do, but as though on autopilot, my newfound crown powers took over and as I pushed the elf off me, white lightning danced across my fingertips and into her body.

She disintegrated instantly.

What. The. Hell!

But I didn't have time to contemplate what happened as another elf came at me.

I rushed to my feet and put out my hands, revealing my fangs as he came for me.

Again, white lightning lit my hands and the elf disintegrated.

Was it because they were elves coming after me, or was it because I was in danger?

I glanced around, preparing for more.

The remaining akuma were occupied with Joanna and her League of Huntsmen.

The battle was intense.

A troll fought Elkin while Joanna fought against three elves.

There were a dozen vampires as well. One of them looked familiar. She jumped onto the back of one of the huntsmen and sank her teeth

into his neck, ripping away flesh.

Blood gushed from his throat and sprayed the vampire.

She glanced up.

"Ciana," I breathed in horror.

But it was no longer Ciana. She had been changed into an akuma. Ciana smiled, revealing her fangs before wiping her face, smearing the blood across her cheek. She shoved away from the dead huntsmen and rushed Joanna. In seconds, Ciana was on her. Instead of trying to feed, she grabbed Joanna by the head. One hand on her chin and the other on her forehead and she twisted.

Joanna wasn't having that.

And neither was I.

I scuttled forward, my fangs extended. My power blazed to life. This time, instead of sending a lightning bolt from my hands, the twin swords I used to battle the assassins appeared. They were bathed in light.

There wasn't time to question their appearance and I used them to flash into akuma after akuma on my way to Joanna, slicing through each of them like a boat through water.

"Ciana," I yelled. Though I knew she was no longer my childhood caregiver, hesitation pulsed through me. I didn't want her to die.

The akuma that had been Ciana glanced up.

In that moment, I knew she intended to change Joanna, not kill her, but I couldn't let that happen.

Without thought, I tossed one blade at Ciana's head.

With the precision of a scalpel, the blade found its mark, slicing into her skull, directly between her eyes.

Ciana's face wore a look of surprise before she disintegrated, the same as the others.

Joanna stood, her sword still in both hands, her eyes slightly glazed over.

Had she been changed?

"No," I pleaded.

Joanna straightened, searching the landscape for more danger.

But the akuma were gone.

At least for the moment.

"Thank you, Jasmine. For a moment, I thought myself a goner." She sheathed her sword.

"Of course," I said with a shrug and followed Joanna as she spoke with her huntsmen and assessed the situation.

Seven huntsmen were in the process of changing to akuma. Without hesitation, Joanna chopped of their heads. I cringed, forcing myself not to reveal my revulsion, surprised at how easily she destroyed those who were supposed to be her friends, including Elkin.

"I'm so sorry," I said, as Joanna wiped the blood from her sword onto her pants.

Joanna clenched her teeth. "This isn't your fault, but the nature of war. That is why you must defeat Sharra and bring peace to all realms once again." She eyed me shrewdly. "And that is why I am here."

It was my fault. All of this, but I didn't say that. "Thank you. I'm glad you're here." And I was. With Christopher, Laeddin, and Silindra gone, I would have been alone.

"You have the crown. Now what?" She brushed off her hands before crossing her arms, her gaze pinning me with her question.

"I must find Sharra," I said, though I didn't feel ready. The blades in my hands vanished as well.

A small smiled played across her lips. "You are worried that now you have the power, you don't know how to use it?"

"That's right." I tucked my hands into my pockets, glancing up at the nearly black sky. How many hours since I'd been back? Since I retrieved the final piece of the crown and it became a part of me? It felt like years, though I guessed it might have only been a day.

Thick darkness filtered through my insides. I missed Troy and the love we shared before Sharra stole him away. Would he ever forgive me? I wanted to believe that when this was all over, if I won, then he would forgive me and we could be together forever. Sharra had manipulated us both when she showed him the vision of Christopher and me. My love for him would have to be strong enough for us both until I could help him see the truth. But Sharra had been torturing Troy for weeks. Who knew what lies she'd told him? By now, he could completely hate me.

"Jasmine, did you hear me?" Joanna asked.

I shook away my preoccupations. "Sorry. Can you repeat it?" I bit my bottom lip sheepishly and started back toward the castle at a human's pace. Joanna was a vampire as were some of her huntsmen, but there were also chayot in the group too and they didn't have super speed.

"My huntsmen need to eat, as do I," she said, her eyes flicking to my throat as she came to walk beside me.

It still pained me to know she'd become a vampire. "Yes, of course. The orchards near the castle will nourish the chayot as well as the vampires.

She raised an eyebrow in question.

I went on. "The fruit changes according to each supernatural's needs so that it provides sustenance according to the supernatural creature. A human will only taste an apple. Vampires will be given blood and so on."

"Bien." Joanna was quiet for a few moments.

I glanced back at the remaining huntsmen, then at Joanna. "What happened to you?" I finally asked.

"What do you mean?" Her eyes became guarded and I thought I recognized guilt. She knew what I meant.

The Joanna I knew would do anything to stay on the side of right. She'd stood up to Sharra and had refused to feed from Pops, telling the

queen she would rather die than partake. Joanna and Sharra had battled - will against will - and Joanna won. In the end, Sharra had ordered Kenmei to kill her and Pops. Thankfully, Kenmei hadn't complied, leaving Joanna as a revenant. But something had changed. She was a full-fledged vampire. I sensed it. Smelled it even. The only way that could've happened was if she drank from Pops. "You drank Adam's blood, didn't you?" I asked the question though I knew the answer already. There could be no other way.

Joanna swallowed, her eyes hooded. "Three hundred years after becoming a revenant, I met and became fast friends with a woman. A vampire. She was easy to talk to. Though I was cautious, over time I grew to trust her more than any other supernatural. We understood each other - the pain and sheer loneliness that came with being what we were." She paused, her eyes pleading that I would understand.

I nodded for her to continue.

"One night, while in the wilderness of Montana, we started a fire and had drinks, sharing our stories. By this time, we'd been friends a decade. Like I said, I trusted her and she never gave me a reason to doubt her sincerity."

Worry began to eat at my insides. I thought I knew where she was going with the story, but I kept silent.

"She brought out a flask," Joanna went on, "filling our cups with blood." She groaned. "The scent was like magic and I drank the blood down without a second thought." She shook her head, but a red tear dropped onto her cheek. "Immediately, I recognized my mistake. The changes grew inside of me, as did the hunger, and my friend - Well, she wasn't a friend at all."

"Sharra," I whispered.

"That's right," Joanna said bitterly. "She changed before my eyes, a cruel smile dancing on her wicked lips. 'Now you will become what you were always meant to be.'" Joanna didn't speak for a good long while as she got her emotions under control. "I killed several innocent

humans," she finally eked out.

My heart broke at the pain in her words. Tears pressed against my lashes. Joanna would never hurt an innocent on purpose. "Joanna," I said.

She shook her head, wiping away her tears. "The chayot found me and were determined to kill me until they discovered who I was. Now I am a vampire, but also something more."

I waited for her to continue, but we'd reached the orchard and I instructed the huntsmen to eat as much as they needed. Joanna and I went to the far end of the castle. "What else are you?" I asked when we were far enough away that no one could overhear us.

She glanced around to make sure we were by ourselves. "The chayot took me to - an angel realm. There, I met someone and confessed my sin." She met my eyes.

I was reeling. An angel realm? That was new.

"There are lower-, mid-, and upper-level angels, Jasmine, and I became one."

"Like a chayot?" We studied them at the Academy. But I hadn't heard of upper, mid, and lower angels. Obviously, I still had much to learn.

"No, Jasmine. I am an upper-level angel. They call me an angel of death." She let out a laugh, but there was no joy in it, only bitterness. "I always believed myself able to hear angels. Now I am one and have been for more than two hundred years." She shook her head. "But I couldn't stay with them. I - " She didn't finish. "I needed to leave that place and help out with the supernaturals. That is why I created the League of Huntsmen, and that is why I am here to help you stop Sharra. She deserves to pay for her crimes."

That almost sounded like revenge talk, not that Joanna was wrong.

One of the huntsmen came over to us. "Is there a place where we can get cleaned up?" he asked, indicating his clothes. They were caked with blood and dirt and I didn't want to know what.

"Sure," I said, and debated where to send them. There were the locker rooms used by students when the Seven Magics Academy was in session. They should be empty - I figured they closed down the school while the akuma and the darkness hung so heavily in all lands.

I stood, knowing our talk was done for a while, but I had to say one more thing. "That's why you haven't found Pops? You feel guilty about drinking his blood?"

Joanna nodded. "Oui." She closed her eyes a moment and she looked like she might crumble. "I cannot face him. Ever."

I disagreed. I understood the weight of guilt, but I also knew that sooner or later her past would sneak up on her and she would have to talk to Pops whether she wanted to or not. "Thank you for telling me," I said and hugged her tight.

She hugged me back. "You and I, more than anyone else, I believe we can relate."

I snorted. "You have no idea."

OceanofPDF.com

SHE'S ALIVE

INSIDE THE CASTLE, I walked the huntsmen, including Joanna, down to the Academy's locker rooms. They were empty, as I suspected. "Towels are in here," I said, opening a cabinet. "Clean clothes here," I went on, opening a closet. "Showers are back there."

"Thank you," the first huntsman said. "I'm Gris," he added. Then he turned to the rest of the group and introduced them. I forgot the names as soon as they were mentioned but appreciated Gris's efforts.

"Good to meet you all. I'm going to get changed too," I said, though that wasn't strictly true. Joanna was suffering and I needed to be there for her. "If you need us, Joanna and I will be in the dining hall in an hour."

"You are most kind." Gris saluted as we walked out.

The castle was like a ghost town. A servant or two would scuttle along, keeping their eyes down, focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

I hurried up to my rooms where I sent Joanna in to shower, hoping the warm water would get her out of her funk. Inside my closet, I searched for clothes that might fit her. As I was about to leave, I caught my reflection in the mirror. There was some blood spatter on my neck and cheek.

"Jasmine, it's so good to see you," Zenny said, appearing in the mirror. He wore purple pants, shiny purple shoes, and a yellow and purple checkered shirt. His hair was silver and swooped to one side like a cursive L.

"Hello, Zenny." I wiped at the blood and tucked my shirt into my jeans.

"You look like you've been in a battle," he said. It was then I

noticed how tired he sounded.

"I have," I admitted through clenched teeth. "But I'm fine. How are you?"

"Sick of this darkness and what it's done to the people of S - " He stopped talking and leaned in close to study my crown. "That a crown?" he asked, his eyes wide. "It's beautiful. Can I hold it?"

I shrugged. "Sure." I tried to take it off, but it wouldn't come. I could make it appear and disappear, but it was stuck to me. It was at that moment I realized the only way Sharra was getting this crown was literally over my dead body.

And I didn't want to die - unless doing so would save the people I loved.

"Here, why don't you touch it?" I leaned in and he reached out, touching the crown lightly.

"Ouch," he said, pulling back quickly. "It shocked me something fierce."

"Sorry about that. Are you okay?" I'd forgotten about the crown's need to defend me and was glad it hadn't killed Zenny.

"Fine." He waved a hand at me. "It's a lovely, if not lethal bit of jewelry." He sucked on a finger and shook it again.

"I need to learn to control it," I admitted, standing and turning from side to side, remembering that Laeddin had suggested I speak with Pops. But going into the human realm might be tricky, especially with Joanna and her huntsmen in tow.

Zenny shook his head. "Well, if you're going to save the world, you're wearing the perfect outfit. Good luck." He disappeared.

I sighed. "Thanks, Zenny."

Outside the closet, I went to my window. There were only sixteen or seventeen days left until total darkness and it showed. The sky was grayish black even though it was still the middle of the day.

"How do I find you, Sharra," I whispered aloud, taking the clean

clothes I'd found into the bathroom. The water had shut off and my friend the angel-vampire would need something to wear. "Clothes are on the counter," I said.

"Thank you," she hollered, still getting dried off in the shower area.

Before I could respond, there was a quick knock at my bedroom door.

Immediately on high alert, the assassin swords appeared in my hands. "Who is it?" I said, trying to calm myself. My gaze caught my reflection in the full-length mirror to the left of me. There were shadows under my violet eyes and my skin was paler than usual. The swords in my hands were scary. I looked scary. Deadly, I thought. That was good. I needed to be a regular horror show to defeat Sharra.

"It's your grandfather," Pops said through the door.

I shook away the swords and ran to the door, flinging it open. Pops was there and I flung my arms around him. "You're exactly the person I needed to see," I whispered into his chest, enjoying his usual scent of peppermint and cigar smoke. At least one thing in my life never changed.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, kissing the top of my head. "I see you have the crown. That's why I came. To check and see if you needed my help."

"Yes, I did," I said. "And yes, I need your help desperately. Because I'm not sure how to control the magic of the crown or even my own magic for that matter. If feels so strong, so powerful, but it kind of bursts out of me on its own. Can you help me?"

He smiled and it was like a breath of fresh air, touching his lips. "That was why you shocked me just now."

"Sorry," I said mournfully.

"Don't be. It's fine." His smile widened. "I believe I can help. Why don't you come back to Salem with me? I have some books that talk about the elven crown and - " He stopped talking, his eyes getting big as they trained on something over my head.

It wasn't something but someone. Crap!

"I can explain," I said at the same time Joanna did.

Pops gently pushed me out of the way and went to Joanna. "Is it really you?" His voice was so pained, I wanted to cry all over again.

"It's me," she whispered, emotions tracking across her face too fast to read.

I just stood there, unsure how to respond. Their reunion felt too personal for me to watch, but I couldn't move.

"How is this possible?" Pops asked, still in shock. He stopped directly in front of her.

"I didn't die but became a vampire after all." She appeared spooked, like she would bolt at any moment, and beyond guilty.

I could so relate and wanted to reassure her, but I held back, knowing Pops could help better than I.

"I've done things - " Joanna added. "Things I'm not proud of. Horrible, awful things." Her voice broke and it was like she was speaking from my heart.

Pops took her hands, holding her to him. "It's okay," he said, pulling her into a hug.

She fell against his chest as a sob caught in her throat. "Adam, ma chere," she whispered over and over.

Tears streamed down my face as the ache in my heart grew. Was it possible Troy would forgive me so easily? I didn't know.

"How I've missed you," Joanna said.

"And I you, my dearest Red." Pops kissed the top of her head and hugged her to him.

They stayed like that for a long time, until I felt like a spy and I cleared my throat. "I'm going to go down to the dining hall," I said. It wasn't the best excuse, but I'd told the huntsmen that was where we would be in an hour. I could visit with them until Joanna and Adam had their time together.

Pops cleared his throat and wiped at his eyes. "Joanna and I will have time later, but first, we need to get you some training."

"I have agreed to train her," Joanna said.

Pops nodded. "Let's go back to my home in Salem and we can discuss it."

"Will your men be alright without you?" I asked Joanna.

"They will be fine. I may be their leader but they are capable of acting independently." She still clung to one of Pops' arms as though now that she had him near, she would never let him go.

"Very well," Pops said. "Let me see - " he began.

"It's okay, Pops. I can get us there." I rested a hand on Pops' shoulder and grabbed the amulet.

"Of course, you possess the power, but I wasn't sure you were aware of your capabilities," he said, a grim look on his face.

"I-I have this amulet that can transport us." I held it up for him to see.

He looked like he wanted to say more about it, but he only nodded. "Go on."

I knew the amulet was a safety net, but right now, I needed it. Closing my eyes, I thought of Pops' study in his mansion in Salem, filled with books and old papers, the low light, and the dark stained wood.

The three of us arrived within seconds. I knew even before I opened my eyes. Pops' office had a distinct smell and I smiled.

Joanna searched the room, though she kept a hand on Pops. "This office looks like you," she said, her voice warm.

He kissed her cheek but didn't respond. Going over to one of his bookshelves, Pops began pulling down books and placing them carefully on his desk. Once the shelf was empty, he found what he was looking for and pressed down on something I couldn't see.

In a flash, the bookcase slid over to reveal a stack of secret tomes.

They rested on glass shelving in what looked like a clean room. A light flicked on, but it was muted, giving off a soft glow.

Joanna and I stood there with our mouths open as Pops went into the small room and calmly scanned through the books until he found the one he wanted. Once he was finished, he stepped out, pressed down on the shelf again, and the bookcase slid closed.

"What are you looking for, Adam?" Joanna asked, moving back to his side.

He smiled. "Jasmine needs to go to the dragon realm," he said and carefully turned the pages of the book until he found the page he wanted. To me, he said, "Your mom created realms for the creatures of the seven magics after she defeated Sharra the first time. You know that?" he asked.

"Of course." It was taught at the Academy, though I'd never heard of a dragon realm. Just add that to the list of things I didn't know existed, including an angel realm.

"Doing so took most of her power. You know that too," he continued.

"Yes," was all I said.

"What you should know, but obviously don't, is that you have all of her power and more within you." He watched me intently until I looked down at my hands.

In theory, I knew that as well. Between the crown and my original vampire powers that were reawakened after my memories were returned, I should feel practically omnipotent. That wasn't the case. "And?" I finally asked, having no idea where he was leading the conversation. My eyes flickered to Joanna and she nodded.

"You need to train, and while I know Joanna said she would help, it's better that she doesn't - "

"But mon amour," she began.

Pops held up a hand. "Jasmine's magic is too powerful. She could

accidentally kill you." He looked at me and I swallowed, not even wanting to picture it. "But she cannot hurt the dragons," he said with finality. "She must train there." He paused a moment, and a distressed expression crossed his face. He bookmarked the place in the book with his finger and closed it, leaning against the bookshelf and watching me. "It will be hard. The dragon realm is dangerous, as you can imagine, but that is why it's the perfect place to hone your magical skills."

"But I don't want to kill dragons either," I said softly.

"As you know, the Unknowns created all supernaturals, except dragons. Because of that, their power is beyond even yours." His eyes bore into mine until I had to look away. "If you tried hard enough, perhaps you could kill one, but it would be very difficult." He opened the book, studying it a moment. "The dragon realm is known as the Hollow. After Sharra began to coax other magical creatures into diluting their magic, the dragons understood what would happen and wanted no part in it. Though Abernathy thought it perfectly normal for magic to alter over time, the other dragons didn't agree. They demanded he create a secret realm known only to them. Without telling anyone, and going against Sharra's wishes, Abernathy formed the Hollow. All dragons went to live there, except Abernathy and Netherby."

I leaned forward in shock. Joanna was surprised as well, though she didn't say anything. Unease crept through me and I wondered if Pops had revealed to much in front of Joanna. Her loyalties had changed. She worked for the angels now. "What did Sharra think when they were suddenly gone?" I asked, my gaze on Joanna.

Unaware of my distress, Pops answered. "According to Abernathy, it took her a while to notice." He shrugged. "It wasn't like there were a lot to begin with and the world is big enough that the dragons spread out. When she finally discovered their absence, she confronted Abernathy, but he refused to tell her what happened to them."

"And no one goes against a dragon, not even Sharra," I said as a

new wave of frustration rolled off me. "If only Abernathy would just take matters into his own hands and destroy the original vampire queen. It would be easier."

"Easier, yes. But life isn't about easy. Besides, it isn't Abernathy's responsibility to clean up everyone else's messes. We must be responsible for our own actions. Abernathy knows that. You should too."

I let that sink in. It was like a lightbulb went off. "You're right," I said, and my feelings toward the dragon softened. I felt bad that I believed all of the responsibility should fall on Abernathy. Just because he could fix things, didn't mean he should.

Pops winked. "I believe in you, my dearest granddaughter."

I forced myself to grin as I flopped into a leather chair opposite his desk. Despite my doubts, it filled me with happiness to know he had such confidence in me. But I wasn't there yet. "So there's a secret realm of dragons?" I asked, getting back to the task at hand. If he intended to send me there, I might as well go now.

"That's right," Pops said. "The realm doesn't follow Earth's rules of time or space like the other realms do. It's completely separate. Sort of like the way Polonias used to be before Abernathy changed it." He came around and sat on the edge of the desk in front of me. "I dare say it isn't even part of Earth, but only tethered to it. Not that it matters. What does matter is, Abernathy gave me the spell to find the realm a long time ago. I wrote it down right here and haven't shared it with anyone. Ever. Until now." He pointed at the page.

I looked but didn't read the handwritten words. The notion of a realm full of dragons excited and terrified me.

Pops studied me. "Are you ready to go?"

My mind raced like it might explode. According to Pops, the dragons couldn't kill me nor I them, so I needed to put my big-girl pants on and just do it. "And you're sure there's time?" I liked the idea of training. After all the mistakes I'd made, jumping into another one

and expecting to defeat Sharra seemed immature, especially since I might end up killing my parents or Troy in the process. But the darkness would be here in - I looked at the digital calendar on Pops' desk. The darkness would be here in fourteen days. Two weeks!

"Definitely. Time in the Hollow is different than time here." He crossed his arms and waited while I deliberated internally. There was really nothing to consider. It was the right thing to do. Necessary, even.

"I'm in," I said.

"I will go with you, Jasmine," Joanna said.

"No!" Pops shouted, fury suddenly on his face. It only lasted a moment before his expression went blank. "That is a bad idea, Joanna."

She flinched and crossed her arms, looking mutinous. The woman hadn't changed much in five hundred years. She would do what she wanted, when she wanted, and no one could stop her once she put her mind to something. I also knew Pops needed time with her - she needed to tell him why she hadn't come looking for him and they needed to heal.

"I appreciate the offer, Joanna. You've always been a true friend to me. But let me do this alone, please," I begged, hoping she would listen.

"Very well." She didn't want to agree, but I think she sensed she and Pops needed a conversation too.

There was evident relief on Pops' body. "Now that's settled," he said, handing me the book.

I took it as he pointed. "Read this," he said.

I studied the spot where his finger rested. The words weren't any I knew and I had to read them more than once. By the third pass, something strange began to happen. As I thought the words, images formed in my mind. I saw dragons of all colors flying through the air. Swirling and twirling. Some breathing fire, others playing together,

doing stunts in the air.

"Do you have the images?" Pops asked, his eyes on me.

"Yes," I said, surprised he knew what I was seeing.

"Now say the words from the book aloud," he instructed, crossing his arms, his eyes falling on Joanna for the briefest moment before he returned his gaze to me. "Go on."

"Gethawa. Soulatha. Yonasha - " I began but stopped.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine here," Pops said. He took hold of Joanna's hand and she wrapped an arm around his waist, giving me a nod.

I swallowed, desperate to believe them. "Shaveneth," I whispered.

The world shifted. I was tugged through time. As I went, there were images of dragon battles. Lands on fire. Stacks of bones piled high. I hoped that wasn't the state of the Hollow, but if my luck continued to hold the way it was, then death and destruction were exactly what I would find.

OceanofPDF.com

ENORMOUS NESTS

As soon as I arrived in the Hollow, the hot air caressed my skin like flames on cooking meat. I wrapped my arms around myself, working to get my bearings. The sky was dark, and I had a moment of fear - perhaps Pops was wrong and Sharra's powers reached here as well - until I noticed the pinks and oranges in the distance. The sun was rising. A shiver of joy touched my heart. Light was coming and that filled me with hope.

I took a step forward and something crunched under my boot as my shin cracked against something sharp. "Ow." I glanced down and discovered the ground was made of sticks, several of which were jabbing into me. "Where am I?" I knew I was in the Hollow, but where specifically? The thick twined sticks were woven together but that gave me no indication. Lifting myself up onto the wall of twigs, I peered over the side. A wave of dizziness sent my head spinning. Below and across the expanse as far as I could see stretched an unending valley filled with craggy hills, some much taller than others, and shaped like giant twisted fingers. The ground was black, just as it had been in my vision as I passed into this realm.

As the sun continued to rise, there shone a body of water, the rays of the sun dancing on the small, rippling waves. To the right stood a densely thick forest, the trees so tight together, the colorful leaves reminded me of an afghan Ciana crocheted for me.

Turning away from the forest, I glanced around the valley far below before allowing my eyes to wander up the strange mountains, reminiscent of anthills. At the top of several sat what looked like enormous nests.

A quick perusal of my immediate surroundings and I knew that I was inside a nest. Three great eggs were nestled together in the center.

Thankfully, I hadn't broken one when I arrived.

From outside the nest came an atrocious sound. I turned in time to see an enormous emerald dragon appear out of the sky and hover above one of the nests with what looked like the remnants of a broken cow dangling from its claws.

Little faces appeared and began devouring the carcass.

"I need to get out of here." If a mamma found me inside her nest, she would probably tear me to shreds.

As I debated how to get down, I thought about my schooling at the Seven Magics Academy. There hadn't been a lot of information on dragons. Kenmei gave us some instruction, but he was always a bit mysterious when it came to whether dragons could have children and so on. And how were they born.

With care, I maneuvered around the nest, avoiding the eggs. Dragons, at least full-blooded dragons, were similar to birds in that they laid eggs. Freaking cool!

But what about Troy? He was half dragon. If his mother was human, then was he born like human babies? I never thought to ask him. When I saw him again, and if he would talk to me, I would find out.

After skirting the nest, I stopped back where I started. There was only one way out and that was down. Way, way down. The thought terrified me. It didn't matter that I was a vampire or that I had flown once upon a time. Nor did it matter that I was strong and fast. The idea of falling filled me with fear.

A noise momentarily brought me out of my funk. The eggs rumbled like they were about to crack open. I didn't want to be a baby dragon's first meal, either. I climbed up on the edge of the nest just as a head poked out, pushing aside the eggs like they were rocks. Too big to be one of the baby dragons, it had just been covered by the eggs. The dragon's head was covered in ruby, scarlet, and burgundy scales and had eyes the color of the sky. When it saw me, it pushed all the

way out and stood on the eggs. Probably two feet tall, it charged me, baring its teeth and sending a puff of smoke from its mouth.

Frantic, I reached out, touching the dragon on the nose as the power within me shot from my hand and went directly into the little dragon. "No," I said, as guilt washed over me. I hadn't meant to hurt the baby.

Instead of crying out or disintegrating like others who attacked me in the past, the little dragon shook its head as the magic rippled across its scales harmlessly.

Relief filled my veins as the dragon spread its scarlet wings like twin kites and flapped them once, then twice, but didn't fly away - almost like it couldn't.

"You're okay, little one," I said, but I kept my hands out, sliding down to the floor with my back to the edge of the nest. The twigs scratched and dug against my skin, but I ignored the pain. "Easy, buddy. I'm leaving." When I knew it wouldn't attack me, I scrambled back onto the edge again, my eyes trained on the dragon. It came forward, sniffing me like a dog checking out a new toy or a delicious treat. It opened its mouth, but instead of biting, it licked my hand.

"I don't taste good, I promise." I stood, glancing back so I didn't accidentally step off the edge.

The dragon used its wings to lift off the ground so we were eye level. It didn't seem scared anymore. Probably just curious and hungry.

"I am not your mother," I said and swallowed. No duh. Dragons didn't want to eat their mothers. At least, I didn't think so.

From above, a whoosh of hot air rushed over me and I had to squat and grab hold of the edge so I didn't fall over. Nervous, I glanced up in time to see a stark white dragon in the distance. The hot air I felt came from the blast of dragon fire it had roared at me. Thankfully, the flames hadn't reached. But now the dragon had turned around and was coming for me at speeds beyond what I could comprehend. I

thought it would crash into me, but at the last moment it pulled up, revealing sharp claws that reached out to grab me.

Quickly I jumped out of the nest, grabbing hold of the dirt and rock mountainside and working to climb down. With my vampire strength, I dug holes into the sheer cliff, hanging on for dear life. One wrong move and I'd plummet thousands of feet down. The dragon kept coming, flying sideways, its wings flapping as it sent a stream of flames at me. I screamed and jumped to the side before continuing down. The dragon wouldn't give up and came around yet again, this time with its claws aimed at me.

Without thinking, I sent a bolt of magic at it. The dragon flinched and snapped her jaws, just barely missing me with her enormous pointy teeth.

More frazzled and afraid than I'd ever been, I continued down the sheer mountain, moving as quickly as I could while sending out protective bolts of magic. About halfway down, the dragon came at me again with both claws. One sharp talon ripped across my back as it dug in. Unable to hold on, I fell down, down, down. Spinning and twisting, I rotated so that I saw the ground coming. I flipped myself around in time to see the dragon chasing after me. Letting out a final scream of frustration, magical lightning bolts shot from both of my hands and into the dragon.

It was surrounded by white light as it fought to be free. Before I knew whether I was safe, I hit the ground, feeling myself go deep into the earth. Then came the pain, so potent it knocked me unconscious.

OceanofPDF.com

LIRLE, THE DRAGON

I WAS DREAMING.

That much was clear.

Because Troy was there and he was laughing.

It'd been a long time since I heard him laugh.

Warmth and love radiated from him and I felt such joy. Even when he started to lick my face.

"Troy," I said, giggling. "Stop it."

His face changed from my gorgeous Troy to something red and scaly.

I opened my eyes and looked directly into the face of the dragon that had been in the nest with me.

Surprised, I rose up on my elbows, hoping the dragon would get the hint and get off, but it just scooted down into my lap before resting its forehead against me.

I heard the distinctly female voice inside my mind: Hello, my name is Lirle.

"Can you get off me, Lirle," I said, aloud, forcing myself to remain calm.

Of course, she said, flying up and landing on the ground beside me.

The ground was cracked and flaky like it hadn't rained in months.

When I fell, I felt myself go into the ground, but now I'm lying on a flat surface without an indent where my body would be.

"Did you pull me out of the hole?" I asked, rubbing the back of my head as I sat all the way up and glanced around. I noticed several claw marks in my shirt and guessed she must have.

Lirle responded in my mind: Yes. I hope that is okay. I didn't want you to wake beneath the ground. That might be terrifying.

As she spoke, she shuddered.

"You're right," I said, sticking my fingers through the holes. "I appreciate you getting me out."

Then I remembered the white dragon. "Where is your mother? Won't she be worried and come looking for you?"

At the thought, I jumped up into a crouched position, scanning the surrounding area.

The dragon snorted, sending a puff of smoke into the air and said: That was not my mother. The dragon's name is Vanera and she kidnapped me from my home several weeks ago. I was trapped in her nest by a spell for weeks as she intended to use me as food for her babies' first meal. But when you shocked me with your magic, the spell was broken and I was freed.

Lirle flew forward and kissed me on the cheek before going on: The least I could do was help you out of your hole, though I doubted you'd survive.

She tilted her head to one side and said: How did you survive? Was it your magic?

Her scales were warm and her lips tickled my face.

"I'm glad I could help," I said, stepping back. She didn't understand what personal space meant and I was struggling with her closeness.

"Magic was part of it, I'm sure, but I am a vampire. The only way to kill me is to chop of my head." I thought about that. No one knew if that would work for me. It seemed logical, but I added, "Maybe."

A vampire? she asked and clapped her hands, flying in a circle.

Lirle spoke in my mind again: I've heard fairytales about vampires and always wanted to meet one.

She flew around me, her face super close as she studied me. I felt like a statue on display but waited for her to finish.

Finally, she made her way back to my face and said: You're very beautiful, uh, what's your name?

I hated to admit it, but she was absolutely adorable.

"Jasmine," I said, kicking at a clod of hardened dirt.

She squinted, her eyes searching mine and replied: Well, Jasmine, it's lovely to meet you. But - What are you doing here? The dragon realm isn't safe for most dragons let alone other supernatural creatures.

I hesitated a moment before deciding to tell her the truth.

"I recently acquired this elven crown," I said, touching it to make sure it was still there.

"It contains a great deal of power, but I don't know how to use it. My grandfather thought it would be a good idea for me to come here to practice using the magic since it doesn't effect dragons."

Her face scrunched with distress and her voice became angry: Did he not worry you might be killed?

"I am an original vampire and I have access to all of the seven magics. Though I don't look it, I'm actually pretty strong myself." I didn't sound convincing.

Lirle tilted her head to one side and said: Hmmmm, well, perhaps I could help you practice using your magic while we travel back to my family's home to the north of here. I'm sure if you returned me they would be very grateful and grant you a reward.

I didn't need a reward but I did like the idea of practicing with the dragon.

I thought about the white dragon - Vanera. "Is the white dragon dead?"

Lirle snorted, sending out a large smoke ring before she spoke into my mind: No. Dragons are very difficult to kill, Jasmine.

She paused, gave me what looked like a very toothy smile, and continued: But you did keep her trapped long enough for me to rescue

you, so now she can't find us.

Lirle's smile disappeared and she gave the landscape a quick perusal.

I did the same and saw we were very near the forest, just on the outskirts.

It made sense she brought me here.

The trees would provide cover and plenty of hiding places.

"What's wrong?" I asked, when her gaze returned to mine.

There was fear evident in her sky blue eyes when she answered: It won't be long until Vanera sends her Ondror Slayers after us.

"On-what? Why would she do that?" I asked, unhappy that we might be in danger again so quickly.

Lirle headed to the edge of the forest and asked: I can trust you, right, vampire?

"You can, without a doubt." Even if she couldn't, I had no one to talk to but her anyway.

"Whatever you share, I will keep secret. I promise," I said, following after her.

She glanced over her shoulder briefly, then bobbed her head once and said: My parents are the king and queen of the Hollow. There are many dragons who wish to kill the only heir to the throne. But the most treacherous and the strongest is Vanera. Twenty years ago, the day after I was born, she started the Dragon War. Not to long after that there began to be tales of the Ondror Slayers -

She paused and I held up a hand. "Wait, you're twenty years old?" That was a surprise.

Lirle sniffed and said: I'll be twenty-one in a couple of weeks.

"And you're a princess?" Lirle and I had a lot in common.

She responded: That is right. And as the sole heir to the throne, I am a very valuable hostage to those who oppose my parents.

Lirle's wings sent wisps of air at me and I was grateful for the

breeze.

The longer the day grew, the hotter it became. She was like my own personal fan.

An eerie feeling washed over me. "Should we be out like this in the daylight? I feel vulnerable."

In response, she said: It is a risk. But we have a long way to travel and the longer it takes, the more likely that the slayers will find us.

"Alright, then lead on, Lirle.," I returned, full of gratitude.

I followed after the flying dragon for hours.

More than once I admired the rainbow colored leaves on the strange trees all around us.

We didn't speak much as we went and the silence was nice.

Lirle told me there were animals in the woods, some large, the size of deer or even a big cat, but I didn't see any, only heard them.

They were very good at hiding.

As she flew, I had to admire Lirle's wings and the way she soared with such ease.

By late afternoon, she became tired and we decided to take a break near a small brook.

She said: I'll be right back. Stay here.

I sat on a rock and waited, the dappled light causing the clear water to sparkle.

Lirle wasn't gone long and when she returned she carried an animal I didn't recognize in her mouth.

Blood dripped from the carcass as she dropped it to the ground and began to eat.

Trying not to be disgusted, I turned away, kicking at some of the rocks near the edge of the brook.

More than once, Lirle crunched on bones and I had to force myself not to flinch or gag.

Into my mind, she said: That's better.

She smacked her lips.

I glanced over my shoulder just as she flew by, landing in the center of the stream and ducking her head under the water, cleaning herself off.

When she was finished she flew back over to me and said: Once we are through here, we can follow this stream to the end.

"What's at the end?" I asked, picking up a rock and turning it in one hand.

She bowed her head and said: My home. I would offer you some of my blood, but it's highly unlikely your fangs would break through my scales.

I gave her a small smile. "Thank you for the offer but I'm not hungry."

Relief washed through her vivid eyes and she said: Great. Do you want to practice your magic on me?

I shrugged. That was the reason I was here. "Sure, but first, isn't following the stream a little too obvious? Won't the Ondror expect us to follow the stream?"

She flew over to a tree stump and sat on her hind legs, folding her wings behind her back and responded: Five streams lead to our family's castle and stronghold. It rests in the center of the realm. The Ondror won't know which stream we are taking. Let's hope by the time they figure it out, it'll be too late. She flew around my head. Now then, let me see you use your magic, Jasmine.

"That's my problem, I don't know how. Usually the magic just comes out of me when I'm feeling threatened." I crossed my arms, feeling self-conscious.

She studied me intently, her head tilted to the side like that of a curious puppy and said: Of course, I don't know exactly how your magic works, but the best advice I was given was to let your body and

your spirit connect. Close your eyes.

I made a face but did as she said.

She went on: Good. Now relax your mind and search for the magic. When you find it, let me know.

I wanted to tell the little red dragon she was kooky, but I decided to give her advice a try.

So I took a deep breath and felt for the magic.

In my mind, I saw my heart, my ribs, my stomach -

It all seemed pointless and a tendril of panic started to rise in my throat.

I would never get this right. I was too immature, too - something.

But then I felt a change. A power near my bellybutton.

It pulsed like a heartbeat and I went to it.

Surprisingly, there was a light. Bright and shimmering.

Then I felt another something, this time near my heart.

I drifted toward it.

The power swirled, like an endless black hole.

It was almost terrifying, except somehow I knew it was my original vampire magic - a part of me that had always been there.

Dormant but waiting for me to recognize it.

"I found them," I said, hearing the awe in my voice.

Lirle clapped her paws together and said: Way to go, Jasmine.

I smiled but kept my eyes closed.

She said: Now imagine that your magic is something you can pick up and wield, like a weapon.

Immediately my mind went to the swords that appeared in my hands just before I battled each of the assassins who had been forced to protect the elven crown.

As I thought about them, the swords appeared in my mind, their blades electrified with the elven magic.

Could I attach my original vampire magic to the swords as well? I wondered.

At the thought, I felt the two powers shift and move so that the elven crown powers and my own powers converged just under my ribs.

They combined with a flash of white light.

A dull ache formed on my skin and I wanted to scratch the pain away but didn't move, allowing the magics to do their thing.

Lirle asked: Can you think of a weapon?

"Swords," I said as I watched the swords blacken.

One at a time, the swords attached to my ribs, the magics running up and down my bones until it felt like they were infused. I sucked in my breath.

Not necessarily pain, but a tightness. Until the magic rested and the swords appeared in my mind again, but different now.

The handles had become onyx in color and the blades silver and gold. They were beautiful, but more than that, they were a combination of my vampire magics as well as the elven crown.

"I have them," I said.

Lirle said: That is excellent. Next, think about the swords and imagine your magic becoming one with them.

I didn't tell her that had already happened. I just nodded.

Though I was still full of questions, a peace passed through me, and I opened my eyes.

The dragon smiled and spoke into my mind: Your crown is gone. The magic must be -

She didn't finish as a menacing sound, like a low growl and a hiss at the same time, came from deeper in the forest.

Lirle's blue eyes grew wide and fear flickered into her words: We must continue on and find a place to hide. While its dangerous to be out during the day, it's even worse at night.

"Lead the way," I said, standing and immediately on my guard.

The dappled sunrays no longer touched the water and darkness covered the forest. How long had I been working on my magic?

OceanofPDF.com

ONDROR'S MAGIC

LIRLE TOOK TO THE AIR, her attention on the direction where the sound came from. Her whole body trembled.

"You're frightened. What is it?" I asked, fighting my own nerves.

Lirle's eyes bore into mine and her terror shone brightly as she said: We're too late. The Ondror's magic is upon us. Listen carefully. A dragon's magic comes from the soul. Our greatest weapon is using the weaknesses of our enemy against them by showing them what they fear most.

She flew over to the stream before coming back to me and pointing with one claw.

Lirle asked: Do you see the soul magic coming?

I followed her gaze and squinted until I saw the blackness, traveling like a deadly mist through the trees, and heading right for us. "Can we outrun it?"

She shook her head and said: No. It's everywhere.

She spun in a circle and I followed her.

Lirle was right. It was coming from every direction, like we had a homing beacon on us.

She met my gaze and said: You see? Whatever happens, whatever you experience or hear, know it isn't real. The Ondror's magic can't last forever. Just hang on. When it's finished, if we aren't dead, we'll figure out what to do next.

She came over and scratched my arm with the talons of one hand.

"Ouch. What was that for?" Blood pooled and lined my forearm where she'd raked over my skin.

Her eyes were trained on me and she said: I know vampires heal quickly, but a dragon wound takes the longest to mend. Focus on the

physical pain. Whatever the soul magic throws at you, remember to focus on the pain.

I nodded that I understood.

"What about you? What will you focus on?" I didn't know what to expect but I worried for her.

Lirle's voice sounded haunted but strong as she said: I'll be alright. My instructors have trained me for this moment my entire life.

Within moments, the wispy darkness enfolded me, almost caressing as it rubbed along my body until it reached my face before making its way into my mouth and through my nose and eyes.

My swords sprang to life within me, but it was too late. My body sank to the ground and I fell over.

There was screaming or roaring.

Whatever the noise, it reminded me of agony.

And I descended into the dark magic of the Ondror -

I OPENED my eyes to the sun shining brightly. Birds cooed in nearby trees and the ocean roared in the distance. I was in Sharra, resting in a hammock. "How did I get here?" I thought about Lirle and the dread she mentioned. A quick glance down at my arm revealed it was still sore, her scratches still visible. But the world around me seemed fine. No danger. No -

Troy came out onto a balcony above me. This was my family's castle and he was on my balcony, the one outside my bedroom. When I saw him, my breath caught in my throat. He was gloriously handsome.

"Troy," I called, climbing out of the hammock as a gurgle of happiness filled my insides. He had escaped the evil vampire's clutches and was here. Safe. All was right with the world. The sun shone brilliant. The birds sang their happy songs. Darkness no longer ruled the land. I was lighter than I had been in months.

As I watched Troy stare out, his gaze traveling over Sharra, butterflies danced in my stomach. "Troy, I'm down here," I said, shouting louder.

He still didn't hear me or acknowledge me. I went toward him and was about to shout again when I heard giggling coming from inside my room.

Before I had time to think, a woman appeared beside Troy. Her hair was long and blond and beautiful like the rest of her. He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her temple as she leaned into him. "How did I get so lucky?" he whispered, his lips on her hair.

Pain tore through my chest. Shredded it into ribbons. "Troy," I called again, this time without much fervor, as I fell to my knees. But I couldn't look away. Not even when he kissed her thoroughly and deeply, the way he used to kiss me. "Stop," I said, my word catching in my throat. "Please. I'm sorry. Don't choose her, choose me. Love me." Tears leaked onto my cheeks and wet my neck, dripping into my shirt.

"Do you miss her?" The beautiful woman asked like I wasn't even there.

"Jasmine?" Troy made a face like my name tasted disgusting in his mouth. "Not even a little bit. How could I miss her when I have you?" He took the woman's hand and brought it to his lips, his eyes holding hers. "Let's go back to bed. I want lots and lots of half dragon babies and I want lots of chances to make them with you." His features turned hungry. For her.

She laughed softly, tugging him against her. "But you promised me we could go flying. I want to see this land we are destined to rule."

What? Where were my mom and dad? And vampires? This was Sharra and this realm had always been ruled by vampires. Not dragons. Another lance of pain rushed through me. Were my parents dead? Did they not survive? Had I failed them all?

"Right, let's fly, my love," he said, pulling me out of my thoughts. Troy smiled and jumped up onto the balcony rail. The woman joined

him wearing a lovely cream night dress, her feet bare. Hand in hand they bounded into the air. On the way down, they shifted into dragon form. Troy's bronze scales glittered and shone, but the woman was even more exquisite with scales the color of the sun. They flew down toward me, so close, I could almost touch them, but I didn't move. It hurt too much. Everything hurt.

It felt like I was dying.

And it was my own fault. The consequences of my actions come to life.

I had hurt Troy by making out with Christopher. At the memory of what I had done, guilt rose like bile in my throat. I didn't deserve Troy. I'd known that from the day we met. He was everything good, kind, courageous and gorgeous all rolled into one while I was arrogant and only concerned with myself.

That understanding did little to ease my pain. Instead I felt worse and wished I would just disappear. I fell onto my face and rolled to my back. As I lay there, I watched Troy and his new lover flying joyfully together. One thought kept playing over and over in my mind:

I wish I were dead.

I wish I were dead.

I wish I were dead.

Something snaked around my leg, but I didn't care. Nor did I move, except to lift my head and see. It was a thick green vine. The pressure of its constriction like that of a snake. I cried out as it squeezed my bones until they broke. Tighter and tighter.

But I didn't care.

All I could do was stare up at the bronze and summer yellow dragons as they flew together in harmony. Troy deserved that, I thought, someone who was like him. Good and unselfish.

The vine gripped my other leg. Agony shot through me once again but I breathed into it, recognizing that I deserved to suffer and

knowing that once I was gone, the world would be free of all I'd done.

Without remorse, the vine wound its way around my hips and moved up to my waist, squeezing as it went. I panted through the pain.

Once the vine swallowed me, would I suffer endless torment? It was what I deserved. The thought woke me to the slightly different aching coming from my arm. Casually, I glanced down at it. Five savage cuts resided in my skin.

And then I remembered Lirle's words.

"This isn't real," I whispered and tears blurred my vision. Troy wasn't with the blond woman - not really. This was the work of the Ondror's magic, and it focused on what I did to Troy. That knowledge surprised me. I would've guessed my biggest shame was the consequences to all realms by making my wishes and bringing about the darkness and the akuma. But that wasn't so. The soul magic drew on my deepest, darkest pain. And that was the belief that I didn't deserve Troy - that he was better off without me.

But there was still hope - if I could break free from the soul magic.

At the thought, my magic, now connected to the twin blades, roared from my chest and sprouted out of my hands. I sat up, cutting away the vines until I could stand.

Above, fake Troy and his fake lover still circled in the sky happily, but I ignored them now. I needed to escape the Ondror's magic.

At my feet, the vine was retreating and I followed it as it led me to the edge of a forest. This wasn't in the real realm of Sharra, but I had a hunch that wherever the vine retreated, that was where I would find the source of the magical hold. So I stepped into the blanket of the trees, using my vampire vision to track the vine. A quick glance up and I could no longer see the sky. In a way it was a relief. Even though I knew this wasn't real, seeing Troy flying with another woman, even in dragon form, was excruciating.

I followed the vine for what felt like several miles until it stopped

at an enormous tree. The trunk and branches were white, the leaves yellow, and as the vine slunk into the dirt near its base, I was reminded of the dragon, Vanera, the white dragon who'd taken Lirle.

At the thought of the dragon doing this to me, I lashed out with my swords, cutting into the trunk. At first it was random, just me throwing cuts out of anger, but slowly, I began to feel my magic within. The ebb and flow. At the moment, it was not buried, but not being used either. I closed my eyes, trying to see my power. And there it was, gold and silver, waiting for me to use it because I wanted to. Not out of uncontrollable rage, but with controlled fury. That was the secret. Choice. Control. Intention.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes and circled the tree, searching for its most vulnerable spot. I wasn't sure what I was looking for but hoped I would know when I saw it. About halfway up the trunk, in the back was a hole where the trunk split. As soon as I saw it, I knew that was where I should aim my magics. I grasped both blades together with both hands, and the blade shifted and became one single enormous blade.

The change didn't surprise me because it came from within.

Another deep breath. My power hummed. And I jammed the magical blade directly into the center of the hole. As soon as I did, the world around me became watery. The pretend land of Sharra evaporated and I was once again near the stream in the forest of the Hollow.

How the Ondror Slayers didn't find us, I wasn't sure, but no way was I going to stick around and find out. Lirle was on the ground, her wings tucked at an odd angel under her body as she writhed, seemingly in pain. She was still caught up in the soul magic. Debating for only a moment, I picked her up and carried her in my arms while I walked down the center of the stream in the same direction we'd been traveling before this all happened. She'd told me how to get to her home and I didn't want to wait.

It was more than an hour before Lirle freed herself from the magic. Her body shivered and she opened her eyes.

At first she looked afraid and then she spoke into my mind: Jasmine.

Her eyes were hooded.

"That's right. I hope you don't mind, but when I saw you still suffering, I decided to carry you while I continued on." I tried to smile, but it was no use.

Too much weighed on me.

She pushed herself from my arms and tested her wings as she spoke: I should eat. That took a lot out of me.

Without another word, she flew away, disappearing into the thicket.

I considered whether to wait or keep going but decided moving was the best option.

Not too many minutes later, Lirle returned, and looked better.

She said: Thank you for carrying me, Jasmine. You went above and beyond. She hovered near my shoulder. You could have left me. I will be sure the king and queen know you protected me and that you are loyal.

Leaving without her hadn't crossed my mind.

"There is no need to tell them anything. I have no doubt you would've done the same," I said.

She nodded her head and said: You aren't wrong, but still. Thank you. Has your wound healed?

With her question, she placed one of her paws on my shoulder.

I glanced down at the area where I'd been wounded and saw that it had. "Yes. All good."

Then I decided to change the subject. "How long did Vanera hold you captive?"

Too long, she said but didn't add more.

I sensed a great sorrow in her.

Changing the subject again, I asked, "When will you be considered full-grown, like Vanera?"

I didn't want to specifically comment on her size, but she was much smaller than any dragon I'd seen before.

Her ears perked and I knew I'd found a safe subject as she responded: At least a hundred years. Perhaps longer.

"When do dragons marry or - mate?" I wasn't sure of the correct word.

Not until after their one hundred and fiftieth year. But there is this one dragon - Lirle said into my mind as her eyes turned dreamy. A waft of smoke left her nostrils and formed what I guessed was a heart in the air.

"I want to know all about him," I said, tucking my hands in my pockets.

All through the night I trudged through the water while Lirle flew beside me.

I listened as she talked about Byne, the dragon she had a crush on.

He was older and one of her trainers.

A dragon her parents would never allow her to mate with let alone tie herself to, but she couldn't help the attraction.

I asked her whether other supernatural creatures lived in the Hollow. She explained that a few had found their way here, but it was rare. Mostly there were wild animals similar to those found in the human realm.

When Abernathy created the Hollow, he made sure to include creatures good for snacking on and eating.

I tried not to dwell on that since I had no room to be squeamish.

I drank blood for goodness sake.

By the time we reached the edge of the forest and light began to form in the sky once again, I knew more about dragons than Kenmei

had taught in all my years attending the Academy.

In the distance sat an enormous stronghold made up of giant rock fences and metal gates.

A grate lifted and went over the circular hold, reminding me of a bird cage. In the very middle and up above everything else was an enormous castle.

Outside the stronghold, in the valley, I was able to see two other streams.

Lirle was right. It seemed the source of the streams all began or ended at her family's castle.

How that worked, I didn't know, but I guessed it had to do with magic.

Lirle interrupted my thoughts: That's it. That is my home.

I was about to tell her it was beautiful when she pulled me back and behind a tree.

"What?" I whispered.

There, she said, pointing.

In the distance was a group of three gray dragons. They had metal armor around their arms and legs as well as their heads.

"What are they?" I watched them fly, their eyes trained on the landscape below.

Her voice quivered lightly as she spoke: Some of the Ondror Slayers. They are looking for me. For us. This time, they will not go so easy on us.

"How did they not find us the first time?"

She snorted and said: They didn't know where we were and blanketed the entire land with their power. Such a feat requires a lot of magic. Obviously, they were hoping to take us out that way.

"Do they know we're still alive?" I debated how we were going to get from the cover of the forest to the stronghold.

From the forest to the outskirts was probably more than twenty

miles of open land. I could use my vampire speed and I guessed Lirle could fly fast, but not faster than the enormous Ondror.

Still, I could carry her.

I might be faster than they could fly.

Lirle shuddered nervously as she spoke: They don't, but they are unrelenting. They won't stop until they find us - dead or alive. That is their quest and they have no choice but to do whatever Vanera says. I don't know what to do.

I was about to tell her my idea when I was hit in the side of the head by something large and hard.

I sailed back, cracking my bones against one of the trees.

OceanofPDF.com

A FIGHTER

"HOW NICE TO SEE YOU, LIRLE." The voice came from a gray dragon with blood red eyes. His sharp and pointy teeth glistened like they held their own light.

Huge talons clamped around Lirle from behind, holding her like a sharpened straight jacket. She gasped and struggled but couldn't move. Her captor's clutches were bigger than Lirle's body.

The first dragon looked at me. "And you are Jasmine, heir to Sharra and an original vampire. But where are your wings?" He opened his mouth and I thought he intended to burn me to a crisp. Instead his tongue came out and he licked me. Tasting. "Strange," he said.

"Gross." I wiped my cheek with the sleeve of my shirt. It occurred to me he was speaking like Abernathy did, with his mouth and not in my mind like Lirle. Perhaps speaking aloud was a skill that came with age.

The first dragon pushed through the trees, causing them to snap and break. Then he pounded his tail on the ground several times in a rhythmic fashion while lifting his head. He roared, sending a streak of fire into the early morning sky.

I guessed he was telling the other Ondror Slayers that we were found.

"Should I eat you or bring you to Vanera?" the dragon said, his nose brushing against my shoulder.

My first instinct was fear, but when the second dragon captured Lirle, another emotion engulfed me. Fury. And with it came my controlled power.

"You can try," I said, quietly, as my twin swords appeared, one in

each hand. White lightning skittered around the blades, emitting a light crackling noise.

The dragon reared back slightly, his eyes wide. Then he chuckled, a deep rumbling that started in his throat. "A fighter. I like that, but it's hardly possible your little swords can hurt one such as me." He got in my face again, but I wasn't having it.

"We'll see," I said, and using my speed, slid under him. As I went, I jammed both swords up through his throat until they reached his brain. How the magic worked, I wasn't sure, but they pierced his scales and thick skin like a thorn through soft flesh.

The dragon roared and shook his head. I hung on as I was flung back and forth. His distress only lasted a moment until he dropped to his knees and rolled over, dead.

I yanked out my swords, sending them away before disentangling myself from him. The second dragon still held Lirle, but now his black eyes were afraid. I used that to my advantage. "Do you want to die too or is it possible Lirle can escape?" I rolled my shoulders back and waited for the dragon to respond, prepared to bring forth my swords once again.

He didn't respond, just lifted into the air with Lirle still clamped tightly in his paw and flew away. Without giving me the chance to fight. Coward!

I couldn't follow in the air and that awareness frustrated the crap out of me. My wings! How I missed them. Not giving up I used my vampire speed to follow, tracking the dragon by sight, and watched as he joined a group of other gray dragons. They continued away from the stronghold, heading east, and back the way I'd come.

They were taking Lirle to Vanera. That much was clear. When Vanera got a hold of her again, I worried for Lirle's safety. Would the white dragon kill Lirle instantly? I hoped she still intended to use her as a pawn, to make the king and queen trade the kingdom and their power in exchange for their daughter.

Either way, I couldn't let Vanera or the Ondror harm my newest friend. Now that they had Lirle, they weren't interested in me and I ran without hindrance all day and into the night. Weariness began to settle over me, but sleep wasn't a necessity like it was for other creatures. Sure, I could use it, but not now. I would sleep when the darkness and the akuma were gone. I could sleep when Sharra was no longer seeking to destroy all realms. Or I would be dead. Either way, rest was out of the question until all of this was over.

When they arrived at the blasted mountain that held Vanera's nest, I ground my teeth in irritation. Right back where I started. As I watched the dragons, I expected them to fly Lirle up to the top and drop her into the nest since that's where I found her.

Instead a portion of the mountain slid open, one giant door on each side, making an enormous hole. Without hesitation, the dragons flew inside and the doors began to close.

I pushed myself faster, darting through the opening just as the doors rumbled shut. Dirt and debris from the ceiling rained down, but I ignored it, focusing on finding which direction the dragons were headed. Darkness loomed. I didn't know what to expect but I should've known there would be guards. Too late. Strong, clawed hands wrapped around me.

"You're the one they are talking about. The one who killed Halged. Won't I win the best prize for bringing the killer to my queen?" His voice was like nails on a chalkboard.

How he knew about the Slayer's death was beyond me. Perhaps certain dragons could communicate like a hive mind. I didn't know. What I did know was that I wouldn't be going to the queen as a prisoner. Not if I could help it.

Drawing on the power within, my swords sprang to life in my hands. In one motion, I cut myself from his grasp, turned, jumped, and beheaded the dragon before he had the chance to cry out.

Another appeared to my right and from behind. Though it was

dark, my vision made it easy to see the second, smaller dragon. I leaped in the air and landed on its back before shoving one sword through each side of his head. The dragon let out a fiery breath and fell to the ground, dead.

Heaving my swords, I jumped off the dragon as he fell, landing between the two corpses. Quickly, I stood and spun, making sure there were no other guards. When I was certain I was alone, I closed my eyes, saddened by their deaths. "I am sorry," I said, and meant it. Killing wasn't something I liked, but it seemed that was all my magic could do. Was that how I was meant to defeat Sharra? By killing her?

Of course. But I didn't like the idea.

Could my magic do more?

I wanted to believe the answer was yes. If I learned to control it. Make it do what I want. Magic, like the swords, was a tool, one I was learning to use. As I headed down the expansive corridor, I decided I would do better.

Sending my swords away so the lightning sparking around them wouldn't give me away, I carefully reached the end where I could turn either left or right. I listened, hoping to hear something of Lirle. She hadn't spoken to me since her capture and I wondered why. Just as quickly, I knew the answer. If I could hear her, then perhaps the other dragons could as well. She was protecting me.

At the thought, my insides warmed. The friendship between Lirle and me had built rapidly. Perhaps because we were so alike. Possibly because we needed each other. She was everything I hoped to be. Everything I was working to become.

I heard the dragons moving on the left and went that way. They were flying slowly, probably to avoid smashing into the walls on either side of the vast hallway, but I didn't have that hinderance and caught up to them.

Carefully, I peeked around the corner. They were in a room more than three times the size of the entrance. Nestled in the center near

the back wall was the Vanera. She was looking at the dragons and they were looking at her, but no one spoke. I guessed they were talking in their minds.

I thought of Troy and our dragon connection. Obviously these dragons were using the same magic. A shard of remembrance filtered through my mind. Duh. I was an original, created from and in possession of all seven magics. With my memories returned, I saw myself in a memory, speaking to Abernathy the same way these dragons were speaking now. If I wanted to, I could use dragon magic too.

I closed my eyes and searched for that magic. It didn't take long to find the golden power hovering near my sword blades, still part of the other magics, but distinct. I reached for it and opened it, calling forth its power, and was immediately rewarded.

Instead of connecting to them, I connected to the man I loved. Troy. He was no longer lying on the ground but dressed and showered. It even looked like he combed his hair and shaved, though the hair on his head was longer than when I last saw him.

Troy, I uttered into my mind, feeling hesitant.

My bottom lip trembled, knowing he might not want to hear from me.

I went on: Are you alright?

That he was dressed and clean made me think of a lamb going to the slaughter.

Did Sharra intend to kill him soon? I didn't know. Pops said time moved differently in the Hollow.

Troy answered, his voice soft: Jasmine. I'm fine. Safe for now. I know something is coming, otherwise I wouldn't have been allowed to clean up.

I sensed hesitation in his words.

He went on: There isn't much time. Sharra wants you here now.

She knows you have the elven crown and is furious you haven't come to her yet.

I'm sorry, I said into my mind, urgently. Apologizing for a whole lot with those two simple words. That was okay, as long as it did some good.

Then I went on: I am coming. It's only that I needed some help first. To control the power of the crown as well as my own magic. But soon.

Irritation flashed across his features and he said: With me out of the way, you won't have any guilt over Christopher. You can be with him.

Then his shoulders drooped and his head fell to his chest.

I blew out a devastated breath and gritted my teeth as I said: I have no desire to be with Chris. He is a friend. Nothing more. What happened -

I paused, pressing my fingers against my temples.

Then tried again and said: What happened between Chris and me wasn't because of anything I wanted. Sharra used her power to make me do that. I swear.

I swallowed down my hurt feelings, hoping to convey through my mind how much I loved my dragon boy.

Swallowing as tears pricked against my eyes, I continued: Troy, I have only ever loved you. You mean everything to me and you always will.

OceanofPDF.com

HE LOOKED up and for the briefest moment, I thought he was staring right at me.

No longer angry, but still unsure.

Troy spoke: I love you, too, Jazz.

He stopped speaking and adjusted his weight, sitting up straighter.

They added: Someone is coming.

He closed his eyes and pretended to be sleeping.

His cell door cranked open and a female voice spoke. "I brought you a friend. Try not to kill each other."

Christopher stumbled into the room before turning and flashing his fangs. "You touch me like that again and you won't live to tell anyone about it." His hands were behind his back and black magic held his wrists together.

The person he spoke to laughed. It was Sharra.

I focused on Troy. His eyes burned into Chris like he would kill him.

To Troy, I begged: Please remember, Chris is on our side. He believes in our love too. When Sharra forced me to kiss him, Chris stopped me and freed me from her magic. He's changed and he can help.

I hoped that was true. As much as I trusted Christopher, there was still a tiny part of me that remembered what he did to my mom.

He'd betrayed her at the last moment.

Would he do that again?

I wanted to believe the answer was no.

I said: But I'm on your side, Troy, and always will be.

If I ever had to make a choice, it would always be Troy.

Thank you, Jazz. Stay safe and I'll see you soon, he replied and broke the connection between us.

Something grabbed me, the edge of one of its claws scratching me deeply, nearly severing an arm. "It seems we have the little rat that caused all of our troubles."

A flash of pain filtered through me, like golden poison, until it reached my heart.

Then everything went numb. I couldn't move or call forth my blades.

All I could do was watch as the dragon carried me like a mouse over to the white dragon before depositing me at her feet.

"What are you doing in the Hollow?" Vanera asked, licking her lips as she spoke.

I glanced around for Lirle. She was inside a cage to my right.

It dangled from the ceiling near Vanera, probably so the dragon could keep an eye on her. Lirle glanced at me, her eyes sad. I wanted to scream that I would save her, that she would be all right, but this whole scenario was all too familiar. She was in a cage, same as my parents, same as Troy, and a narcissistic creature held her because she believed she deserved to rule in Lirle's place. Anger at the injustice of it all welled up inside me and I fought to have my swords spring to life, but with my arm taking its time to heal, it was difficult.

"Answer me," Vanera roared, sending smoke and flames from her mouth as she spoke.

My face felt like it would melt off, but the flames didn't quite reach. I licked my lips, working to figure out what to say.

Before I came up with an adequate response, Vanera plucked Lirle out of her cage and dangled her in front of her mouth. "Lirle explained the two of you have become friends. Let's put that to the test." One eye lingered on me. "Either tell me what business you have here or I will

eat the little runt."

I decided to go with some truth and a lie. "Our realms are falling into darkness and I hoped to ask for help from the king and queen of the Hollow."

"Is that so? And why would you think the Hollow would want anything to do with the other realms? We are separated from you and your kind as well as the rest of them for a reason." She brought Lirle closer to her mouth.

"I'm desperate," I said, and meant it. I was desperate. Desperate to save Lirle. To save my parents and Troy. To save the world. As my thoughts fed my anxieties, they rose and so did the magic. What little control I gained over it disintegrated. The seven magics erupted from the blades and suddenly my skin was glowing, hot like the sun. The dragon who held me burst into flame. I was free.

Surprised, Vanera dropped Lirle. In the back of my mind, I noted that Lirle took flight and didn't seem hurt. Vanera sent a stream of raging fire at me. "How dare you? What have you done?" She was furious. I sensed it, even more overwhelming than the fire she breathed. Instead of being afraid, her fury fueled my magic and I took it into myself before sending it back to her, one hand raised out in front of me. An inferno of magic pressed against hers, will and against will. But that only lasted a moment before my magic took her fire and used it to pull her near.

"You will cease this madness and let Lirle's parents rule the Hollow in peace or I will destroy you here and now."

Vanera eyes glinted with impotent fury but she didn't respond.

"I mean it. Stop this and promise me you will go your way in peace and I will let you live." The words coming from my mouth didn't sound like me. My voice was calm and so self-assured. My magic reached up to Vanera's mouth and lassoed her nose, clamping her teeth together.

From behind, I sensed the soul magic from the Ondror.

It tried to sneak up on me and leech into my soul, but my magic was too strong and the Ondror couldn't infiltrate my magical barriers.

"You cannot harm me. But I can kill you all with just a thought." I shivered at the words I spoke, knowing they were true.

Vanera nodded and said into my mind: I will stop trying to take the king and queen's stronghold.

I released her, bringing the magic back into myself, though I was still glowing.

As soon as Vanera was free, she flicked her tail, knocking me off my feet before landing on me, her front paws pinning me down.

She was so heavy, I thought my ribs would turn to powder.

Dark sadness overwhelmed my pain as my magic lashed out at Vanera as well as the Ondror.

Gossamer like a spider's web, white lightning lassoed around each of the dragons' necks, encasing and igniting their flesh until they became charred husks then shattered to dust.

I had never seen so much power used all at once, let alone coming from me.

It was terrifying.

Black ash coated me from head to toe.

I blinked it away, trying to wipe my face with the underside of my arm.

Lirle sounded freaked when she said: Wow, holy baby dragonflies. You-You saved us.

Her eyes were wide with awed fear.

"Yeah, I'm - " All around the room were piles of ash.

Dead dragons.

Guilt washed over and through me, drowning me.

Without waiting for Lirle, I ran. As I went I saw there were more dead bodies.

Had I killed them all? A shudder of fear rushed through my veins. Had I killed all the dragons in the Hollow? Of course not. Lirle was still alive. Hopefully others were, too.

When I reached the double doors, my face was wet. I looked for a handle or doorknob. Was there a button or did the dragons use soul magic? I didn't know and didn't care. I didn't think, just wiggled my fingers into the space between the doors and pushed them open wide enough that I could squeeze through and out into the fresh air. It was still stifling - the whole realm felt like it was a hundred degrees.

I fell to the ground, curling into the fetal position. All of my control was gone. Any kind of confidence I had was gone and I felt useless.

"Jasmine," Lirle said gently, coming up behind me.

She spoke with her mouth instead of into my brain. Surprised, I studied her through my tears, unable to express my shock.

Instead I asked the question weighing most heavily on my soul. "What about her babies? The eggs in the nest?" I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping against hope they weren't dead, that I hadn't taken innocent lives. "Did I kill them too?"

"Let me check." There was a whoosh and when I opened my eyes, she was gone.

Despite the heat of the realm, my body shivered uncontrollably.

After what seemed like forever, Lirle returned. "The babies are fine," Lirle said. "When we reach my home, I'll send dragons to collect them. They will be kept safe." Her voice was soft as she landed beside me, resting a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry." I rose to my knees, pleading, hoping she could forgive me for all of the killing, but grateful at least the babies were safe.

She tilted her head to one side. "What do you have to be sorry for? Saving me? Because without doubt, those awful dragons would've killed us both. Maybe not right away, but we would've died." She

touched my face, carefully wiping at the tears.

When she pulled it away, her hand was streaked with black dust, the remnants of Vanera and her minions.

Then Lirle pressed her paw between her eyes leaving a mark. "You are a hero, Jasmine. My hero. Slayer of the White Dragon. No one, not even the Ondror, had the power to kill her. Our realm has been at war for years, since before I was born, because of her. Without you, the Hollow would still be in a mess." Her eyes softened. "Now I can go home." She wrapped her arms around herself and spun in a circle. "Now there will be peace. Because of you." She shook her head. "My parents - They are going to be so happy to meet you." She smiled, flashing all of her sharp teeth.

My guilt subsided but only a moment. "But what if I killed them all? Not just those in the mountain but every dragon in the Hollow?" With the power that surged through me, I thought it might be possible.

Her mouth fell open and she blew out a puff of smoke. "Nonsense. I'm still here, aren't I? Others will be, too, you'll see." She stuck out a paw and I took it as I stood. "Let's go home so you can meet the king and queen."

My legs were shaky, but I agreed.

We walked slowly, heading over to the nearest river, where we both climbed in and rinsed off.

OceanofPDF.com

NIPAFORTE WOOD

NOW THAT WE had nothing to fear, Lirle and I moved quickly and undeterred toward the stronghold. As we went, Lirle talked more about the dragon she liked as well as growing up in the dragon realm. Hearing her talk, I couldn't help but admire the Hollow. It was stark and vast and though it wasn't blooming with all manner of flowers like Sharra, it still held beauty.

That night as we rested and ate under a canopy of trees, I was able to witness one of the wonders of her realm. Here, the forest stirred to life at night. Everything seemed to possess a bioluminescence. Trees whose leaves were pink during the day glowed a soft white, like millions of fireflies covered them. Animals I hadn't known were there, insects and little creatures that reminded me of spider monkeys, lit up as well. It was beautiful and a little terrifying.

"Why does it do this?" I asked, mesmerized.

Lirle took another bite of whatever she was eating. Her lips were luminescent blue like the spider monkeys and I forced myself not to shudder with disgust. The dragon needed to eat.

"No one knows." She shrugged, her wings flapping behind her lightly. "We call this portion of the forest the Nipaforte Wood."

"Why neepaforty?" The name was strange.

"Nipa for tay is what we call the creatures in the branches above us." She sucked on the bone before tossing it behind her. "Seemed appropriate."

"If you say so." I sighed, exhausted. My eyes closed and I was asleep before I had a chance to decide whether or not I should.

WHEN I WOKE, it was still dark. I didn't know how long I slept, but I

was done. Dreams of Sharra torturing Troy had consumed me. I jumped up and went over to my new friend. "Ready to keep going? The sooner we get to your home, the better." I carefully touched her head. No surprise, she was warm.

"I suppose." Lirle stretched, smacking her lips together. "Let me get something to eat and then we will be on our way." She disappeared into the forest and returned quickly, another of the nipaforte monkey-looking things in her mouth. I couldn't watch her eat again and got up, wandering around the forest while I waited, admiring all of the lovely creatures.

When Lirle was finished, we started on our journey again.

Once we left the forest, we followed the stream, Lirle's enormous Stronghold standing monstrous in the distance. Above, millions of stars twinkled in the night sky. If I weren't in such a rush, I would've admired the vastness.

By the time we came to the front gate, light had filtered away the stars, turning night into day. Two dragons were there, guarding the entrance. They were nearly asleep, their eyes closed and their bodies slack against the wall.

We were nearly upon them before they heard us and snapped to attention, preparing to fight.

"It is I, Lirle, Princess of the Stronghold. You will let us pass." Her voice was commanding.

"Of course, Princess." The guards bowed, allowing us to enter. Their eyes never left me and I sensed their unease at my presence.

The Stronghold was truly grand and expansive. Within the gate, I felt like a mouse. There weren't homes or even buildings as I was used to thinking of them. Just nests and different open areas, including enormous training grounds. In the very center was the castle.

When the dragon guards opened the double doors, I felt smaller than a mouse.

"This place," I whispered.

"Yeah, it's easy to get lost, so stay close." Lirle flew beside me, always on alert, though I guessed the other dragons we came across in the castle were doing their hive mind thing to communicate with each other because none of the dragons gave us trouble.

We didn't make it far before Lirle's parents appeared. Her mother, a lovely burnt orange dragon let loose of a cry of relief at the sight of Lirle. Her father was midnight black and intimidating, except for his eyes which were the same sky blue as Lirle's. Neither of them wore crowns or robes, though they each had an amulet that rested at the base of their necks. The king's looked to be made of onyx while the queen's gem was citrine. Beyond the strange gems, there was something different about them. An "it" factor that seemed to say, "we are your king and queen, so be civil."

"Mother," Lirle said and flew toward her, hugging her neck.

"My dearest," the queen said, snuggling against her daughter carefully. She and the king were much bigger than Lirle. In fact, they appeared to be bigger even than Vanera and she'd been huge.

As I watched the king nuzzle his daughter next, I tried to imagine if they were bigger even than Abernathy. I didn't think so.

After several loving minutes, the king and queen turned their attention toward me.

Lirle flew back over, hovering next to my shoulder. "Mom and Dad, this is Jasmine. She's the one who saved me not just once but twice." Lirle glanced at me and smiled before continuing. "She's an original vampire and the best." She rested a clawed hand on my arm.

"Nice to meet you both," I said, and bowed, not sure what the protocol was to show respect for dragon royalty. I'd met Abernathy before, obviously, but he was less formal.

A deep rumbling came from the king's throat and he smiled, showing off his brilliant white and pointy teeth. "I am Armond and this is my stunning mate, Karelle."

I bowed again. "I've heard lots of good things about you from

Lirle," I added, trying to remember all of the etiquette I was taught as a child.

"Come and let us discuss things in private," Karelle said, her voice deep but sounding more feminine than the king's, and very kind too.

They turned and took flight, heading back in the direction they came.

"They like you," Lirle said as we followed after them.

"I'm glad," I admitted. "Is bowing the correct thing to do when meeting them or is there something else I should be doing to show my respect?"

She giggled lightly as we entered a chamber. Along the right wall were pipes like those from an organ. As soon as the king and queen entered, a smaller dragon began to play. The music was soft and haunting but not like funeral music. More upbeat. "You're doing great," she said.

Once Armond and Karelle sat, their tails curling around them, the king ordered a chair be brought for me.

Thanking him, I sat. Lirle sat beside me and I couldn't help the warm gratitude I felt toward her. She truly was a friend.

"Now then, I would offer you food but our blood is sacred and I cannot allow you to consume it. However, if you would like, I can offer you cow's blood or that of a deer or elk?" The king regarded me with interest.

"Thank you so much for the kindly offer, but I am not hungry." That was a lie. I was beyond famished, but I didn't want cow blood. It wouldn't sustain me anyway. Dragon blood would, but I couldn't ask. It felt too forward and I suddenly missed my dragon boy.

"Very good, then tell us why you're here and how you came to meet our daughter," he said.

"Yes, please share everything," Karelle added.

I did just that, explaining how I was born and about my wings. I

described meeting Laeddin and making my wishes, followed by the arrival of the darkness and the akuma and Sharra. I also told them about Troy and Christopher, about going back in time with Abernathy. Next I mentioned my parents and the gargoyle realm as well as the elven crown and my uncontrollable magic. Then I told them about arriving here, and finding Lirle, and our quest to get her home, followed by her recapture and then using my magic to kill her kidnappers. The last part was hard to get out. Guilt radiated from my heart and I worried how they'd take me killing dragons, even enemy dragons, especially since I wasn't one.

At some point during our conversation, both the king and queen had lain down. I glanced at Lirle, wondering if they were asleep. Before she could respond, the king told me to continue, which I did. They listened intently, asking questions so I could fill in gaps. By the time I was done, it was well into the night. They didn't seem upset, but they might be saving their energy for when I was finished. I stifled a yawn, not necessarily tired, but mentally exhausted.

Armond's eyes blinked open and he and the queen returned to their sitting positions. Lirle still stayed beside me, keeping me company. She seemed thrilled by my story, even though parts of it she'd already heard once or experienced firsthand.

"That is quite a tale, young vampire." Armond studied me a moment as though considering what more to say. The direction he took next surprised me. "Did you know I am a direct descendant of Abernathy, the dragon you spoke about?"

Before I could remember my manners, I blurted, "Like one of his children?"

Armond chuckled. "That's right. I am his oldest child, which is why I rule the Hollow with my wife. My father created the Hollow at my request many, many years ago."

Pops had told me part of the story, but listening to Armond tell it was still fascinating. "I didn't know that," I said. Then smiled. "My

fiancé, uh, Troy, the guy I told you about that's half dragon, he is also Abernathy's son. So is my aunt Cindy, though we aren't really related. She's a witch." I realized I was rambling and stopped myself.

Armond shook his head and laughed. "How very interesting. My father was always more forward thinking than the rest of us." He glanced at Karelle. "I would say that makes Jasmine practically family, wouldn't you say so, my darling?"

Karelle nodded. "I already consider her family because she rescued our Lirle. I was lost without her," the queen said, her eyes getting misty.

"You said you killed the white dragon and her minions?" Armond asked, his gaze shrewd.

"Yes," I said and swallowed, bracing myself for his anger. "The magic of the elven crown mixed with my original magic and got away from me. I didn't want to kill them, but I did." A new wave of guilt swallowed me. "I'm so sorry. But when Vanera was about to kill me, my magic rolled out and I lost control - " I glanced at Lirle. "Your daughter taught me a great deal about my magic before that moment. She taught me to focus my magic on a weapon, which I did - dual blades." I hung my head, unable to meet their gazes.

"Controlling magic can be difficult," Armond said, "especially if you have as much power as you say you do. Killing our kind is not easy, even for dragons."

I nodded but still couldn't look up.

"Jasmine, do not apologize for saving the Hollow," Karelle snapped.

I looked up then, meeting her angry glare. "That dragon intended to use our daughter against us, but you saved her and us." She paused, a billow of smoke coming out of her nostrils. "We are forever in your debt."

"Which is why we would like to present you with a gift." Armond met his wife's eyes. She smiled and nodded before they both faced me.

"Nothing we ever give you will be enough to repay the return of our daughter, but maybe this will help to show our appreciation." Karelle touched the gem near her throat as did Armond, each grasping their gem between two clawed fingers. They brought their paws together and their two gems became one before forming something like a liquid.

This was the first time I'd witnessed two dragons doing soul magic together. It was a beautiful moment and I felt a pang of envy at the love the king and queen shared.

After several long moments, the magic stopped and Karelle held the vial of liquid out for me to take. "May this provide you with more control as well as something you are greatly missing," she said.

"Thank you," I said, unsure what to do now. The clear vial was made of glass and the liquid inside was black with glittering orange flecks. I went to tuck it into my pocket when the queen stopped me.

"No, darling, you must swallow it." She gave me a brilliant smile. "Drink it up," she said again, encouraging.

"Okay." I forced myself not to be nervous even as my magic flared to life protectively. There was a small black stopper in the top of the bottle and I removed it before bringing the liquid to my mouth. I gave it a quick sniff. Notes of brimstone and smoke filled my nose.

"Drink," Lirle said, reassuring.

I tilted the vial back, pouring the liquid down my throat. It was cool and tasteless and when I swallowed, it seemed to go everywhere at once. Like my veins and sinews were railroad tracks and the liquid was the train. As it traveled, I began to heat up with pain, aching, ferocious pain. I fell to my knees.

"What's wrong with her?" Lirle asked with concern in her voice.

"Just wait, darling. She is in pain now, but it will be worth it," Karelle said.

I wanted to believe her, but the pain was beyond anything I'd ever experienced and I found myself going in and out of consciousness. The

liquid filled my insides and moved up to my back, where it burned so hot, I thought I would become a pile of ash to match those of the dragons I'd incinerated.

And then the liquid pushed through my skin.

I screamed out, panting. "Please make it stop!" I pleaded as tears of agony filled my eyes.

"Be strong, Jasmine. Give it time. The pain will be worth it," Armond assured me. I didn't believe him. Nothing that hurt this much could ever be worth it.

Where was my magic? Why didn't it fight against what was happening inside me?

I felt something growing from my back, and I glanced back, not sure what I expected. What I saw stunned me.

It was a new set of wings!

Shock blocked out the pain, and I pressed my fists against each other in sheer joy. Now that I understood what gift the dragons had given me, I knew they were right. The pain was worth it. I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and forced myself to keep quiet as the inferno roared through me.

An eternity later, or maybe it was only a few minutes, the pain subsided and I heard Lirle gasp.

"They're beautiful," she said. "Jasmine. Can you hear me? Look at your wings."

I carefully opened my eyes which were still throbbing from the remnants of the spell. There was a flutter at my back, and I jumped to my feet. "Is there a mirror?" I asked, desperate to see my new wings.

"Over there," Lirle said.

I started to run over, but my wings lifted me from the ground and I gasped. Crying and laughing at the same time, I studied my reflection in the polished glass. Though I was relatively clean from my bath in the river, my hair was a mess and my shirt was in tatters. I pushed

that aside and turned, watching my new wings flutter. They were large and black and reptilian, like those of a dragon - like Troy's. My love, I thought, desperate to be with him again. I moved and the light hit my wings just right. They sparkled with the colors of the seven magics. "They are beautiful," I said, flying back over to Armond and Karelle. My hands clasped together in prayer, I bowed before them with profound gratitude. "Thank you for the gift." Tears continued to stream down my face. "This is the best gift." To show them I meant it, I twirled in a circle, shot up into the air so I skimmed the top of the stone ceiling, and then flew over to Lirle. Taking her hands in mine, I flew the both of us in a circle.

She and I laughed and laughed.

"Not only did we give you the gift of wings, Jasmine, but also a little of our combined soul magic. Hopefully our magics will help temper yours so you have more control."

Their gifts were beyond anything I could ever have hoped for. "From the bottom of my heart, I thank you," I said, bowing low for a second time.

"It was the least we could do," Armond said.

"Now," Karelle began, "I am famished. Do you wish to stay for dinner?"

The thought of watching them eat turned my stomach and I fought to keep my expression even. "I should probably get back," I said.

"So soon?" Lirle asked, her face sad.

"Sharra still has my parents and Troy and her darkness is consuming everything in its path. I need to stop her." Part of me didn't want to leave. I felt safe here, and even with all that I'd gained during my time in the Hollow, there was still no guarantee I could defeat Sharra. Plus I'd miss Lirle. She'd become a true friend. "I'll come back often, promise. And," I looked at the king and queen, "if it's okay, I'd like to bring Troy too. I think he will love it here."

"We would be honored to have you," Karelle said.

"A piece of the Hollow resides in you now. With that, you will always be able to return," Armond added.

"Thank you." I grasped for the amulet on my neck, but it was gone. "Oh no!" I flew around the room, hoping I'd dropped it recently. "My amulet. I don't know how to get back."

"Jasmine," Karelle began. "The magic is within you. Just think of where you wish to go and there you will be."

Armond nodded. "Karelle is right. Your magic is strong enough to take you anywhere you want to go. You do not need to rely on trinkets."

I nodded and closed my eyes, sensing they were right. With their magic inside me, I felt a new sense of control as well as the full weight of the power I possessed. I opened my eyes and faced the king and queen. "Thank you again." I turned to my new friend. "Lirle, thank you for being such a great friend. I will be back soon and I promise to bring Troy," I paused. "If he'll still have me," I whispered so only she could hear.

"If he doesn't, then he's an idiot." She rubbed her nose against my cheek. "See you soon."

I nodded and closed my eyes, imagining myself back in Pops' office. He and Joanna would want to know I was okay. And I wanted to know how things were going with them. Plus, they would be able to help me come up with a plan. Everything worked better when I had help.

"Goodbye," I said. Using only my magic, I began to cross through the realms. As I passed through the dragon realm, I noticed there was no more war and I was grateful for the opportunity to help the Hollow become a realm of peace. Soon, I expected to see Earth, still filled with terror and upheaval.

Instead of seeing the human realm overrun by darkness and the akuma, I went into complete blackness. Emptiness was a better word. It swirled around me and a tendril of fear rose into my throat. Had my

magic gone wrong?

"Welcome, Jasmine," a female voice said.

It was the Unknowns. Somehow I traveled into their domain. Glancing down, I saw I was floating in the nothingness, like a speck of dust.

Twin shadows swirled around me, their presence only slightly visible in the vast ocean of night.

"We've waited a long time for this moment," the male voice said.

Fear was replaced by anger, but try as I might, my magic wouldn't ignite. It was useless here.

"Shall we kill you now? Doing so will begin the catalyst to end all magics, all supernaturals, all realms - including the Hollow - giving us the chance to reset and start anew," the female said, her words sharp like my twin blades.

"That's right. Earth is in serious need of a supernatural cleansing," the male added.

"But I'm glad to see your wings up close before you die," she said, her strange presence brushing against them.

I gritted my teeth to keep from screaming.

"They are lovely," she went on. "Too bad you won't need them much longer."

Slowly their eyes appeared followed by faces and hair. Bodies and clothing. They hovered in front of me, looking like two sides of the same coin. Slightly different, but still the same.

"Have you nothing to say?" the male asked, his bright eyes, like those of a full, moon boring into mine.

"Don't do it," I blurted.

"Do what, dear? 'It' is such an uninteresting word," she said.

"Don't destroy all magics. Don't destroy supernaturals. Let me fix this," I begged, my hands out in front of me, pleading that they would listen. "Let me find a way to - " I thought of the word they used before

continuing, "reset all magics."

Both laughed heartily, doubling over.

"She thinks she can fix everything wrong in the world by herself," he said, wiping his eyes.

"I can." I swallowed, my hands in fists. "I will. There is enough power in me. I intend to end Sharra." Rolling my shoulders back, I clenched my hands together, praying I could make them see I could do this.

"Killing." She tut-tutted. "It's such a final word."

"Agreed. And not a reset as such. But - " he began, then looked at me. "Stop Sharra without killing her. Do that and we might consider allowing all supernaturals to live."

I was flabbergasted. How was I supposed to stop someone as powerful as Sharra without killing her? It was impossible. On the other hand, I found I liked the idea. I hated killing. Doing so left me feeling so much guilt and I was tired of that. "Fine. I'll find a way to do that," I said, nodding with finality.

"If you can stop Sharra without killing her, that will initiate the reset we require," the woman said, and snapped her fingers.

OceanofPDF.com

WINGS

DETERMINATION WEIGHED my shoulders down as I traversed the inkiness. As I went, I called out in my mind, using the magic within me to speak with Silindra and Laeddin. At once, my mind was there, in Laeddin's realm, in his library full of books. He and Silindra were there, standing close, reading something aloud.

"Laeddin," I said.

Laeddin glanced at me, or rather, my mental presence. Silindra looked up as well. "Is it just me or am I seeing Jasmine?" Surprise flickered across her too lovely face.

"I see her too - somehow." Laeddin reached out, but his fingers couldn't touch me.

I was there, but not really there. "I'm going to Sharra," I said, and looked from Laeddin to Silindra. "The darkness will swallow the earth soon. There is no more time. I need your help now. Please find me."

"We're coming, Jasmine," Laeddin said, and took Silindra's hand.

Were they a couple now? There was no time to figure it out.

Silindra said, "Watch out for my sister. She's tricky."

"I will," I said, and the world around me swirled before I found myself in Pops' study. He and Joanna were there, looking as though I'd only just left. They were speaking together softly, words I chose not to hear since they weren't for me. "Grandfather," I whispered.

He looked up. Joanna turned as well so they were both staring at my essence. "I've completed my time in the Hollow and am going to Sharra's to free my parents. Please help."

Joanna and Pops stood.

"We will be there," Pops said and Joanna nodded her agreement.

"Thank you," I mouthed, as I swirled again through the emptiness

of space.

When the blurriness stopped, I was no longer in empty space. Sharra had to be here, but where I was made no sense . Instinctively I tucked away my new wings, grateful for the way I could hide them from view if I wanted. A jolt of happiness shot through me. Wings! I had wings. I shuddered with glee before tamping down the feeling and got to work trying to figure out my location.

The room was bright and airy. Windows were open and white curtains billowed in the slight breeze. Birdsong filtered through the room along with the sounds of the rustling trees as well as the ocean waves. This was a living room, but the furnishings were sparse. Off to the right was an eat-in kitchen and beside that, a dining room.

"Oh, Jasmine. Welcome." Sharra was dressed in a light blue flower print shirt with white capri pants. She wore an enormously oversized hat to shield her creamy skin from the sun. In one hand, she carried a basket filled with cut flowers and herbs. In the other, she held a pair of scissors. "I thought you'd run away for good." She set the basket on the table and waved her hands. Immediately, the sunshine vanished and darkness shone through the windows. "Glad you finally made it."

Beside her stood a woman with graying hair wearing nearly the same outfit as Sharra. She looked to be in her early sixties and when she saw me, her face twisted in fear. "Who's your friend, Shari?"

Shari? I snorted.

Sharra waved a hand in my direction. "This is Jasmine." Then to me she said, "I'd like to introduce you to my lovely neighbor, Mrs. Lubbot."

"Good to meet you," I said with a wave, wondering if the woman was a magical figment of both our imaginations or if she was real.

Sharra went on. "Jasmine has brought me something and I need to get back to work. Can we meet tomorrow for tea?" Sharra kept her voice light. She sounded just like a regular uppity middle class human.

"I'll put on a kettle around three," the woman replied, her smile

transferring orange lipstick to her teeth. Before she left, she sniffed as though I disappointed her somehow. "Lovely to meet you, Jasmine." With that, the woman left.

I clasped my hands together, still unsure about where we were. "What is this place?" I asked, working to stay calm. Not only was Sharra dressed like a lady of leisure, but she appeared cheerful and happy. It didn't fit anything I knew of the vampire. Not even a little bit.

"The suburbs, dear." She waved me over and I glanced out the enormous living room window to see that we were in a neighborhood filled with immaculate lawns, clipped hedges, and lots of bright flowers. Each house looked similar to the next.

"Why?" It was the only question I could utter. I'd expected a lair or at least something sinister. She was supposed to be hiding out. "And how are the flowers growing?" With the darkness, I didn't think such a feat was possible.

Sharra laughed. "Living near me has its perks." She took her basket of flowers and went into the all-white kitchen where she took a glass vase from a cupboard and filled it up halfway with water. "And to answer your question, why not" She picked up a dark purple tulip, clipped the end at an angle and placed it into the vase. "Martha's Vineyard is beautiful this time of year." She continued snipping the ends of the flowers before arranging them in the container.

The sound of an infant's cry startled me. I turned and saw a bassinette in the corner. "Is that a baby?"

"She isn't not a baby," Sharra responded vaguely, taking the flower arrangement and placing it in the center of the clear glass coffee table. Then she went over to the bassinette. "There, there, little one. You are almost done. As soon as we take the elven crown from Jasmine, I'll be able to complete the spell and you will be the newest original vampire. Mine to mold and shape. An heir as I rule the world." She picked up the blanket-wrapped bundle. Freakily, there was a head

with hair, but no eyes or nose, just a mouth. It looked like someone's nightmare doll come to life.

"What have you done?" Sickness funneled into my heart as I recalled all the times Sharra mentioned creating her own original vampire. By the looks of things, she hadn't worked it out.

"You'll see as soon as you give me the crown." It was then she really looked at me. "Where is it, Jasmine?" She placed the "baby" back in the crib and rushed me, frustration arching her brow.

"Well - " I didn't know how to respond. The elven crown was gone. It was a part of me as much as the ribs in my chest. And when I told her what had happened, she would do what? Kill me? Siphon it from me somehow? I wasn't ready to find out. "Where are my parents, Troy, and Christopher?" I returned, thinking it safer to respond with questions of my own. "Let me see them and make sure they are safe. Then we can discuss the crown." If I had to, I would trade myself for them, but I hoped it didn't come to that. I wanted to live, and I wanted all realms to be free of Sharra's tyranny. I just had to find a way to do both without killing Sharra in the process.

"Very well," she said shrewdly.

The room went out of focus, like I'd been standing in a watercolor painting, as the house and the contemporary décor changed. Sharra's clothing did as well. The oversized hat, old lady shirt, and capris were replaced by a sleek black dress that looked to be made of rubber; it hugged her curves, the collar high but still revealing a lot of cleavage. Her hair was slicked back and hanging in a long ponytail. Her staff appeared as did my wings - or rather, the wings that used to be mine.

The haziness dissipated, replaced by a cave of sorts - there were walls and a floor but no ceiling. Above was the darkness, looming hungrily like its own entity. Ready to consume at any moment. Like the ticking of a clock, each second sent another star from view. "This is more lair-like," I whispered. The walls appeared to be made up of the akuma. They seemed to be stacked one on top of the other, though

there was a solid wall there too - almost like the akuma had been painted into the walls. The twisted creatures writhed and moved like millions of spiders, their eyes staring as they gnashed their teeth, waiting for the moment when they could attack. The effect was both eerie and claustrophobic - it felt like the walls were closing in.

My pulse quickened as Sharra waved her staff, speaking several foreign words. Jumping up, I tried to get my bearings. All around us were oddly shaped red rocks staggered against the blackness and similar to the Hollow. Besides the mountainous pillars, there was nothing else around. We were an island of solace.

On the far left appeared cages. My loved ones were in them. I sensed them.

A quick glance revealed Sharra was still casting spells or whatever. She almost seemed to be in a trance, and if I was going to kill her, now would be the time. Did she know about the rebirth? About what the Unknowns demanded of me?

As I went over to the nearest cage, I determined she must now know. Either that, or she believed she was more powerful. She'd proven herself beyond arrogant.

"Jasmine?" my mom whispered, her eyes wide on her dirty face.

"Yes, it's me," I responded, blinking away the tears.

"You're safe?" Her eyebrows lifted in question.

"I'm okay," I returned with a smile. "How about you?"

"Fine," she said, then glanced behind her at a body lying on the ground, his back to me.

"Who is that?" I asked, my mind zoned in on the form. I knew it was my dad. He didn't look good. In fact, he looked dead. There were no visible wounds that I could see, but somehow I knew there was something very wrong with him. My magic zinged along my ribs, trying to break loose, but I managed to keep it contained. I'd need it to defeat Sharra and I would do it for my dad - for all of them.

Mom shook her head. "Sharra did something to him. Tried to leech his magic." She glanced down at her hands. They were shaking and my heart broke for her. "He hasn't been conscious in days."

"Dad." I gritted my teeth. My magic did another lap around my ribs, ready to be called forth. My eyes went to Troy as anger buzzed through my mind. My fiancé stood in his cage, his hands grasping the bars, his eyes alert. Christopher was beside him, a smile on his still-not-healed busted lip. I wanted to run to Troy, but the thought of my dad and what needed to be done kept me in place. I relaxed my hands, taking a deep breath. Again, I checked on Sharra. She was still in her trance. "Do you know what she's doing?"

"No idea," Mom said. "But this isn't the first time. I'm not sure why, but she believes it's necessary." Mom shook her head.

"Pops and Laeddin should be here soon," I said, hoping that was true and not mentioning Silindra and Joanna. They would take too long to explain.

"Good," Mom said.

Please hurry, I thought, sending out a silent plea to Silindra and Laeddin as well as my grandfather and Joanna. I needed them.

"Don't worry, Jasmine. As soon as you give me what I want, your father will be fine." Sharra's voice was close behind me.

I jumped at her nearness and swung around. "Don't touch me," I seethed, then breathed deeply to stop my magic from lashing out at her.

The soul magic Armond and Karelle gifted me really helped to keep my emotions from flying every which way. I closed my eyes and centered myself. Beyond Sharra was the bassinet. Interesting that she at least kept the "baby" with her.

"Or what?" Sharra laughed. "You see I kept up my end of the bargain. They are alive. But if you want them to remain that way, give me the damn crown so we can all get on with our lives."

"I can't," I finally admitted. "It's a part of me."

"No," she began and then was suddenly directly in front of me, her fangs buried in my throat.

I gasped and shoved her away, my wings exploding from my back, flying me to the other side of the lair. Above, the darkness approached thick like smoke, as though it sensed Sharra's attack on me.

"What is this?" Sharra said, wiping her mouth. Then she licked a droplet of my blood resting on the back of her hand. "Very interesting." Her eyes narrowed, lingering on my wings.

I resisted the urge to gloat. Now wasn't the time to underestimate Sharra. The only creatures older than her were Silindra, Abernathy, and the Unknowns. She was no one to trifle with and I needed to keep my wits about me. "Surely you taste the truth in my blood. The magic from the crown is mine. You can't have it." I didn't mention my new wings, waiting for her to visit the obvious.

"On the contrary." She aimed her staff at me and a bolt of green light shot my direction.

Before I could think, Silindra and Laeddin appeared in front of me. Silindra took the brunt of the evil magic meant for me with a grunt of pain, taking a step back.

"Stop this, Sister! You've done enough. It's time to die." She took Laeddin's arm and was about to say more, but her mouth was suddenly gone.

Sharra smiled evilly. "Be quiet, Silindra. You always did talk too much."

My swords appeared, white lightning flickering along the blades as I flew to free my loved ones. Sharra sent another shot of magic at me but missed.

"If you free them before I have what I want, you'll be sorry. There is magic protecting every inch of this place and it's tied solely to me. Give me the crown or they all will suffer the consequences." Her eyes flashed with fury and she sent a bolt of magic at Laeddin.

It barely fazed him. "You can't hurt me, Sharra," he said.

"Perhaps not, but I still possess the ability to remove your genie power and if I do that, Silindra will be no more once again." She cackled. "I sense losing her would be - disappointing." Her laughter grew. "Isn't it sweet, sister dearest? You can only find true love once you no longer look like a hideous monkey."

Silindra tried to respond. Without a mouth she couldn't say anything, but she flipped her sister off, which spoke volumes.

"Do not speak. Do not even move, genie, of I will destroy you once and for all," Sharra screeched.

"Very well," he said, glancing at me. "I'm sorry, Jasmine."

Before I could respond, Sharra send a bolt of magic into Laeddin. This time it was as though he allowed her magic to affect him and he disappeared inside a golden lamp. His lamp. The same one I found all those months ago. "Better," she said, smug, and faced me, shooting a bolt of magic directly at me from her staff.

Instead of hurting me, my swords absorbed the blow. I centered myself and lifted my chin. "Stop this, Sharra. Release my family, free the world from the darkness, get rid of the akuma, and let us live in peace. You won't have to be alone. I'll make sure there is a place for you as well, if you want." I was surprised by the words leaving my mouth, but I meant them. I didn't want to kill her and not just because the Unknowns ordered me not to.

My words surprised her too. "You would let me live if I agreed to your terms?" She seemed amused.

"Yes," I said, relaxing my arms.

She appeared to be considering my words. "I see. And your wings? Where did you get those?"

That was quite a channel change, but I got the feeling she was searching for my ulterior motive. Too bad for her, there wasn't one. "A gift from the king and queen of the Hollow," I admitted, figuring the truth wouldn't hurt at this point.

"They are lovely," she said. "Too bad you won't get to enjoy them."

She tilted her head to one side and sent a spell into my mom. The attack was so sudden and unexpected, I just stood there, stunned, as Sharra opened the cage with one hand and dragged my mom out by the hair.

My mom tried to fight, but it was no use. Even before Sharra's latest spell, my mom had been weakened from all her time as a captive. Now, she could barely lift her arms.

"Give me the magic this instant or your mother dies," Sharra said, sending another wave of green magic into my mom.

My mom screamed, panting as her eyes rolled back at the pain.

The infant thing started to cry.

Behind Sharra, Troy and Christopher were shouting - at me or Sharra, I couldn't tell. My head was fuzzy from panic. This wasn't how the battle was supposed to go. My family was supposed to be safe before I confronted Sharra, not completely at her mercy. What should I do? How could I stop this? Power surged inside me, but I still felt helpless. I could kill her - I was strong enough to do it. But if I did, the Unknowns would destroy us all. There was no way to win. No matter what I did, my family would die.

I couldn't let that happen.

A thought occurred to me, so simple and terrible, it sent ice flooding through my veins. "What if - " I allowed my voice to trail off as I thought about what I intended. I could allow Sharra she could use my body, the way she'd done with others for centuries and the way she'd envisioned for my mom eighteen years ago. Sure, there would still be the darkness and the akuma, but at least those I loved and cared about would live to fight another day. Sacrificing my life for theirs wasn't a choice at all.

"Fine," I said. "Let them go, and you can have me. My body, I mean. I can't give you the power of the crown, but I will give myself to you freely."

"Is that so?" Intrigued, Sharra threw my mom back into her cell,

slamming the door shut with the flick of her staff. She turned toward me, examining my face. "You're serious." It wasn't a question.

"I promise you. Release them all and you can have my body." I sent my blades away and dropped my hands to my sides as an inkling of a plan began to form in my mind. Completely outrageous and utterly preposterous, but it just might be exactly what was right.

Behind me my family was screaming. Even my dad. Tears pricked my eyes at the sound of his voice. He would be okay. They all would be. I would make sure of it. And once I was gone, Silindra and Laeddin as well as Pops and Joanna could rescue my mom and dad, Troy, and Christopher. They could defeat her.

"Very well," Sharra said, and relaxed enough to go over to the baby. "Shush, little one. You will be whole sooner than you think." Slicing one of her fingers open with her thumbnail, Sharra squeezed so her blood dripped into the crib.

She was feeding the baby her blood.

Abhorrence, disgust, and horror rolled through me, but I gripped my hands into fists. If I had to, I would allow Sharra to have my body - if my plan didn't work. Neither of us would die. It would be just as the Unknowns wanted. Their terms would be met and my family along with billions of others would survive.

I glanced back my family, giving them each a possible last goodbye with my eyes. My gaze went back to Troy. "I love you," I mouthed.

OceanofPDF.com

ACCESS TO YOUR NECK

"DO NOT DO THIS," Christopher said, a look of complete disbelief on his injured face. "You have the power within you to destroy her. You know you do. So why?"

I couldn't explain. But I hoped one day he and the rest would understand. If I failed, Laeddin could tell them the truth about the Unknowns, what they had planned. In the end my family would see I made the best choice. The only choice.

"Silence, Hunter. I'll deal with your insubordination later," Sharra said, sending a bolt of magic at Christopher.

He was thrown back, landing against the other side of the cell before falling to the ground with a groan. Chris bared his fangs in anger and jumped to his feet, though slower than expected.

"Hurt them and the deal is off," I seethed, facing her, my hands in fists at my sides.

She gave me an innocent look. "I didn't do any permanent damage." She crossed her arms, sauntering toward me. "Now then, let's do this."

I swallowed, forcing myself to remain calm. My plan would work. It had to. My family's lives depended on it. But deep inside I was nervous. What if I was wrong? If she possessed me, would my spirit hover inside Sharra's mind like Silindra's had in mine? I doubted it. Sharra didn't like to share. She would burn everything that was me right out of her. Maybe the Unknowns were counting on that. My existence wasn't part of the Unknowns' plan and they'd been trying to get rid of me since.

"The transformation will go rather quickly since you've allowed Christopher to drink from you and you've drunk from your true love." Sharra clapped her hands, circling me like I was the prized pig at a

country fair. "And I didn't want to say anything, but your new wings?" She paused and ran her hands along them. I fought back a tremor of revulsion. Her touching them felt too intimate and I didn't like it. "They are exquisite," she went on. "Delicate as a butterfly's, but still badass."

"I'm glad you like them," I replied through clenched teeth as my magic rumbled angrily within.

She came back around, a smile dancing along her lips. "Tilt your head, darling and give me access to your neck," she said, her voice icy and demanding.

I did as she asked and before I could prepare myself, she sank her fangs into the vein at my throat.

All around me my loved ones screamed that I shouldn't do it - that I should kill her - but they didn't know what would happen. If I destroyed Sharra, I would destroy all of them too. Closing my eyes, I blocked out their words and allowed myself to succumb to the inevitable. My plan would either work or it wouldn't, but it was too late to turn back now. I smiled at the thought of finally doing good. Most of my choices hadn't great, but this would rectify them. My giving Sharra my body, I was fighting for the ones I loved. I was making amends for my choices and making the most out of a horrible situation.

Sharra grabbed my arms and tugged me to her, gaining better access to my neck. I was like a rag doll, allowing her to do with me as she pleased.

Something crashed loudly and Sharra jerked away from me. "What are you playing at, girl?" She glared, my blood on her face, her fangs out, her eyes red. She never looked more like a vampire than she did in that moment.

There was another loud bang and one of the walls came down. The filthy akuma scattered away like rats in a sewer, but most were vaporized. As the dust settled, Joanna and Pops appeared. They stood,

their feet hips' width apart, looking for all the world like superheroes.

Pops charged Sharra, his eyes flashing with fury. Joanna, red hair flying around her like auburn fire, attacked Sharra from the other side. They fought Sharra like the perfect tag team, their movements so quick it was tough to keep up with them. They weren't making progress in subduing her, but they were distracting her.

I didn't know what to do. Fighting against Pops and Joanna was out of the question. Instead, I stood there, feeling dazed and slightly out of it.

The baby began to cry once again.

And a different plan filled my mind. One in which I could save the strange child, stay alive, and stop Sharra without killing her. My magic skipped to life, and I lifted my hands. "Sharra," I called with all of my newfound confidence. Power skittered across my body as I walked with purpose toward the original vampire who was throwing magic at Pops and Joanna, her back to me. Sending out a wave of lightning magic, I used it to lift her off the ground.

Beside me Silindra still struggled to move. Her eyes were on me, pleading, but I knew what needed to be done. I would end Sharra, but not in the way everyone believed.

"What are you doing? Put me down!" Sharra wiggled and jolted, trying to shoot magic at me from her staff, but it was no use and I held her tightly above my head until I reached the crib.

Peering in at the upset being, I hoped I was doing the right thing. All it took was one thought.

And I spoke it clearly into my mind: Rebirth.

I thought that same word over and over. Each time I hissed the word in my mind, Sharra's body shrank and became lighter. With ease, I brought her down so I could watch until she was smaller than the infant.

Rebirth, I thought again.

Now, she was barely the size of a pixilette. Still fighting, she used her staff to send magic into my hand, but I barely felt it.

"There, there, Sharra. I'm going to give you a second chance to get it right." As I spoke, she continued to get smaller until she was just a particle of light. Her spirit, I thought anxiously and tore open the pad of one of my fingers.

"What are you doing?" Joanna whispered, suddenly beside me.

I didn't respond, determined to finally set things right.

Pops spoke for me. "She knows what she's doing, Red."

I had to smile. My grandfather always had such faith.

Blood dripped from my finger and onto the infant's lips. The Frankenbaby opened its mouth and while it drank I spoke the word again, this time out loud. "Rebirth." I dropped the particle that was Sharra's spirit. It hovered above the infant a moment before entering the child's mouth along with my blood.

Two things happened simultaneously.

The first was the akuma. They stopped writhing and moaning. It was like the silence that comes when the crickets stop chirping.

"What's happening?" Joanna asked.

All of us focused on the walls and I watched as one after another the akuma changed into dark shadows. They surged around the room, swirling over us and through the cages until they sailed out into the sky like water after a dam breaks.

"They're gone," Christopher said.

I met his gaze before allowing my eyes to flicker onto Troy.

He was watching me, his features unreadable and I had to quickly look away.

The second thing that happened was the thing in the cradle shifted into something much for infantile. Little ears grew and peeked out of thick, curly white hair. Her face formed eyes and they opened, shining the color of lilacs. And wings! They were white and gossamer.

Instantly, I knew those wings had once belonged to me. Now though they fit with the child in the crib as though they belonged to her from the beginning.

Surely, it was a different kind of rebirth, but the wings suited the baby perfectly. Besides, I liked my new ones better. In fact, I was proud of them because I'd earned them.

The baby's nose appeared and it was small and pert and perfect. Her mouth changed slightly, the lips blood red and pursed together sweetly. The blanket she was wrapped in disappeared as the child became a fully formed baby - who looked an awful lot like Sharra might have in her infancy, had she been an infant, which I knew she hadn't.

The child began to cry again. "It's okay, little one," I said, lifting her into my arms, careful not to squish her wings. I used my magic to cover her naked body with a dress the color of the baby's eyes.

"Wait," Mom shouted, still locked in her cage. "She's supposed to be evil incarnate. That was what Sharra was trying to create. Don't touch it."

I smiled, tapping my healed first finger on the baby's bottom lip. She grinned back at me adorably. "It's okay, Mom." I brought the cooing child over so my mom could see. "She isn't evil, Mama. She's just a baby now. See?"

"Oh," Mom said, covering her mouth with one hand. "Is it - is she Sharra?"

"Yes," I admitted. "This body houses Sharra's spirit, only she's reborn."

"And you thought this better than killing her?" Dad asked, his eyes on me as he leaned against my mom. He still looked like death, but I was happy to see him awake and on his feet.

"Definitely. If I had killed Sharra, the Unknowns would have immediately destroyed all of us. Magic had to have a rebirth and it was either Sharra or the rest of us," I said, smiling sadly at the baby I

still held. It was hard to picture anyone so innocent-looking causing so much destruction. Hopefully she'd make better choices the second time around.

"It was true then. What the underlings told us all those years ago." Mom looked up at my Dad and continued. "They said if Jasmine died, then so would all magic." Mom wrapped her arms around Dad's waist, resting her head against his chest.

"It would seem so," Dad said, pulling her to him and resting his cheek on her head.

They gave each other a look and I knew they were sharing a conversation meant only for them.

I swallowed and nodded. "That's right. The only way to protect all supernaturals was to stop Sharra without killing her." I rubbed my nose on the baby's and she put her hands on my cheeks. "At least I think that's how it worked." I glanced at Pops, knowing he probably had a better understanding than I did of all that had just occurred. Or even Joanna. As an angel of death, she might be able to decipher what happened, especially with the akuma. "But I believe through Sharra the seven magics have been renewed?" I shook my head, unsure, as I studied the baby.

"In effect, you are right, Jasmine," Pops said and looked at Joanna. Relief was etched on his face. He was alive, but more importantly Pops was glad Joanna was too. He had just got her back. It was obvious he hadn't wanted to lose her again.

I smiled at them both, grateful for their opportunity for a happily ever after.

And Troy and me? I sought him out again, but before I could meet his gaze, Joanna came over, cutting off my line of sight to him. An ache of need ripped through my chest.

"You are correct, Jasmine," Joanna said. "Magic has been reset. There is a disturbance among all the dead and something is happening." She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. "It's strange,

but I believe those possessed by the akuma are returning to their original forms and will once again live as they had before the akuma invaded them."

She was right. My magic somehow verified that Joanna spoke truth. But I didn't say anything, waiting for several beats to see if Joanna had more to say, but she opened her eyes and shook her head.

"That's all I know for now." She wiped some hair out of her face.

"See?" I said to Mom, moving aside so I could make eye contact. "It's all good." Without meaning to, my eyes focused on the bars of the cage. I wanted to release my mom and dad as well as Chris and Troy, get them out, but the baby was helpless and I needed to concentrate on her first. Still, I went over to my parents. "She'll need a home too." My gaze flicked back and forth between my mom and dad. I glanced back at Silindra. She looked confused and unsure about what to do.

"Of course, Jasmine," my dad said.

Mom nodded her agreement.

Silindra was suddenly beside me, one arm around my shoulders. "I will help if you need it as well," she said, using a finger to stroke the child's cheek.

I glanced up at her, hoping she was alright with the way things turned out for her sister. She seemed to be. "And you're okay with this?"

Her eyes darkened. "As you said, there wasn't another way. I can live with this outcome since it means I get to live." She smiled. "Can I hold her?" Silindra held out her arms.

I hesitated, feeling protective. "You won't hurt her?" Sharra was responsible for Silindra's original death. No one would blame Silindra for wanting revenge.

"No," she said. "I couldn't," she added, cooing softly.

"Here you go." I handed the baby over carefully, tucking the blanket around her to keep her warm. When she was content in

Silindra's arms, I used my magic to release mom and dad from their cage.

"The white lightning," Mom said, watching me curiously a moment. "Is that from the crown?"

I sent the magic away, returning it to my ribs where the blades still rested. When I was sure it was secure and wouldn't harm anyone, I hugged my mom tightly. "I think it's a combination of my magic as well as the crown," I finally said.

"Makes sense." She squeezed me to her, kissing my cheek.

Dad came over and hugged us both. "You are amazing," he said. "And I couldn't wish for a better daughter." He kissed my other cheek. "I always knew you could do anything."

The three of us held each other for several long minutes.

Someone cleared their throat.

"I hate to break up the love fest, but I'd really like to get out of here."

I released Mom and Dad.

Mom gave Dad a look before heading over to Christopher's cage. "What you did for my daughter. Helping her. I will be forever in your debt." She held out her hand and took Christopher's through the bars.

Dad stood beside Mom. "Agreed," he said.

"Thank you," Chris said, soberly. I noticed his face was finally healing, thank goodness. "That means so much," he added.

"Let me open this cage," I said, moving. "Stand back."

Chris and Troy moved out of the way as did my parents. Channeling my magic, it separated from my ribs and skittered along my body. I tore through the bars like they were paper.

As soon as he had the chance, Chris pulled me into a hug before I'd completely sent away my magic and he winced.

"Sorry," I said, hugging him back.

"Nonsense." He looked at me. "Watching you use your magic is

beyond cool." He hugged me again, then moved over to Silindra and the baby. He might want revenge on the child too and I was suddenly nervous.

"Be careful," I said in warning.

"I will," he admitted and winked. "Now, let me have a look at this baby," he whispered at Silindra.

I watched him until I was sure the baby would be safe. Then glanced up at the sky. There was still one more person I needed to be reunited with. The most important person. Troy. But I was nervous and sensed he was too. I glanced up at the sky. The darkness was dispersing like a storm system moving at a quick pace.

Steeling myself, I glanced at Troy. He was standing just outside the cell, his arms at his sides and his hands in fists. He was breathing heavily and I took in a quick breath. "Hi Troy," I said, my eyes locking with his.

And the rest of the world vanished. There wasn't anyone else but Troy and me.

"Hi yourself." He came forward and swooped me into his arms, crushing me against him. "How I missed you, Jazz."

OceanofPDF.com

AN ANNOUNCEMENT

BEFORE I KNEW IT, I was laughing as tears of joy leaked onto my cheeks.

He set me on the ground and pushed my hair out of my face, then cupped it in his hands. "I love you vampire girl."

"You do?" I believed him, but needed reassurance as my hands curled around his wrists.

"More than I believed it was possible to love." He bent his head and gently touched his lips to mine, his eyes still open and on me.

I kissed him back, as a gurgle of happiness shot through me.

The sweet kiss turned hot and needy. I loved him and wanted him and didn't care who knew it. He pressed my mouth open, deepening our kiss as his arms went around my waist and he lifted me off the ground.

"Hey you two?"

It was my Mom.

I froze and opened my eyes. Troy was watching me again.

"Should we tell them?" he asked.

I knew he was talking about our engagement. "Now's as good a time as any," I said as he set me on my feet.

Troy took my hand and I turned to face the group.

"We have an announcement," he said.

They were stunned. Pops had an arm around Joanna.

Silindra was still beside Christopher who was holding the baby.

Mom and Dad stood beside them.

And poor Laeddin. He was still in his lamp. My eyes landed on it and Silindra gasped and ran over to pick it up.

"Troy and I are engaged," I blurted, then covered my mouth.

The baby let out a laugh and everyone turned to the child, doting on her like what we shared was yesterday's news.

"I see how we rate," Troy said and chuckled, taking my other hand and turning me to face him. His eyes danced with joy.

"You're number one in my book and always will be." My wings appeared and I flew up so our faces were close. "I love you, Troy."

He stroked my wings and I shuddered. "You're so damn hot," he said, kissing me again.

"Is this really the time?" My dad huffed.

I smiled, biting my lower lip. He had no idea.

Silindra rubbed on the lamp and Laeddin appeared, frustration evident on his face. "What happened?"

Silindra patted his cheek. "I'll tell you all about it." She glanced at me and then the two of them vanished.

Pops and Joanna came over to look at the baby and suddenly I couldn't stand being in the lair one more second. Closing my eyes, I teleported everyone to my parents' drawing room in our castle in Sharra.

Mom and Dad and the others gasped with surprise and I smiled. Yep! I could do that.

Home, I thought happily, my eyes going to Troy. He was speaking with Christopher, but he caught me looking at him and smiled. My heart filled with joy. Safe. He was safe. My family was home. I'd never been so happy in my life.

The baby cooed and babbled, delighted with her audience as everyone gathered around. She really was quite beautiful.

Troy wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pressed a kiss to my temple. His eyes were haunted. "May I?" he asked, holding out his arms for the child.

"Sure." I carefully handed her over, feeling so much love and joy

and happiness. I wanted to remember this moment forever. With a thought, I healed Troy's physical ailments. I hoped he would talk to me if he had any lingering issues because of what Sharra did to him while imprisoned. We needed to talk about everything, but that could wait. He loved me and I loved him. We would work through the rest in time. We had time now.

As Troy talked to the baby, he walked around bouncing her in his arms. I went over to my dad and mom. My magic flared to life and I healed them each with just a touch. Healing them felt like a gift, and it was the least I could do after everything I'd done. I opened my mouth to apologize for everything, but my dad swept me into a hug and I knew no words needed to be said. This was what unconditional love felt like, and I hoped I never forgot it. Then my mom locked her arms around my dad and me. We hugged and then hugged some more. Eventually, we broke apart and Pops introduced everyone to Joanna.

When there was a break in the chatter, I gave Christopher a hug. Long and hard, squeezing him until he said he would pop. "Thank you for always being there for me," I said, tears misting my eyes. "You are without a doubt one of the best friends a girl could ever want."

"Thank you," he said.

"Did you ever find Arthur?"

His face fell. "No, but I intend to keep looking."

"What about me?" Abrea asked, interrupting as she flew into the room from an open window. "Am I still your best friend?"

"Always will be," I said, laughing and used magic to make her my size, just for a moment, so I could give her a big hug. "The best ever," I added.

She giggled but was grateful when I shrank her back to pixilette size.

"I'm still worried about those who became akuma," Mom said.

Dad was holding the baby now but put one hand around my waist as he spoke to Mom. "Since Sharra has had a reset, so to speak, all

who were affected by her evil doings will be reset too. They will return. No doubt about it." He kissed her softly on the lips.

"So that means?" Mom asked, studying him with a quizzical look on her face.

"The darkness is no more. The akuma are no more. And all realms are free once again and those who became akuma are alive and well."

"That is wonderful news." She gave me such a look of admiration, one filled with love. "You are amazing, Jasmine," she said and kissed my cheek.

"Thanks, Mom." Of course there would be some drawbacks, like Arthur and Ciana were still alive, but they could be dealt with at another time.

The baby cooed, her hand wrapped around my mom's finger. "What should we call her?" Mom asked, her eyes never leaving the child.

"Not Sharra," my dad said, his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

"How about Clare?" I asked, caressing the little girl's curly head of hair.

"That's a great name," Mom said and my dad agreed.

"You'll help us with her, won't you?" my mom asked, her eyes misty.

"She's my sister. I wouldn't have it any other way," I said, and smiled when Troy's arm slipped around my waist. the four of us hugged, our eyes on the beautiful baby. Together, we could raise Sharra to love the way we loved each other.

And if she still chose evil - Well, that was a story for another day.

FOUR MONTHS LATER, on a Monday, I entered Salem High. Troy was at my side. After a long conversation and a lot of make-up kissing, we agreed to never be apart again unless absolutely necessary. Still, as we made our way into the high school, chayot guards lined the walkway,

for our protection as well as the humans. Since the darkness had vanished, much had changed in the human realm.

Troy and I were kind of supernatural celebrities, which was weird. Everywhere we went, a picture of Troy and me kissing was plastered all over social media. People created fan accounts with more than two hundred million followers. Entertainment news called us the biggest thing since the Kardashians.

As part of my new job as supernatural ambassador in the human realm, I was asked to speak at many functions as well as colleges and schools all over the world. They all wanted me to share first-hand what happened with the darkness. No one knew about the akuma. Since there was a reboot, it was like that never happened and I was grateful.

Dressed in jeans and a tee shirt as well as my black combat boots, not to mention my new wickedly-cool wings, I was no longer embarrassed. No longer worried about what normal looked like. The wings on my back were part of me and that was all that mattered.

Together, Troy and I walked the sidewalk leading to the entrance of Salem High. Students pointed and whispered. Some clapped. Other jeered. I ignored them. There would always be bigoted individuals as well as those who couldn't stand to witness another's happiness. It wasn't completely their fault. For eighteen years, the government had fed their fears regarding the supernatural. Now, times had changed, and I intended to do my best to help humans see that not all of us were bad just as not all humans were good.

On either side of the school's entrance stood a chayot guard. Ever the protectors of humans. Their angelic magic reeked of light and overcompensation. Not that I minded much. For the most part, I didn't pay them much attention. They were a part of the human realm and I respected their position, but that was where my care for them ended. Except for Gabe. Though he'd given up his power and position for Cindy, he was still a chayot and one of my favorite uncles.

Rolling my shoulders back, I landed at the bottom of the steps. Both guards wore sunglasses. Each one gave me a barely perceptible nod. I wanted to smile, to put them at ease, but couldn't. My thoughts swirled as I rehearsed what I intended to say.

"You're going to do great," Troy said. He knew I was nervous to speak here. The school was a small venue, but it was also the beginning of my new journey.

"Thank you," I whispered, squeezing his hand until all the blood left it.

Inside, the halls were pretty sparse. Many parents as well as students didn't want to be near me. The rest moved off to the sides to let me pass.

I held my head high, trying not to flinch every time I saw a poster of myself with the words: JASMINE, PRINCESS OF SHARRA across the middle.

Definitely not any kind of normal.

But that was okay.

Humans and I wouldn't be friends, at least not right away.

I'd tricked them and hurt many of them.

But at least they are all alive. I welcomed their scorn because it was better than them being dead.

Inside the auditorium were more chayot guards. I ignored them, knowing they would be with me for every tour. That was part of the deal.

When the principal saw me, he waved.

Troy and I made our way over to him. I extended a hand. "Thank you for having me," I said.

He laughed nervously before shaking my hand and then Troy's. "Glad you both could come," he said, pulling his hand away like I burned him.

"Of course."

He studied the floor in between us awkwardly a few moments. "I'll be back." He scurried away, leaving Troy and me at center court, all alone. With a tiny sigh, I glanced at Troy.

He smiled and all of my worries vanished. I could do anything with him by my side. Even speak at this school. "I'm going to go stand over there." He pointed to an empty portion of the wall under the basketball hoop. "You're going to do great, okay?"

He kissed me and I touched his face. "Thank you."

When he was gone, I took one of the chairs beside the podium and pulled out my phone. I don't know why. Habit maybe.

"Watched any of The Vampire Diaries lately?"

I glanced up and into a pair of hazel eyes. She didn't seem mad, but then why would she? As far as she was concerned, the akuma thing never happened. That was what all the humans believed. "Hi, Abby." She looked great today. Same nerdy cool girl with cropped honey brown hair, a nerdy tee shirt, and her worn paperback copy of Wuthering Heights.

"Jasmine, huh?" When we first met, I'd lied and said my name was Jack. Obviously, one of the dozens of posters had set her straight.

"Yeah," I admitted, bracing myself for whatever she would dish out. I deserved it.

"I like it better than Jack." She shrugged, scrutinizing me. "Your wings are awesome." She sat in the chair next to mine.

"Thank you." I studied her a moment. "I'm really sorry, Abby. Are you okay?" I wanted to ask if she remembered being dead, but I didn't have the guts.

She gave me a big smile. "I'm more than okay. No worries. I feel more energized than ever." She reached over and grabbed my hand. "All is forgiven."

I glanced down. "And Cameron? Have you seen him?"

"Of course, but he isn't coming. His mom wouldn't let him."

I met her eyes. "I get it," I said, and meant it.

She patted my arm. "Maybe we can get together for pizza sometime. When you aren't being all Supernatural Ambassador of the World Vampire." She winked.

I laughed. "I would like that a lot," I admitted. "And maybe you might want to meet a friend of mine, Lirle. She's a dragon."

Abby's eyes got wide. "Yes," she said, laughing lightly. Her attention turned to the filled bleachers. "They'll come around, but it might take time, so have patience with us." She paused. "And by us, I mean the human race."

I laughed again. "Got it. Patience. I can do that."

The principal was headed our way.

Abby stood. "I'd better find a seat. Good luck."

"I'll need it," I said, and took a deep breath. I could do this.

OceanofPDF.com

ONE YEAR LATER

"ARE YOU READY?" I asked. We were standing outside on my balcony. I took Troy's hand as my wings fluttered behind me. My engagement ring sparkled in the midday light and I couldn't help but admire it. Troy had asked Jesse and the gargoyles to create the ring for me. A thick platinum band with vines filigreed on either side leading to the center where sat a delicate jasmine flower made of diamonds and blue topaz.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Troy was teasing me, pretending to be nervous about me flying him around Sharra.

"There's only one way to find out," I said, and leaped into the air.

Troy whooped out a holler as he clung to my hands, his body dangling below.

"Don't drop him, Jasmine. It isn't every day you find someone crazy enough to fall for you," Abrea said beside me, her pixilette wings fluttering gracefully.

"True." I laughed and the action felt really good.

"Jasmine? We need to leave for the wedding," my mom called from back in my room.

I rolled my eyes and glanced at Abrea, who giggled. "Just like old times," I said.

"Should we keep her waiting this time?"

"Probably not." I angled my wings turned to fly back to my room.

Below me Troy shuddered and shifted into his dragon from, his magnificent bronze wings spread wide to keep him aloft. "We can keep her waiting long enough to have a race, don't you think?" He smirked and blew out twin puffs of smoke.

"You're on," I said and took off. "See you at the wedding, Abrea," I

shouted over my shoulder.

"Don't be late," she responded.

Troy was coming up on me fast and I pushed myself, determined to beat my fiancé once and for all. Just before we reached the finish line, which is this case was the water's edge, Troy shot past me.

I growled. "Not cool, dragon boy."

His laugh sailed back to me as he turned around, hovering over the finish line, his wings beating lightly behind him. Even in dragon form, he was gorgeous.

When I got to him, he swooshed me into a hug. I laughed. "I don't like to lose," I admitted after a few moments.

"You're the Eternal Vampire. You can do anything you want and are almost as powerful as my father. Letting me win at flying is the least you can do." He winked. "I may be secure in my manhood, but I need a win once in a while." He chuckled and I joined in.

"I guess." I pulled him into an awkward dragon slash vampire hug.

His arms went around my waist and he pulled me tight against his body. "Should we have a wedding tonight or what?"

"I'm all for it," I said, my gaze lingering on his mouth. My heart raced with excited nervousness. With Troy by my side, our happily ever after would be epic. No doubt about it. Dragon boy and vampire girl. Together we'd overcome every obstacle thrown at us and found our way back to each other. Nothing could stop us.

OUR WEDDING WAS in my favorite rose garden behind our castle in Sharra. Rustic yet sophisticated décor interspersed with plenty of magic was everywhere. Rows of wooden benches lined either side of the wide grassy aisle. At each end was a wooden container filled with teal and copper hombre roses and fluttering pixilettes.

At the front was a wooden arch covered in fresh roses and more pixilettes. They were all dressed in their finest, giving everywhere

they touched a magical shimmer. The arch was also draped in gauzy white material. A light breeze caused the edges to dance happily.

All around us were the roses I loved so much. Cindy had spelled them so they slowly shifted smoothly from white to teal to bronze. It was beautiful and so fit Troy and me and our wedding colors.

"How are you doing?" Dad asked.

"Good," I said, leaning into him, grateful he was alive and well. He'd mostly recovered from his time in captivity, when Sharra tried to steal away some of his magic. His eyes were more hazel now, and I heard him and my mom talking about whether or not he was human. I would tell them later tonight that my dad, though he appeared to be human, was more like me than my mom. He was human, but he still possessed a great amount of the seven magics. Perhaps Cindy could train him or better yet, Abernathy.

Dad lifted one eyebrow. "Just good?"

I smiled. "I'm great," I corrected. "So happy to be marrying Troy. And beyond glad to have you and Mom back." My gaze left his face and once again, I scanned the crowd of creatures who'd come.

My gaze went first to Netherby, the sea dragon who granted my wish. Though I'd invited him personally, I hadn't expected him to come. It was a nice surprise to see him.

He was transformed into a human-ish looking man with long white hair. His body was wiry and lean and he was dressed in a light blue suit, the jacket long, coming to just below his knees and he wore white boots. On his light face he had a white mustache and just under his bottom lip was a patch of hair that was long and swayed in the wind.

Beside him sat Silindra with her long, bright blue hair and matching wings, as well as a face so exquisite, it made my eyes water to look at her.

Silindra sensed me and turned, giving me a thumbs up.

I nodded in response, glad she was back. She deserved to find a life

of her own. Laeddin sat beside her, his arm around her waist. The two of them made an amazing couple.

Silindra's eyes went to Clare. The little girl who used to be Sharra stood in front of me, waiting for her cue to go. In the last year, she'd grown quickly, as I had, going from a baby to what appeared to be a five-year-old.

I still wasn't sure whether it was the combination of my magic and the elven crown or something the Unknowns had done that allowed her to become the child. If I had to guess, I would say it was mostly the Unknowns. They made it clear messing with our planet was their favorite pastime. And even though they had wanted me to die so that all magic would die with me, it seemed they were placated by the new turn of events. Sharra would get a second chance. We all deserved at least one.

On Troy's side sat Christopher. Extraordinarily handsome in his loose fitting white shirt, opened at the collar and navy dress slacks, he needed to find love as well. More than once he admitted to feeling like what he had was enough, but I wanted more for him.

Somehow. Someday.

As my eyes traveled up to Troy, he winked and I smiled. Pops stood beside him looking elegant in his three piece tuxedo complete with black and teal tie and a white shirt. The suit showed off his tall and lean body. His graying hair was combed back, revealing his striking face and vivid eyes. He smiled.

I returned it before my gaze flicked over to Troy, the man I would spend the rest of eternity with. My insides jumped and my newly reacquired black wings fluttered at the sight of him in his deep teal suit and bronze and white tie.

He winked and my smile grew as I thought about the vision of my future Laeddin gave me. Someday soon, Troy and I would have children and a life of our own. Of that I had zero doubts.

Next to Pops was Jesse as well as Heathcliff, Gabe and the

remaining seven uncles. They were all exceedingly fine. More than once, I heard someone in the supernatural crowd comment about how gorgeous all of them were. Among the guests were vampires, unicorns, gargoyles, elves, fairies, Locanis, Vaktare, and more. Some from the different realms and others from the Seven Magics Academy, including some friends from my classes. Even the brute, Jonathon, was there. In a small way, I felt like I owed him. If he hadn't been a jerk to me, Troy and I never would have met.

My side included my mom, Cindy, and Joanna. Lirle was there too. She wasn't old enough or didn't possess enough power to shift into a human form, so she stayed off to the side where she wouldn't accidentally singe someone. I glanced at her and she winked.

Joanna followed my gaze before glancing at Pops. Much to my delight and everyone else's, the two of them would marry soon. It made my heart happy that they finally found each other. I already considered her part of the family.

All the women standing up for me were breathtaking, especially my mom in her light teal dress and soft rose buds in her hair, creating a crown. She looked my age with her long, dark hair down and curled at the ends, hanging to her hips. Her eyes danced with joy. Our relationship had come a long way. During the course of the last few months I was able to see her for who she really was - a strong and intelligent woman. I was beyond lucky to have her as a role model in my life.

The music began and Clare started down the aisle. Her pearly wings flapped as she walked and flew toward the wedding party. When the light hit her wings, they seemed to change colors. Though she was still quite young, she was like me - an original vampire.

She glanced back, her violet eyes, so like mine, studying me inquisitively.

It's going to be okay, I spoke encouragingly into her mind.

It still surprised me how easily she'd become my sister.

Though she'd been the evil and awful Sharra six months ago, she was now kind and loving and cared deeply for our family.

She gave me a single nod before turning around and continuing down the aisle until she reached the end where Kenmei, who waited stoically in the center of the arch, patted her head kindly before indicating she sit down beside Laeddin.

The music changed and everyone stood.

"Here we go," I whispered. Cindy had done my makeup to enhance my eyes and my tanned skin, highlighting my high cheekbones and thick lashes. My black hair had been pinned up in a delicate bun and my enormous black wings were draped against my back. My long white dress had a train and several pixilettes including Abrea held the ends. The dress was hand made by elves of the most delicate white fabric. Delicate black roses were woven around my waist as well as on random places across the dress. The sleeves were spaghetti straps and the collar was low and round in the front and the back, allowing plenty of room for my wings. The dress glistened in the light and hugged my body like a satin slip.

In one hand I held a bouquet of roses. I knew they were beautiful, but I didn't look at them. Now that our wedding was about to happen, I only had eyes for Troy.

When I reached my spot across from him, I handed Cindy my bouquet.

I barely heard him as Kenmei gave his speech and said the words that would seal Troy and me in matrimony forever. Though I was young, I wasn't afraid. Marrying Troy was the best thing to happen in my life and I would cherish every moment.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Kenmei asked, his eyes flicking to Troy.

My beloved swallowed and looked straight at me. I was beaming, my smile so big my cheeks hurt when he spoke. "You are a light in my life. You've taught me what it means to fight for what you love and

never give up. Beyond the fact that your stunning - " He paused, his eyes roaming me, as the crowd laughed. " - Jasmine, you are the most exquisite being I've ever had the pleasure to meet." He swallowed again, forcing down his nerves at speaking in front of so many. "It means the world to me that you've chosen me to be your husband. I promise to be there for you as a friend and a lover forever." He gave my hands a light squeeze.

"And you, Jasmine?" Kenmei asked. "Anything to add?"

"Troy, before I met you I didn't know what it meant to love unconditionally. Not because I hadn't seen it, because I had in my parents and my family. But I wasn't able to recognize that love or understand it until I met you." Tears blurred my vision as I struggled to say all that was in my heart. "Not only are you the most gorgeous man in the world, you are also the most giving, the kindest, and most caring, too. Despite my mistakes, you continue to root for me and to love me. If I've changed at all for the better, it's because you inspired me to do so." I closed my eyes. Tears dripped onto my cheeks. "You've helped me become the person, daughter, sister, and friend I'm supposed to be and all of my relationships are fuller because you came into my life." I shook my head and worked to contain my emotions. "It means the world to me that you have agreed to be by my side forevermore." I quickly wiped at my eyes, smiling around the tears.

"By the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife," Kenmei said. Then he grinned at Troy. "You may kiss your bride."

I didn't wait but flung myself into Troy's arms, using my wings to lift off the ground and press my lips to his.

His arms circled my waist and my wings circled the two of us.

"My sweet Jazz." He pressed my mouth open, kissing me so deeply, I felt it in my toes.

We parted when we heard clapping.

Then I reached back and touched the arch, sending my magic into the wood and the flowers. The pixilettes fluttered away as teal and

bronze flames sprang to life around us. They didn't burn anything, but they sparkled and glittered against the setting sun.

The clapping grew louder and everyone got to their feet.

My mom lifted Clare so she could see. The little girl reached out a hand and sent her own magic into the arch so it mingled with mine. All seven magics grew, their colors blending and lifting until they nearly touched the sky.

OceanofPDF.com

THE KPID

THAT NIGHT, after all of the festivities were over and we said our goodbyes, Troy and I went back to the small house that used to be my mother's. Now that Sharra was no longer a threat, the chayot set up a meeting between several of the heads of different countries in the human realm and me. There, with the help of the chayot, we discussed relaxing the laws for supernaturals. Together we came to an agreement and I created a magical system with the help of Heathcliff and several other human scientists. After much discussion, I became aware of the KPID, a supernatural government agency known as the King's Paranormal Inquiries Division. The organization had been tracking supernaturals for hundreds of years, at first in the United Kingdom, but in the mid seventeen hundreds, they'd moved over to America as well.

Given access to the KPID's super top secret information, I was able to update and strengthen the magic already in place as well as add some newer, more technical attributes with Heathcliff's help. All major world governments agreed to keep the name of the agency a secret as long as their agents from around the world could work alongside certain supernaturals within the agency. Each time a supernatural entered their jurisdiction, an alert would sound. Then it was determined whether they were a threat or not. The system wasn't perfect. There were many supernaturals who slipped through the magical cracks, including Pops and his adoptive sons. But it was better than anything the human realm had before.

By unanimous vote, I became the human realm's figurehead for all supernatural creatures. That meant meetings and other such duties, but, as long as Troy was with me, I was ready to take on the responsibilities that came with my power and do my part.

I noticed Troy watching me. "What?" I asked, leaning into him. The man had the sexiest lips and face and - yeah, the man was damn sexy. Period.

"Just watching your mind work," he said with a sultry chuckle. "This place is ours. Is it big enough for the world's only Eternal Vampire?" His eyes sparkled at the silly name.

I played along, enjoying his teasing. I still didn't even know what it meant to be the Eternal Vampire. It was a term the Unknowns gave me but I thought it was pretentious. "I don't know, my love. Perhaps we should find out if every room is suitable." I hoped he understood my meaning.

His chuckle grew. "I like the sound of that." Troy caressed my face and I shivered, kissing his palm.

But neither of us moved. Probably because he sensed the thoughts still running through my head. Excitement that this little house my mother grew up in was now mine and Troy's while we resided in the human realm. Of course, in Sharra, we would stay in the castle. It was big enough to hold us as well as my mom and dad.

But here, this place, it felt like a delicious secret. Together we'd changed the house's décor to suit our style, filling the rooms with light paint and new windows and white curtains. When Clare came to stay she would use the same bedroom that had been my mother's and then mine. We changed the room color to pinks and painted the walls with unicorns.

The master bedroom was now mine and Troy's.

"Come on, lover," he said, taking my hand.

Slowly we walked up the stairs, Troy leading. A nervous punch filled my stomach. I wanted to make love to Troy. No doubt about it. Troy and I would be together forever and tonight we would seal our promises to each other physically as well as emotionally.

At the top of the stairs, he turned and pulled me into his arms. "Are you scared?"

"No," I said and meant it. "Only a little anxious about what to expect." I knew what it was like to kiss him and want him, but we hadn't gone further.

Troy gave me a look that said how much he loved me and kissed my hand before leading me into the bedroom.

The room was decorated in an airy contemporary fashion. The enormous bed piled with pillows in creams and white with hints of teal and bronze. The window coverings were closed and the room was lit with thousands of candles.

"Did you do this?" I asked in surprised wonder.

"You're not the only one with magic," he said, his eyes alight with joy.

Music began to play, a soft beat with melodic singing. It was enchanting. "You're really good at this wooing thing," I said, wrapping my arms around him and leaning my face against his chest. He smelled amazing, like sunshine and warmth and a hint of sandalwood. I could feel his heart beating beneath the soft cotton of this shirt. We'd both changed into more casual clothes after the wedding.

We swayed to the music a few moments, until he tilted my head up and kissed my lips. It was soft and full of love and I responded in kind, inexpressibly grateful for the man in my arms.

"I'm going to change," I said, feeling a little lightheaded. As a vampire, I wasn't prone to any kind of sickness or human frailty, but my head was spinning with love and happiness. Well, it was more than happiness. And excitement too. I was married to Troy!

"Great," he said, keeping hold of my hand for as long as possible before I disappeared behind the door. Inside the bathroom, I studied my complexion. My hair was still in the bun from the wedding and I decided to remove all of the pins. It relaxed me, pulling pin after pin from my hair and setting them on the sink. When I was done, my hung long, nearly to my waist, and had some wavy curl in it. "You can do this," I told my reflection.

Again, I reminded myself it wasn't the love making that had me nervous. As I studied my face in the mirror, it became clear I was nervous about baring my soul completely to the man I loved most. He had agreed to love, honor, and cherish me, in sickness and in health. Did that include pride and arrogance too? Or what about whining and selfishness? I had grown up a lot but there was no doubt I still had more growing up to do. Would he love me then?

Taking a deep breath, I sent my wings away, a new development since receiving my new wings from the king and queen of the Hollow. Then I kicked out of my black combat boots, sliding off my jeans and removing my shirt. In my undies it occurred to me I'd gone into the bathroom to change but had nothing to change into.

"Crap!"

A soft knock came on the door and he opened it a crack, sliding a soft aqua satin nightgown through. "Jazz, I thought you might want something to put on."

I took it, thinking it looked too fancy for me, but was grateful. "Thank you," I said meeting his eyes. He winked and I returned it before pushing the door shut. Holding the thing he gave me up against my body, I stared at myself in the mirror. "You definitely want this," I whispered, and quickly took off my underthings before sliding the nightgown over my head.

Then I fluffed my hair and brushed my teeth and stared some more, bringing my wings back. How grateful I was for them. How I had missed flying! Still, I was beyond grateful I could have them appear and disappear at will. It made things like dressing and showering and life in general much easier.

"Jazz, is everything alright?" Troy asked through the door.

If occurred to me that he might think I was having second thoughts, I was taking so long. "Yes," I said, giving myself a smile before opening the door.

The bathroom light bathed Troy in light. The man still had his

jeans on, but he'd removed his shoes and socks and shirt. The button on his pants was undone, too. My heart raced at the sight of him. Hot. Beyond gorgeous. He was everything.

And I wanted him.

"You look like an angel," Troy said, awe filling each word.

"Thank you." I quickly whisked my wings away.

"Bring them back," Troy said, stepping so close that his chest caressed mine. My skin prickled and shivered.

"Are you sure? I-I don't want them to get in the way." I wasn't embarrassed by them any longer and I loved them, but I didn't want Troy to feel like my wings had to be in our lives constantly.

The word freak flickered through my mind and I momentarily panicked. Then I took a deep breath and brought my wings back. I wasn't a freak. I was me and I was okay.

Troy caressed my wings, sending a tremor of desire through me. There was something to be said for having the wings. They were very sensitive and Troy knew how to awaken the need in me. He pressed his lips to mine, opening my mouth and kissing me soundly.

My arms went to his waist and he trembled at my touch. I smiled against his mouth, grateful I could make him feel as undone as he did to me.

"My beautiful Jasmine." He lifted me into his arms and I whisked my wings away again just as he laid me on the bed. Climbing on, I admired the way his muscles flexed as he moved, hovering over me. "Together forever and always, right?" He leaned down so we were nose to nose.

"Absolutely."

As he studied me a moment, I thought about all I still didn't know about him. At some point, I would learn more about the man I loved more than myself. "Tomorrow, will you tell me about your mother?"

The question surprised him.

I did have horrible timing, but I didn't want to forget to ask.

He kissed my mouth, letting it linger before trailing kisses down my neck to my collarbones. As heat rose within me, I decided I didn't give a flying flip about his mom or where he came from. He was here and he was mine. That was all that mattered.

He paused, then brought his face up so I could meet his eyes. "I don't know anything about my mom. How about we find out together?" A mischievous smile splayed across his beautiful lips. "But not today. Maybe not for a while. Deal?"

I ran my fingers through his hair, arching my neck so he would have easier access. "Deal," I finally whispered and then lost myself in the love between Troy and me.

OceanofPDF.com

A BEAUTY SO BEASTLY

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO

"GO, LENORA! THEY CANNOT CATCH US." Fisher pressed his nose against her furry cheek, urging her deeper into the woods.

His whiskers tingled with the realization that the Locanis were close.

Too close.

They were being hunted by the king, his father's servants, the worst of the worst of the Locanis.

And Kevoney had not been a kind master.

He'd been ruthless.

Fisher was nothing like him, but that didn't matter to the Locanis. He knew if he and his wife were caught, the werewolves would slaughter them without remorse.

Fisher and Lenora had to endure.

They were all that was left of the Vaktare royal family, and his mate carried the child that could save their species.

Fisher looked back, peering into the dark night.

A strong smell of smoke wafted through the air, and Fisher knew the werewolves had burned their palace home.

"I can't do it." Lenora stopped, panting.

Her beastly body swayed, her swollen belly nearly touching the ground before she caught herself. "Our child is unhappy with all the running. It's making her sick."

Lenora fell onto her side. "It's making me sick, too." As though to prove the point, she retched on the ground.

Fisher moved close, taking a protective stance, sensing the Locanis were getting closer.

A quick glance down revealed that the pendant still dangled from his furry neck, the red stone gleaming in the moonlight.

The pendant was their only chance, the one significant advantage they had over the Locanis: each Vaktare was born with a unique preternatural ability.

He had been given the gift of conjuring, which was why he could use the pendant.

His wife, Lenora, could control the elements but couldn't use her power now for fear the strain would harm their unborn child.

One of the Locanis howled.

Others responded.

There were at least a dozen, and they were getting closer.

"Please, Lenora. Get up." Urgency caused him to roar. "If we can get to the top of the mountain, we'll be able to jump realms. It isn't far." Fisher nudged her, encouraging her to stand.

Lenora's legs shook and wobbled.

"Oh," Lenora cried. "I think the baby is coming."

"How much time do we have?" Fisher asked, fear causing his heart to beat rapidly.

Her ears twitched, and she shook her head. "Minutes, possibly just seconds."

Fisher knew there was no way to predict when the child would come, but he wouldn't let them give up.

Another set of howls.

The werewolves were gaining fast.

He closed his eyes.

Unlike Lenora's gift, his usually required additional components in order to work. He needed a spell that didn't require any ingredients, something that would slow the werewolves down.

If only Lenora could use her talent and create a thunderstorm to

conceal and wash away their scent.

“What is it?” Lenora asked, her breathing heavy.

Fisher opened his eyes, considering his mate. Could he ask such a thing of her, especially in her condition?

Lenora’s legs shook, but she held her ground.

His mate seemed to understand.

She closed her eyes, focusing.

And Fisher immediately felt the winds pick up.

Dark thunderclouds appeared in the already opaque sky as it began to rain heavily.

“It’s done,” she said, falling against him.

“Get on.” He nudged her onto his back.

When she was secure, he hefted up the mountainside, digging his thick paws into the dampened earth.

More than once, he debated changing into his human form but tossed the thought aside. If he and Lenora were caught, it would be easier to fight the Locanis in his werecat form.

On and on, he pushed.

So high up, the wind whipped fiercely against their faces, slapping through their fur, stinging their skin.

He kept going, bowing his head against the tempest his wife had created.

“Stop, you mangy cat!”

Even with the wind and the rain, it was easy to hear the Locanis’ growling words.

It had been the leader of the pack, Beck, who shouted.

The werewolf was young and arrogant, but he was also fearless and exceptional in the art of killing.

Many Vaktare had died with their throats in his mouth, their blood dripping from his fangs.

“It’s okay. Keep breathing.” Fisher spoke softly to Lenora, keeping his back to the werewolves.

Lenora opened her eyes with a look of amused irritation. It said if she had more strength, she’d lovingly claw his eyes out.

“I know. Sorry,” he whispered, a wisp of a smile on his face.

She rested a paw against his cheek.

He leaned into it, setting her down.

He would use the pendant now.

If they weren’t close enough to the gateway, it wouldn’t matter.

They were dead anyway.

“Turn around, Fisher. Don’t be a coward like your father. Face your death honorably.”

Fisher’s hackles rose.

He wanted to make the werewolf leader pay for his insolence.

Instead, as water dripped from his face, he chanted the words for the incantation.

The wind and the rain kept the portal hidden until it was nearly big enough to jump through.

“Go,” he shouted ferociously, shoving Lenora into the opening.

But Beck was suddenly on his back as Fisher took a step toward the portal.

“So you are a coward,” Beck hissed, sinking his teeth into Fisher’s shoulder.

Fisher bucked Beck off him with a mighty heave, trying to snap his neck in the process. “You’re a lot of talk, Beck.”

The gateway was beginning to close.

Beck stood, shaking his head. Then he charged.

Fisher planted his feet.

Beck lowered his head, preparing to ram Fisher.

At the last second, Fisher sidestepped and leaped into the closing

portal.

He heard Beck howl in frustration just as the gateway locked behind him.

It was dark in the new realm like it'd been in Hiraken, the realm of his birth, but Fisher's enhanced eyes allowed him to see that Lenora was on her side, breathing rapidly.

"Lenora," he shouted, running to her. He shifted into his human form now.

Lenora already had. Her creamy skin was almost translucent in the moonlight.

She didn't speak, all of her attention on birthing her baby.

As the child came, Lenora let out a loud scream, which sounded more like a roar.

Then she fell silent.

Fisher picked up the human child.

"Lenora," he whispered when the baby started to cry. "Our baby girl."

It was strange.

While he'd been so terrified for the child moments before jumping realms, he now found he had no emotion at all.

He remembered he'd had emotions, that he'd once known what it was like to smile, to love, but he couldn't find where they'd gone.

The medicine woman had explained that when they crossed into the human realm, the magical enchantment would shut away the werecat part of themselves and all of their emotions.

"I feel nothing," Lenora said.

"Neither do I. This is what she said would happen." Fisher looked down at the baby.

"What should we call her?" The question seemed appropriate, though he couldn't understand his need to name the child now.

Lenora closed her eyes, nodding. “We’ll name the child Beatrice.”

“Agreed.” Fisher glanced down at his naked chest. The pendant was gone.

He remembered when Beck rushed him, as he’d moved to the side, he’d felt a tugging. “Beck has the pendant,” he said.

“He won’t be able to use it. He has no power. We are safe.” Lenora stared up at the starry sky.

Fisher nodded, but a strange buzzing deep inside made him think otherwise.

OceanofPDF.com

YOU AREN'T INVITED

FROM MY LOUNGE chair near the pool, I studied the waterfall. It rumbled monotonously down the enormous rocks and dumped into the pool.

I closed my eyes against the blaring sun, focusing on the heat kissing my skin.

Unwanted memories flooded my mind.

As I brushed some waterproof mascara on my lashes, I thought about the first time I realized how much power I possessed.

I was seven.

My dad rented out an entire amusement park for my birthday.

I invited the kids in my class to come.

We rode the rides as many times as we wanted, watched the shows over and over, and ate ice cream, funnel cakes, and homemade fudge from the food shops.

Throughout the day, more than one classmate told me I must be "the richest girl in the world" or asked if I was a princess.

Of course, at that age, I wanted to believe I was a princess.

So I said yes.

After that, I gained a lot more friends.

It didn't matter that I felt nothing.

No one cared if I treated him or her badly.

Those who I allowed to spend time with me felt privileged.

I was given everything and took what I wanted without consequence.

I was ten when one of my classmates first called me on my personality or lack thereof.

She'd said I was a heartless bitch.

My dad had rented out the entire theater so my friends and I could watch the newly re-digitized Beauty and the Beast movie. Dad and Mom told me to invite as many people as I wanted. I invited five.

Alice Lindell came over to me one day in school, sat primly in the seat beside mine, and informed me that I should be kind and invite everyone.

She was one of those trendy girls, very friendly, super pretty, and her parents obviously had money too, which was why I wanted nothing to do with her.

I was the princess.

No one else would ever be allowed to claim my title.

She'd been wearing flower pants, a white half shirt with the word princess sparkling in hot pink across her chest, a hot pink tank shirt, and matching hot pink boots.

The girl loved hot pink.

Her hair was blond, and she always flipped it with her hand when she talked.

I'd picked up my fruit punch juice container and "accidentally" spilled it all over her shirt and pants.

"I don't have to be kind," I said, thinking I had no idea what kindness felt like. "I can do what I want, and you aren't invited."

That was when she used the words - heartless bitch.

They stuck.

If it were true or not, I didn't know.

I didn't care.

Those types of emotions meant nothing to me.

Eight years later and people still called me a heartless bitch behind my back.

And it still didn't bother me. Nothing did.

A lot happened since Alice Lindell and her words.

I'd just turned eighteen, graduated from high school, and was the owner of a brand new LaFerrari. It was yellow, had black leather seats, and cost my parents more than a million dollars.

The car was beautiful, and I knew I should be excited, yet my mood remained the same as always - blank.

"Would you like lunch by the pool or inside?" Mrs. Dotts asked, interrupting my thoughts of the past. She was Cavanaugh Mansion's cook. An older lady with gray hair, a friendly smile, and sensible shoes.

"The pool," I answered, opening my eyes lazily.

"Very well, Miss Beatrice." She bowed slightly, making her ruffled, white apron arch outward.

"Have you seen my parents?" I asked before she left to go downstairs.

"No, miss. When I arrived, they were already gone."

The way her round face puckered, it was easy to discern she was distressed by their actions. I knew why.

My parents were creatures of habit.

They woke each morning, including weekends, at five o'clock.

Exercised.

Got ready for the day.

Ate breakfast.

And then my dad would go into work, and my mom would do whatever it was she did.

I rarely rose before seven, but they'd been following the same routine for so long, even I knew their schedule.

Occasionally they took a trip, but they always gave plenty of notice so Mrs. Dotts and Isaac could prepare for their absence.

"Did they leave a note?"

She wrung her hands, filled with worry. “No, miss.”

If they were gone, they were gone.

I shrugged. “You’re blocking my light,” I said, waving her away.

Mrs. Dotts nodded and headed away.

The pool was a few hundred feet from the main house, past the adobe-style patio. Cavanaugh Mansion was twenty thousand square feet of traditional grandness.

The outside was a combination of stucco and brick.

There were dozens of windows and a balcony across the front and back of the house. It rested on the side of a mountain overlooking Salt Lake City.

Spanning fifty acres, Cavanaugh Mansion’s grounds had everything, including its very own nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, and stables, along with three guesthouses.

“Alone,” I whispered.

The pool water shimmered in the sunlight. I adjusted the lounger so I could lay flat, soaking in the warm summer rays.

Birds chirped in the nearby trees, singing so happily I suddenly wondered what that must feel like - to be cheerful enough to sing about it.

“Miss Cavanaugh, may I present Will, Eva, Ashley, Cassidy, and Greg.” Isaac came over to the pool, followed by my guests.

He wore black pants, a black jacket, a silver vest, a white shirt, white gloves, and a black bow tie.

Always pristine, and by the book, he was a butler’s butler.

When I was little, he scared me.

He was tall and thin with receding salt and pepper hair and thick eyebrows that seemed to grow thicker by the year.

“Can we get some drinks, Isaac?” I sat up, my toned abs contracting as I moved.

“Yes, miss.” He bowed and withdrew.

I’d known my friends were coming.

Yesterday was my birthday, and they’d texted that they wanted to bring me presents.

I wasn’t going to pass up gifts, no way.

What they gave told me how dearly they held my friendship.

“The hard kind,” Eva said, smiling coyly up at a guy that I guessed was Greg. Then she said, “Happy eighteen, Bea. You look hot.”

Greg nodded.

He held a present in his other hand.

“Thanks. I am hot.” Everyone except Greg laughed.

He obviously hadn’t been schooled on what was appropriate in my presence.

I’d find a way to make him see.

I went to push my sunglasses on my head and then remembered I wore a tiara.

Yes, the tiara was perfectly acceptable sunbathing attire.

My bikini was red, the exact shade of the red diamonds in the rose crown.

I took the glasses off and set them on the end table next to my chair.

“Damn, Bea. Where’d you get that crown?” Cassidy asked, setting her present on the patio table and moving closer.

She liked shiny things almost as much as I did.

Ashley shook her head. “Seriously? Only you would think to lay out next to a pool in a bikini and a tiara. What’s that stone in the center? A ruby?”

I shook my head, feeling like the cat that swallowed the canary.

“It’s a red diamond.”

Will, who’d been quiet so far, blurted out, “Holy shit.”

His father was in the diamond business.

I knew that because he talked about diamonds all the freaking time.

“That thing is probably worth eight million, give or take.” He sat on the patio chair beside me, smiling.

The present in his hand was small, with a brilliant blue bow and the word “Tiffany’s” etched across the box top.

I smiled back, knowing it was expected.

“Where did you get it?” Ashley asked, still referring to the tiara. She took the chair on the other side of mine.

Eva, Cassidy, and Greg pulled up patio chairs and sat as well.

Glancing at each person, verifying I had their full attention, I gave them a brilliant smile.

“My mom and dad gave it to me for my birthday.” I spoke about it like it was no big deal. To me, it wasn’t, but I knew it was a big deal to them.

Picking up some tanning lotion, I held it out for Will. “Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” Will was always so accommodating, just the way a boyfriend should be.

He put down his gift, shook the lotion, and squirted some on his hands.

Then he rubbed them together and placed his hands on my back.

The lotion was cool against my warm skin.

I winked, knowing he liked when I did that.

He rested a hand on my knee, his blue eyes sparkling with need.

I pulled away.

His hand was still covered in lotion.

Will’s face fell.

I knew it bothered him that I had no desire to get physical.

Eva crossed her legs, leaning into Greg.

“I’m so sorry, Beatrice. I know you had your heart set on that yellow Ferrari.”

I laughed. It was hard and cold. “I got that too.”

Cassidy whistled.

“You driven her yet?” Will asked, massaging lotion into my shoulders. Some got on my hair. My maid Celeste had curled it and swept the front up, but the back was still down.

“Watch it,” I snapped, pulling the ends out of the way.

“Sorry.” Will sounded repentant.

“No, I haven’t driven the car yet,” I said, putting my sunglasses back on. “I’m thinking tomorrow or maybe the day after that.” Several magazines were on the table next to my chair, and I picked one up, casually flipping through the pages.

Of course, I wanted to drive the car. Why wouldn’t I? But I didn’t want to take him.

“This is for you,” Greg said, handing me Eva’s present.

I gave him my special smile, taking it.

The paper was a bright yellow with an even more colorful orange ribbon.

“Should I open it now?” I was playing demure.

To fit in with regular people, my parents taught me what was expected during specific situations at a young age.

“Yeah.” Eva glanced at Greg. “We hope you like it.”

I tore off the paper and opened the box.

Inside was one of the Fall collection Christian Dior bags. The colors morphed from red into orange and then yellow. It was gorgeous - score one for Eva and the hot new guy.

“Love it.” I set it back in the box and on the concrete ground.

Eva beamed with pride.

The look on Cassidy's face told me that either the gift she got was too cheap or it was the same one.

Without focusing on her, I watched her push it back and under her chair.

"Do you want me to open your gift next, Cassidy?" I asked, purposely putting her on the spot.

Her already pale face got whiter. "No, I - I've brought the wrong gift. This one is for my aunt." Her face turned red as my bikini. "I'll bring you the right one tomorrow."

I raised an eyebrow, telling her with my expression that I wasn't happy with her efforts. "Whatever," I sniffed, lifting my nose.

Ashley handed me hers. "Happy birthday."

Her present was long and thin, like a hefty envelope.

It was wrapped in yellow paper with a black bow.

It reminded me of a bee, and I randomly wondered if she'd done the colors on purpose. I didn't ask.

When I took the box, I waited a few seconds for her to comment on the color scheme, but she didn't.

I could see she was a little worried.

The skin around her eyes was tense, but she was also less willing to bow to my desires than the others.

If the gift was lame, it was because she'd had enough of my bitchiness, and I would drop her like a hot plate.

"What could it be?" I ripped off the paper and opened the envelope.

It was a trip for two to Belize.

I was actually impressed. She'd remembered that I'd mentioned I'd wanted to go to Belize a few months ago.

Maybe she wasn't worried about me so much as something else in her life.

“This is great. So unexpected.” Then I smirked. “I suppose the second ticket is for you?”

She played it cool. “Whoever. I’ve been to Belize a bunch of times.”

“Right. I’m sure I can find someone.” I set the envelope with the tickets in it on the ground next to the Dior bag.

The only one left was Will. He handed me his present.

“It isn’t anything big, but when I saw it, I thought of you.” He gave me a bright smile. The one that lit up his eyes.

I took it and untied the ribbon. In the distance came a yowl, like a cat, only the sound was louder than a house cat.

Living on the side of a mountain, it wasn’t uncommon to hear strange noises.

Bobcats were prevalent in the higher altitudes.

What was strange was the way Will glanced in the direction of the noise.

“Afraid of bobcats?” I asked, smirking.

One of his eyes twitched. “No, not really.” He chuckled nervously.

Since the box was from Tiffany’s, I expected to find diamond earrings, a tennis bracelet, or even a pretty diamond necklace.

I mean, his dad worked in diamonds, so believing I would get diamonds didn’t seem far-fetched, even if whatever it was would seem trivial next to my amazing white and red diamond tiara.

I opened the box.

There were no diamonds inside.

Instead was a key chain with a yellow and onyx textured leather bee with palladium-plated wings on the end. I picked it up.

“Read the back. There’s an inscription,” Will said, leaning closer so that I could smell his spicy cologne over the strong chlorine from the pool.

I turned the bee over and read aloud, “You’ll always be my Bea. ~ Love, Will.”

It was corny and cheap and totally stupid. “Wow.” I forced myself to smile, internally debating what in hell I was supposed to do with it.

“You see,” Will said. “It’s a bee, and you’re my Bea.”

I nodded, gritting my teeth. “I get it.” I bit my cheek. “It’s - it’s - ” I studied his features, wondering why I even bothered to keep him around.

He had black hair he spiked in the front with gel.

His eyes were a dark blue, and his lashes were black.

He had olive skin, and even though school had only been out a couple of weeks, he looked like he lived in the sun. His tan was so deep.

“You hate it?” His expression was filled with hurt.

It would have been proper to thank him and move on, but I couldn’t. The present was stupid.

Eva and Ashley had each spent several thousand dollars.

His probably cost a hundred, if that.

“I don’t exactly hate it,” I said and took a deep breath.

Blowing out, I tossed the bee into the pool.

He gasped, his eyes getting wide.

“The gift is stupid, Will. My parents gave me an eight-million-dollar tiara and bought me a million-dollar car. Ashley got me a trip, and Eva got me a bag worth thousands of dollars.” I tossed the box onto his lap.

“Don’t you care about me?”

Will’s mouth opened and closed. His eyes permeated with pain and anger.

I turned away, watching the Tiffany’s bee sink to the bottom of the pool. “It’s pitiful,” I said, clasping my hands over my stomach.

He stood, his hands forming fists at his sides, letting the box crash to the ground. “I’ve got to go.” He walked a few steps and glanced back. “Happy birthday, Beatrice.”

A cruel grin spread over his face.

It was a look I hadn’t seen on him before, and I couldn’t decide if it was new or if I just hadn’t paid enough attention to his facial expressions before.

“I hope you get exactly what’s coming to you.” He stomped past Isaac, who carried a tray of drinks.

“Are you leaving?” he asked Will.

“Hell, yes.” Will shot me a final glare.

Disappointment settled on Isaac’s features. His bright brown eyes locked on mine.

They spoke volumes about how I should understand that I could show my friends, if not kindness, at least respect.

But he said nothing, which was a damn good thing.

It wasn’t his place.

Isaac cleared his throat, set the drinks on the patio table, and walked away without a word.

OceanofPDF.com

WANT TO KISS ME

THOSE WHO REMAINED SPENT the afternoon with me outside, by the pool.

Mrs. Dotts brought out a lunch of marinated salmon with mango-kiwi relish. After we ate and had a few cocktails, Ashley, Eva, Greg, and Cassidy swam.

I didn't.

I wasn't a fan of spending long periods of time in the water.

No one mentioned what had happened between Will and me. They kept the conversation on easy stuff, like summer plans, parties, and college.

I hadn't decided where to go yet. I had no idea what I wanted to study.

Ashley was going back East to Harvard. She wanted to study law, which fit her perfectly. Most days she wore black horn rimmed glasses and kept her short, dark hair pinned back. She was short, like me, and had brown eyes, not like me.

Mine were hazel.

Cassidy was going to the University of California, Berkeley. She said she was going to study the fine art of hot men and surfing. Her long blonde hair, green eyes, and unnaturally tanned skin would fit right in on the California beaches. She was also tall and super into working out.

Eva was staying in Utah to go to the University of Utah.

When I found out that was where Greg went, I understood. It was hard to know what the true color of Eva's hair was. She changed it monthly.

Today it black with white streaks throughout. She had a tattoo of a

butterfly with fangs on her left collarbone and her nose was pierced.

Her clothes were edgy too. She said she wanted to work in a zoo, and her plan had been to go to Africa for a semester.

But the way she kept looking at Greg, I wondered if she would now. Probably not, which was completely idiotic. She'd probably known the guy five minutes.

I didn't know where Will planned on going to college. He hadn't told me and I hadn't asked.

I'd been accepted into a few schools but since I didn't know what I wanted to study, I couldn't decide which school to attend.

My parents didn't seem to care where or even if I went, unlike other kids' parents, so I figured I had time.

Maybe I'd go to Belize and not come back.

Ashley dunked Eva under the water. Eva screamed as she surfaced, spitting water out of her mouth.

"Don't do that again," Eva shouted, splashing Ashley with water.

Ashley gasped as though she couldn't believe the nerve of Eva. "You've ruined my makeup!"

Greg jumped out of the pool and walked over to where I was sitting. He picked up a towel from the chair next to mine.

I decided to use the alone time to make my move. "Can you help me get some more wine?" I asked him, smiling sweetly, the way I always did when I wanted something.

"Can't Isaac get some?" He glanced back at the pool, at the still fighting girls.

I pouted. "Yes, but I want some now."

"All right." He grinned, wrapping the towel around his waist so that it hung low on his hips. I knew this was going to be easy.

I took him down the back stairs into the cellar. It got cooler the deeper we went.

"What's your major?" I was trying to be conversational.

“Engineering, I suppose.” It was hard to see in the dim light, but his eyes seemed to take on a strange color, almost turquoise.

What did he mean, he supposed? Not that it mattered.

I didn’t want to get to know him, I wanted to make out and mess around.

Do just enough damage to remind Eva just how much power I had over anyone I wanted.

I didn’t want sweetness, Greg’s life story, or anything personal.

“How much longer do you have?”

Greg glanced up as though thinking about it. “A year, this time.” He gave me a strange smile.

I did the math on his age as I flicked on the lights.

The walls to our wine cellar were made of stone. There were wood cabinets. The wine slots were wood as well. The floor was made of slate.

“You must be twenty-one then?” I preferred older men. They weren’t as immature as the guys my age. They seemed less gushy with their feelings.

“My age is of no consequence.” He walked over to the wine rack. “Did you want red or white?” Greg pulled a bottle and held it out.

“Sure, whatever.” I slid up to him, putting my hands on his naked chest and tracing my fingers along his muscles.

“What are you doing?” He grabbed my hands, his strange eyes studying my face.

“Come on. Don’t you want to kiss me?”

Greg released my hands. Sadness crossed his face. “Are you sure you want to?”

“Yeah. Are you kidding? You have to know you’re gorgeous.” I ran my fingers down his muscled arms. He didn’t move.

“Don’t you want to?” I removed his towel, letting it fall to the

floor.

“What about Will?” He put his hands on my waist. A strange tingle wriggled in the back of my mind. Like it was trying to tell me I’d forgotten something and was on the verge of remembering.

I ignored it. “We are definitely not together anymore. You saw what happened.”

Greg leaned down so his lips were next to my ear. “And what about your friend Eva? She and I are an item. What about her?” His voice was soft and warm.

The irritating tingle came back but this time it was stronger. It felt like my mind was trying to tell me no, that it wanted me to run away. But that was ridiculous.

I did what I wanted, when I wanted.

And right now I wanted Eva’s boyfriend.

“She doesn’t have to know.” I didn’t say I’d make sure Eva found out within minutes after he and I were finished. He didn’t need to know that. He didn’t need to know anything, except that I wanted him right now and that meant I should have him.

He sighed heavily. “Then it’s come to this.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

I tried to kiss him but he pushed me away.

“Come to what?” I frowned, unused to being denied anything.

He kept silent, picking up his towel and wrapping it around his hips again. It was then I realized he no longer held a wine bottle.

When had he put it back? I thought, a little confused.

Greg’s turquoise eyes were a mixture of sadness and delight. “When we designed your species we believed you were perfect. We thought you would be the precise combination of ferocity, tenderness, humility, generosity, power and love. I was most excited. Your kind was to be my finest creation.”

Greg ran a hand through his thick, dark hair.

I watched, caught between being mesmerized and terrified, even though I had no idea why. Maybe it was because he was crazy.

What did he mean by perfect species?

I was a human, not some beast that was bred to be domesticated like the house cat. He wasn't making any sense and the tingle in the back of my brain had changed to an annoying buzz. I felt myself take a step back. The heel of my shoe caught on the grout between the slate slabs. I started to fall, but felt my body turn so I landed on my hands and the balls of my feet.

"Whoa," I said, pushing myself up. How had I done that?

OceanofPDF.com

A CURSE I LEAVE UPON YOU

I TURNED BACK to Greg curious to know what he thought of my quick reflexes.

He seemed unimpressed so I shrugged it off.

Besides, Greg's body shimmered strangely in the dim lights. Like he was a wraith or a ghost.

Or maybe it was all in my head.

I'd drank more than my normal amount of alcohol. I pressed my palms against the sides of my head, hoping that would clear the incessant buzzing and whatever was going on with my eyes.

Greg came in super close, invading my space, so I caught hold of is smell - like air and spice. "Beatrice Cavanaugh?" he began.

I blinked several times. "Yeah." I thought maybe he'd changed his mind about kissing me. "You want me now?"

He held me at arm's length. "It's time you understood that being beautiful doesn't give you the right to be beastly and that sometimes those who seem the most beastly are actually quite beautiful."

Profound, I thought.

"Right," I blurted, each letter oozing with sarcasm. "Whatever you say, Greg." Obviously the combination of too many fruity drinks laced with alcohol and too much time in the sun was causing issues.

Greg's distorted eyebrows rose and he crossed his arms. "For your vanity, your cruelty, and your cold unfeeling heart, a curse I leave upon you - " While Greg spoke his body changed into something I could see through.

Maybe he really was a wraith or a ghost.

The buzzing in my head was so loud that if he said more I didn't hear him.

Turquoise eyes watched me from within the dark mist that had once been Greg. The mist shot up, passed through the ceiling, and was gone.

“What the hell?” The words came out but I didn’t think about them. All I could focus on was the noise inside my brain getting louder and louder by the second.

The buzzing was all I knew.

It seemed to engulf my body.

I fell to my knees, pushing my palms more tightly against my head.

The room started to quake.

The lights swung from the ceiling.

Bottles fell from their shelves, crashing to the floor.

Glass cut my skin.

Wine broke free of the bottles.

One of the lights detached from the ceiling, smashing against my forehead. Red liquid ran into my eyes. I closed them, forcing the world to go black.

I WOKE WITH A START, light bathing my face.

There was a quick knock at the door and then Celeste came in, carrying a tray with what I knew held my breakfast.

“Morning, Miss Beatrice. Did you sleep well?” Her voice shook slightly and I wondered why.

Celeste sat the tray on my desk and pulled open my curtains.

“I guess.” I stumbled out of bed, making my way to the bathroom.

After flushing I went to the sink to wash my hands. It was habit to check my reflection. As I let the water run through my fingers I studied my face.

Flawlessly creamy skin.

Perfectly pert nose.

Red lips. And hazel eyes, the same as before.

Except…

I leaned in closer. My eyes were different.

Usually I had a yellow ring around the outer edge, but today the ring was a thick orange.

I dried my hands and stuck my face right up to the glass.

And that's when I remembered what'd happened in the wine cellar.

Greg and I had gone down there together.

Then I'd tried to kiss him. And he'd… he'd… what?

For your vanity, your cruelty, and your cold unfeeling heart, a curse I leave upon you… That was what he said.

Those odd words - his words played themselves over in my mind.

He'd called me vain, cruel, cold and unfeeling.

He said he cursed me and then he changed into something, like a ghost or mist.

The wine cellar had shaken and crashed in around me.

I'd been bleeding, hadn't I?" I studied my face, checked my arms and hands. Not a single scratch was visible anywhere.

"What an asshole," I whispered, trying to forget his words but they seemed to get louder. Whatever he'd changed into had vanished into thin air.

It was unexplainable.

A feat, until that moment I believed only happened in fairy tales.

I looked away, frustrated. Celeste had brought me in breakfast, including sliced watermelon, cantaloupe, and strawberries. She also topped it with -

I yanked the bathroom door open. "I want steak. Rare," I growled, scaring Celeste.

One hand went to her chest.

I'd spoken before thinking about them and felt a twinge of

something. Almost like guilt but shook that aside.

I wasn't a big meat eater. But today meat was all I could think about. I was ravenous for it.

Celeste hesitated slightly, eyeing me and then the fruit and then me again. "Yes, Miss Beatrice."

She picked up the tray. "I'll let Mrs. Dotts know right away."

"That'll be fine." I left the bathroom and went into the closet, absently scanning my clothes as I tried to remember how I got from the wine cellar to my bedroom. There were swimsuits all over the floor, including the red one I wore yesterday.

I heard my door open and knew Celeste was about to leave but I had a question for her."Celeste, can you come in here a moment?"

There was a clattering of utensils as she set the tray down. "Yes?" She entered empty handed.

"Did you help me change?" The last I remembered I was being cut to pieces by wine bottles.

An enormous light fell on me, cracking my head open.

The feeling as the heavy light hit my head, and the way the glass cut my skin was still fresh in my mind. Yet again, I checked my appearance to verify there wasn't a wound.

"Yes, miss."

I caught her gaze in one of the many mirrors in my closet. Celeste was an older woman, probably in her late forties. She had mousy brown hair, a few wrinkles, and a firm worker's body under her uniform of gray skirt, white shirt, tights, and practical gray shoes.

At least her body wasn't soft like some of the other servants.

"How did I look?" It confused me to think about how I got from the wine cellar to my room. And the curse?

Why had Greg cursed me?

And what was the curse?

I forced myself not to think about the way I saw Greg change from

a hot college guy to a dark mist.

“Tired. You appeared to be almost asleep where you stood.” She went over and picked up the swimming suits I’d tried on yesterday and began folding them.

“They’ve been on the floor, the suits need to be washed,” I snapped.

“Yes, Miss Cavanaugh.” She set them in the laundry basket.

“I was wearing a crown yesterday, remember?”

“Of course. It is very beautiful,” she said, wringing her hands.

“I know. Where did you put it?”

“Right here.” Celeste opened the cupboard above the drawers. The crown sat on the mannequin head.

She leaned in closer. I heard her suck in her breath.

“What is it?” I asked, ready for her to go and get me my freaking steak. My hunger grew stronger by the second. It was possible I might be able to eat two.

“The red jewel in the center? It’s gone.” Her voice had gone soft and her eyes flicked back and forth.

I peered closer. She was right.

“That diamond is worth millions, Celeste. You’d better find it.”

OceanofPDF.com

THE DIAMOND

"RIGHT AWAY, MISS." Celeste got on her hands and knees, searching under the drawers and all along the edges.

I casually glanced around the closet as well.

When Celeste finished, she stood, but kept her head bowed. "It isn't here."

"Was it on my head when I came upstairs?" I went over to my makeup desk and peered around the bottles and containers.

She seemed to think about it.

And that's when I knew. "You stole the diamond, didn't you?" I slapped her face. "You think you can steal from me and get away with it?"

"N - No, Miss Cavanaugh. I didn't take the diamond. I wouldn't do that."

I let out a roar. It felt good. Right. "You're lying!"

I reached out and twisted my fist into the collar of her white button down shirt, lifting her off the floor.

A part of my mind wanted to be shocked at my newfound strength, but my fury overpowered everything else.

"Tell me the truth or so help me - " I let the sentence die in my throat. So help me what? What would I do to her? Kill her?

Just that thought sent my mind into a whirlwind.

I didn't understand what was going on inside my head.

"Swear - No - Diamonds." Her words came out in gasps and her fingers dug at my fist.

I was choking her.

That was clear by the change from cream to purple on her face.

If she died it would serve her right.

Stealing wasn't something I accepted with any sort of leniency.

When I was fourteen one of my friends stole a necklace from me and claimed I'd given it to her. I made her suffer until her family finally moved out of state.

"Please." Tears lined Celeste's lashes and leaked down her cheeks.

One dripped on my arm.

I watched as it slowly crawled up my skin. Its perfectly round wetness sparkled in the light.

A figure appeared within the tear.

I peered closer and saw a hideous beast.

Forcing down a scream, I took a deep breath and dropped her.

"Fine."

She fell in a heap to the floor, taking giant gasps and coughing.

"But I'm going to call the police," I said, walking from the room.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for the police to arrive. When I explained the situation, they placed Celeste under arrest and took her away in handcuffs.

She was sobbing, still claiming her innocence.

I knew better.

She'd always seemed overly polite and hard working.

No one could be that decent.

Mrs. Dotts and Isaac watched the situation unfold from the front porch.

Mrs. Dotts hugged Celeste.

"Good-bye." She wiped her face and glared at me.

"You have something to say?" I asked, returning Mrs. Dotts' sad gaze with daggers of my own.

"No, Miss Cavanaugh."

“I didn’t think so. Bring a rare steak to my room.”

“Yes, Miss Cavanaugh.” Her voice was laced with disappointment.

“Hurry up,” I snapped, climbing the steps and walking past her and Isaac into the house. “And make it two,” I added.

I trudged up the stairs to my room.

My cell phone vibrated as soon as I opened my bedroom door.

It had been placed upside down on my bedside table.

I picked it up. It was a voice message from my mom. I debated whether to listen or not, but after a few seconds decided I should.

“Hello, Beatrice. This is your mother.” Her voice sounded strange. Garbled. Scared. “We’ve gone away for the summer. Your dad and I need some time away from everything.” She paused and I knew the word everything was code for me.

They wanted to get away from me.

“I’m sure you’ll have a great time on your own. You’re all grown up now.” Mom sniffled and I wondered if she were crying, which was impossible.

I’d never seen my mom shed a single tear.

I didn’t remember her ever being sick either so it couldn’t be a cold.

She cleared her throat. “You may start to experience some changes.”

That part bothered me the most. Changes? What kinds of freaking changes?

“Seek out the Vaktare histories,” she continued.

Then my father spoke in the background, “You’ve said too much. Hang up.”

Mom sighed. “Take care, Beatrice.”

Then she was gone.

I flung myself onto my bed, smacking my head on something.

“Ouch.” Reaching back, I wrapped my fingers around the culprit and brought it up to eye level.

“Shit.” It was the large red diamond from my tiara.

I guess she didn’t steal it, I thought, a strange feeling washing over me.

I shook it off, pressing the Play button on my phone so I could listen to my mom’s message again.

How could they just leave?

Sure they’d never been the most loving of parents, but at least they normally said good-bye. And what was Vack Tare?

I closed my eyes, debating all my mom said while I waited for my food and my mind drifted.

A knock at my bedroom door startled me.

I sat up, realizing I must’ve fallen asleep.

For how long, I didn’t know.

“Go away,” I hollered even though it was probably Mrs. Dotts with my steak and I was starving.

There was another knock. “Sorry, miss. There’s a gentleman at the front door and he’s made it clear he won’t go away until he speaks to you.” It was Isaac. If he’d come up, then it must be serious.

“Oh, for hell’s sake.” My breathing came more heavily. “Okay. I’ll be down in a few minutes. Put him in the main room.”

“Yes, Miss Beatrice.”

I stood, considering what to do with the diamond.

A wholly unique emotion crept around my heart.

It was barely there, like it was tiptoeing, testing what my heart would do with such a thing.

I rejected it.

In my closet I got on my knees and pushed aside my pants.

Feeling for the button I knew was on the back wall, I pushed it.

A secret door opened, revealing a hidden safe.

Entering my code, I put the diamond inside.

Then I took off my clothes and went into the bathroom to shower.

When I was finished, I dressed in a pair of jean shorts, a butter yellow tank top and Prada wedge sandals.

I went to my bedroom door and pulled it open to call for Celeste to do my hair and makeup.

That's when I remembered she wasn't around anymore.

I'd sent her to jail. "Dammit!" I went into the bathroom and brushed my hair.

It was wet and tangled and I got the bristles caught in it.

When I finally got it untangled, I quickly braided my hair, securing the end with a tie.

Then I applied some makeup. My eye shadow was too dark, my blush too light and in all the wrong places, and my lip-gloss was the wrong color. "Gah!"

Whoever the jerk downstairs was, I would make him pay for insisting on speaking with me. Me. No one ordered anything from me.

Not from Beatrice Cavanaugh.

I stomped down the stairs and walked into the living room.

"Where is he?" I demanded of Isaac, searching the room.

My butler stood beside the fireplace and held out one gloved hand. "Good afternoon, Miss Beatrice. May I present mister Beck Haddox?"

From the high back chair directly in front of me stood a man.

He stepped around the chair and I couldn't help but admire him, drink him in like he was water and I was parched. He appeared to be more god than man.

He was tall with piercing light blue eyes and blond hair.

His body was fit, beyond fit.

He caught hold of my gaze.

I saw a slight tremor of his lips as he took in the color of my eyes.

But he recovered quickly and smiled, making his already glorious face come alive.

“Hello, Beatrice. May I speak with you?” He glanced at Isaac. “Privately?”

OceanofPDF.com

BECK AND CALL

"THAT'LL BE fiNE." I nodded to Isaac, letting him know it was okay.

"If you need me, I'll be right outside." Isaac exited and slid the pocket doors shut, leaving Beck and me alone.

I swallowed, forcing away another new feeling, like fireworks were going off in my stomach. The buzzing I'd experienced yesterday was back too.

It pounded against my head, like a raging herd of horses.

The throbbing pressed against the backs of my eyes.

My pulse raced and it was all I could do to walk past him and sit on the love seat across from him.

"What do you want?" I asked, trying to force away the pain by focusing on my surroundings.

The room was on the smaller side.

It was normally used to entertain two or three guests in a formal setting.

Beck stood in front of one of two gold high back chairs.

There was the love seat I sat on and to my right was a large stark white couch.

It was directly opposite the tall rock fireplace.

Above the fireplace ticked a large glass clock with onyx pieces.

Behind the couch were three floor-to-ceiling windows.

White curtains with gold and black polka dots hung at either side.

Potted plants and lamps decorated the corners, the end tables, and the coffee table between Beck and me.

A baby grand piano stood regally behind the love seat.

And two straight back gold and black chairs were placed in front of

it. A small table with a chess set sat between them.

My knees bobbed up and down, a reaction to the pain, I guessed.

It was like my body had a mind of its own. I put my hands on my knees to stop the movement, and noticed my fingers were trembling.

What the hell was happening to me?

I swallowed.

“You recently accused my mom of stealing - ” Beck’s piercing eyes swept over me. “A diamond.” His crossed his arms. “Is that correct?”

I couldn’t help but admire him.

While my body raged with an unknown storm, he was calm as a hot summer day.

If someone had accused my mother of stealing I would seek revenge.

Yet, all I saw in his eyes was compassion.

His blond hair was thick and wavy and a little on the long side. He sat up straight, showing off his broad shoulders and tapered waist.

He had loafers on his feet, but he wasn’t wearing socks.

His appearance seemed kind of prissy, yet everything about him screamed alpha male. He was older but no more than twenty-five.

“Celeste is your mom?” The words came out shaky.

“That’s right.” Beck leaned forward. “I’ve come to ask you to drop the charges. She didn’t do what you accused her of. She wouldn’t.”

That irritated me even though I knew the truth. “So you think I lied? That I blamed her out of spite?” How dare he?

Regardless of whether or not it was true.

The arrogant ass had no right.

“How about I have you arrested,” I began and stood.

The world started to spin. Probably because I hadn’t eaten in I didn’t know how long. Hunger caused my stomach to rumble.

My hands went out as I tried to balance myself. “For harassment,”

I continued as a thick darkness covered my vision.

I couldn't see anything except two white lights.

And then I hit the floor.

"Hey, Beatrice. Are you okay?" I felt arms come under my body and gently lift me.

The pain subsided slightly.

I wasn't sure why.

I blinked as my vision cleared. "Put me the eff down. How dare you put your dirty paws on me," I scoffed, adjusting my clothes.

"Sure. Sorry."

When I was on my feet, I pushed him away. "Don't ever touch me again."

I carefully sat and watched as Beck went over to his chair. "I'm sorry if I upset you." His eyes softened. "I'm not calling you a liar, Beatrice."

When my name left his lips, it sent a hot quiver down my spine.

I internally shook it off. He was the son of a servant.

I was royalty. The man was beneath me. I glared.

"My mom told me you strangled her." He flinched as though he felt her pain. "I've seen the bruises."

Another wave unfamiliar emotion - guilt, my mind said - racked through me.

It was true.

I had strangled her.

But it was her fault.

She'd obviously misplaced the diamond and tried to cover up her insolence.

No freaking way I'd tell him that.

Or that I'd found it.

The man didn't deserve any kind of generosity and neither did his

mom.

So she hadn't stolen the diamond, I had no doubt she was dishonest.

I decided his kindness was actually arrogance and that would not be tolerated.

"For your vanity - "

The words entered my mind. I clenched my fists. I was not vain.

"Your cruelty, and your cold unfeeling heart - "

I wasn't cruel or cold.

Beck was the one who was cold and cruel.

He was the one who'd come to me, questioned me like a common criminal.

"A curse I leave upon you - "

I would curse Beck.

I would make him suffer.

The way I suffered.

A plan formed. I smiled.

"Call me Miss. Cavanaugh," I said and pretended not to notice his thoughtful grin.

"Very well, Miss Cavanaugh."

More fireworks went off in my stomach.

"I'll drop the charges. On one condition." I placed my hands on my hips, ignoring the pain in my head and focusing on the plan.

Beck's face lifted. Hope revealed itself on his handsome face.

I would use it against him. Hurt him, whatever it took.

"What is your condition?" he asked.

"You must agree to live here and take her place as my personal servant." That would be a sight. To watch this gorgeous man bend to my every whim.

Beck leaned back, surprised by my demand. “Why would you want that?”

I bit back a trembling smile.

It would be such fun to break him.

Anger piled on top of more anger.

But I wouldn’t let him know he was affecting me.

I put my hands behind my back. “My reasons are none of your concern. If you agree, I will have the charges against your mom dropped, and she can go free. But you must sign a contract agreeing to live here and be my servant until such time as I release you, and not a second before.”

Beck growled.

It was low and barely discernable.

But I heard it.

“I appreciate your offer, Miss Cavanaugh. I’d like to take a day to consider it and get my affairs in order.” His handsome features, while still gentle, became pinched. “If that’s what I decide.”

Affairs. I wanted to snort.

No one talked like that unless they were from the eighteen hundreds.

“Fine,” I said. “But if you agree, you’ll be here to do my hair and apply my makeup by - ” I glanced at the clock. “Eleven tomorrow morning. Once the contract is signed, I’ll make the call and have your mom released.” I crossed my arms, feeling proud of myself.

OceanofPDF.com

A DEAL

BECK CROSSED his arms as well. His delicious lips twitched.

I wondered if he was mocking me.

“Why would you want me to apply your makeup or do your hair? Those things - ” He let out another growl. “I don’t know what I’m doing. It’ll end horribly.”

I smiled for some reason, unable to help myself.

A peculiar new feeling crept along my spine, like a winding rose reaching for the light.

“That’s what your mom did and it’ll be one of your responsibilities too. I guess you’ll need to learn and fast," I said.

Beck raised an eyebrow. “You’re foolish,” he responded, so soft I speculated if he’d said it aloud or if I only thought he did.

“It’s the only way I’ll drop the charges. Take it or leave it.” I released his gaze and glanced out the window. “What’s it going to be, Beck?” I said his name with sarcasm.

“Fine.” He rose quickly and opened the pocket doors. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

“See you then.” I felt a strange urge to giggle.

It went against everything I’d ever known about myself so I resisted, leaning back, closing my eyes.

The buzzing had subsided, but my pulse seemed to be going the same speed as that of a hummingbird.

My palms were sweating too, which never happened.

That was gross and so unbecoming of a Cavanaugh.

My mom especially would be horrified.

I wiped the wetness on my jeans, curious about my bizarre

reaction to Beck.

He was arrogant.

Completely rude.

And I would crush him.

I would make him pay.

I would make him wish he'd never stepped foot inside my world.

Isaac walked in. "I've shown Mr. Haddox to the door. Is there anything you need?"

"Yes, there is." I sat up straight. "The small room in the basement needs to be readied as well as the bathroom. Stock it with things a man might require, but don't go overboard. Keep it simple. Beck will be staying with us for a while and those two rooms will be for his use."

Isaac crunched his unruly brows, perplexed. "If he is to be your guest, wouldn't you rather he stay in the large room across the hall from your bedroom?"

"He isn't going to be my guest. He's going to be my servant," I snapped, shooting him a glare for his insolence.

"Yes, miss." He pulled at the edges of his vest with both gloved hands, something he did when he was nervous or irritated. "Will there be anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." I rose and walked past him. "Contact our lawyer and have her draw up a contract stating that Mr. Haddox will be required to stay in my service until such time as I release him. In return I will drop the charges against his mother."

"Very good."

"And I'm starving." The hunger was past the point I'd ever felt it before. And it felt differently too.

If a cow walked by, I might eat it where it stood.

"I still haven't had my breakfast. Mrs. Dotts was to prepare two steaks." I wanted to tell him to make it three, but that would look too

bizarre. “That’ll be all,” I said, excusing him.

“Right away.”

I went up the marble staircase and down the hall toward my bedroom.

When I reached my door I paused, unable to stop myself from glancing at the door across from mine.

I hadn’t been inside that room for a long time. It could’ve been amazing. Instead, I knew it was dusty and unused.

I sighed, a small part of me wishing I’d put Beck in there.

“Oh well.” I walked into my room.

It was decorated in the same color scheme as the rest of the house.

Golden curtains hung from the windows.

My king-sized bed had a white duvet and lots of fluffy pillows in shades of gold, white, and black.

At the end of my bed was a shiny black chest. Inside was an extra blanket, nothing more.

My room had a fireplace, smaller than the one in the living room, with two white chairs with gold stripes arranged in front.

The fireplace was covered in smooth white rock that matched the walls. Over the mantle was a large picture a photographer had taken of me on my sixteenth birthday. It was the only picture in the room.

Against the opposite wall rested my desk. On it was my laptop, a pencil holder, a few books left over from school, and a notebook.

Next to that was the entrance to my walk-in closet, the best part about my room.

It was set up like an expensive little boutique.

One-of-a-kind dresses, expensive shirts, pants, jeans, skirts, and casual dresses overflowed along every rack.

The tiara I wore last night sat atop one of the shelves.

Seeing it without the center diamond filled me with rage.

I was angry. That emotion shocked me and I thought about Greg and what he'd said again.

Had he cursed me?

Two rows of floor-to-ceiling shoe racks covered the furthest wall in my closet. There were also drawers for sunglasses, scarves, gloves, underthings, and various other accessories.

I grabbed my phone and went into my closet, flinging myself into the chair in front of my makeup desk. It sat at the end of a large round seating area that I used to put on shoes and twirl in front of the full-length mirror.

All sorts of pretty things sat on my desk, including perfume bottles, lotion bottles, powder puffs, attractive tubes of gloss and lipstick and my favorite Bobbi Brown lip balm.

I opened the lid and rubbed some on my lips.

It immediately made me feel a little better.

"Nothing like a little makeup to lift a girl's spirits."

I jumped, staring at my phone.

The voice had come from there.

I picked it up, thinking maybe I'd accidentally dialed one of my friends.

The face staring back wasn't my own and it wasn't one of my friends' either.

It was the face of a girl I'd never seen before.

"Do I know you?" I asked, trying to regain my composure.

The girl winked.

I guessed she must be a girl from my school.

"Kind of," she said. "We've met twice. Once at your birthday party and then again recently, at your pool party."

I tried to remember all the people I'd talked to at the formal dinner my parents held for me before they left.

It'd been filled with my dad's work colleagues and my mom's bridge friends.

There had been several people I'd never seen before.

I knew for sure she hadn't been at the pool.

"I don't think so," I said. "What's your name again?" I glanced over my phone and into the mirror, unable to help the surprise at again seeing the odd new color of my eyes.

The girl sniffed as though offended I didn't remember her.

"My name is Fizban. I'm here to help you in any way I can, Beatrice. This next year is going to be remarkable." She chuckled. It was a kind laugh, like that of a child.

"I know for a fact we didn't meet yesterday." I propped the phone against the mirror so I could talk to her with my hands free.

Fizban made a tsk-tsk sound and shook her head back and forth. "You opened birthday gifts from your friends. You tossed your boyfriend's present into the pool." Her head tilted and she lifted a brow. "You tried to make out with Greg in the wine cellar."

I gasped. "How do you know that?"

The idea that Fizban been there and I hadn't seen her really freaked me out.

Taking the lid off my new Bobbi Brown beach perfume, I sprayed a little on each wrist and my neck, hoping the scent would calm my nerves.

"Well," she said, her nose twitching.

I wondered if she could smell the perfume, its fragrance the epitome of summer - a breezy day at the beach with a fruity drink in one hand as I lounged in the sun.

As I thought about taking a trip to St. Tropez, I caught my reflection and tilted my head to one side. Something else besides the color of my eyes had changed.

What was it?

Fizban interrupted my thoughts. “My appearance is slightly different now than it was yesterday.” She shifted positions and I caught a glimpse of her bright red hair.

It was the exact shade of her lips.

The color seemed tame compared to the blue of her eyes.

They weren’t like any blue I’d ever seen on a person. They were turquoise.

Like Greg’s, I thought.

“What did you look like yesterday?” I asked carefully as my pulse raced.

“I was a little taller, a little broader. My voice was deeper and my muscles were thicker.” She winked. “You knew me as Greg.”

My first thought when she said that was to hang up on her.

Obviously she was messing with me. Maybe one of my friends put her up to it.

Probably Eva.

That’s when I realized there was no way to end the call.

I picked up my phone, trying to figure out how to make her go away. I even pushed the button to turn off my phone. Nothing worked.

“You’re lying.” I finally said, setting the phone down like it’d burned me.

“Am I?” She touched a finger to her nose and suddenly I was staring at Greg’s face. “For your vanity, your cruelty, and your cold - ”

“No, stop,” I shouted, covering my ears. “It can’t be. It can’t be.”

The buzzing was back, louder than ever. I squeezed my eyes shut. “Go away.”

I questioned whether someone had slipped something into my drink yesterday and I was still tripping.

I wouldn’t put that past any of my friends.

Greg’s voice seemed to climb inside my head. "For your vanity, your cruelty and your cold, unfeeling heart, a curse I leave upon you -" he began.

Then the voice changed back to that of Fizban’s. "A year shall not pass before your true form will be revealed. You are Vaktare, daughter of royalty, born to deliver your people, created to save your species from the extinction they so rightly deserve.

Her voice went back to Greg's. " You, your father and your mother have been sentenced to die."

Fizban again. "Unless you can learn to give love unconditionally. Only then will your species have a chance."

OceanofPDF.com

SNAPPING HER NECK

THE NIGHT CALLED TO ME.

I raised my head and roared at the full moon, surprised at how free I felt.

How happy.

It was a sensation I'd never experienced.

Joy seemed to bubble along my veins and out each of my pores.

I ran through the thick trees, climbing higher into the mountains, stalking something.

The scent drove me onward.

When whatever I was tracking moved, my body instinctively compensated.

It stopped.

I did too, but only for a moment, and then crept forward at a slower pace.

My body was stealthy. I knew exactly where to step and how much pressure to use. My ears turned back and forth as I listened. I sniffed the air, allowing the breeze to caress my whiskers, almost tasting what I was after, seeing with my senses everything that was around me.

To the right was a small stream used by my prey to get water.

That's where what I tracked was heading.

My prey had no idea I hunted it.

The snap of a leaf straight ahead told me it was moving again.

I picked up speed, knowing I would catch it at the stream.

My heart raced with excitement.

The trees opened slightly.

A deer stood at the water's edge, her ears turning, listening for

sounds of danger.

Finally she dipped her head and began lapping at the water.

My throat burned with need. I was starving. I dug my front paws into the earth, preparing to attack. Then I ran.

One. Two. Three. I leapt on the doe, my claws digging into her back, my teeth grabbing hold of her neck. I shook, snapping her neck until she was still.

When I knew she was dead, I let go, roaring in triumph.

Leaning over, I went for her stomach, but that's when I noticed my reflection in the water.

I was - I was a -

I jerked myself awake. "A monster." I'd fallen asleep at the makeup desk in my closet.

Lifting my head, I glanced in the mirror, and noticed whiskers.

"Impossible." I tightly shut my eyes.

Counted to five. Opened them. The whiskers were gone.

"Thank goodness."

A white china plate had been placed on the edge of the table. Two seasoned steaks sat in the middle. To the right of the plate was a steak knife and a fork, a white linen napkin underneath.

The meat smelled rotten. Not fresh like the deer in my dream. I poked at the meat slabs. They lay there, dead.

"Cold." Frustrated, I picked up the plate, determined to give Mrs. Dotts a piece of my mind.

Why hadn't she wakened me?

Juices the color of blood swirled along the edges of the meat. They made my mouth water. My stomach gurgled.

"Gross," I said, aloud.

But picked up the steak and took a large bite, tearing off a piece with my teeth.

I chewed a couple times, swallowed and took another.

My hunger increased as I ate.

I couldn't get it inside me fast enough.

As I shoved the final piece in my mouth I caught another peek of myself in the mirror.

And froze.

My teeth were long and pointy.

A piece of meat hung in my mouth. Some of the juices dribbled down my chin. One droplet hung and quivered and then fell onto my shirt.

I screamed, horrified and dropped the plate.

There was a laugh. It sounded like Fizban.

I couldn't stop to deliberate what it was though. I ran to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before I puked.

"Miss Beatrice. Is everything all right?" It was Isaac knocking on my door.

My body shook. I wiped my mouth and flushed. At the sink I turned on the water, closing my eyes to avoid the mirror, and rinsed my mouth.

"Miss." Isaac knocked again, harder.

I spit. Cleared my throat. "I'm fine, Isaac." I thought about the plate and the juices staining the thick white carpet in my closet. It should be cleaned up.

"Come in." I walked to the window, peering outside.

It was dark.

A glance at the clock told me it was after midnight.

I'd been asleep nearly twelve hours.

That was unnatural for me.

The moon shone three quarters full, a waxing gibbous, if memory served.

There were no clouds. Millions of stars twinkled brightly.

A satellite blinked across the sky, slowly making its way around the Earth. A shooting star shot across its path.

Most people believed in wishing on a shooting star. Not me. I didn't need wishes.

I always got what I wanted.

Except love, a voice inside my head whispered.

It sounded like Fizban again. Or Greg.

Their words filled my mind - male and female, they spoke in unison: "For your vanity, your cruelty and your cold, unfeeling heart, a curse I leave upon you. A year shall not pass before your true form will be revealed. You are Vaktare, daughter of royalty, born to deliver your people, created to save your species from the extinction they so rightly deserve. You, your father and your mother have been sentenced to die. Unless you can learn to give love unconditionally. Only then will your species have a chance."

Isaac had walked in and paused just inside. "What do you require?"

I heard Isaac speak, but his voice sounded so far away. The curse burned itself on my heart, my soul, and each and every fiber of my being.

"Miss Beatrice? Are you ill?" He came forward and touched my arm.

I flinched, turning away. With my back to him I answered, "I dropped my plate in the closet." I pointed in its direction, too afraid to go in there myself. I didn't want to catch a glimpse of my reflection, worried I might see the changes on my face.

"I'll take care of it." He left and I heard him pick up the plate.

Then he reappeared.

In one hand he held the plate and in his other was my cell phone.

"It seems you have several missed calls from your friends." He

handed me my phone.

“Thank you.”

Isaac raised his eyebrows in shock.

His features contorted in surprise.

I figured that was how my face must seem as well.

Words like “thank you” weren’t part of my vocabulary.

I didn’t owe him my thanks.

My family paid him handsomely for his service.

That was all the thanks he required.

The words had just slipped out, probably because of my crazy dreams or whatever.

“I’ll have Nelle come in right away to clean the carpet,” he added.

I nodded. “Have Beck’s rooms been prepared?” I asked, quickly glossing over my comment.

“Yes, miss. And the contract has been faxed over as well. All is ready for Mr. Haddox’s return in the morning.”

“Good.” I said, sitting on the window seat, my body thirsting for the moon’s light like a fish needed water.

“Is there anything else you require?”

I stood. “Will you wake me at ten in the morning?”

“Of course.” He went to the door.

“Oh, and please -” Another freaking word I didn’t use. “Have Cook prepare me a rare steak for breakfast.”

Isaac scanned the empty plate.

I could almost hear him questioning my need for so much red meat. He didn’t ask though.

“Very well.” He left the room, closing my door.

“What is my problem?” If I were suffering from some kind of drug-induced dementia, it was lasting a long time.

For the first time in my life I was scared.

I felt like a little girl. And I was alone.

Ask Fizban. She said she'd help, my mind whispered.

"No!" I growled, flopping onto the cushioned window seat. The moonlight on my skin was like a salve. I'd never been a night person.

In many ways it'd always unsettled me. "What's happening?" I curled my small frame into the window seat, pulled on a blanket and closed my eyes.

OceanofPDF.com

RIDE IN YOUR FERRARI

MRS. DOTTS BUSTLED into my room carrying a tray and humming. “Good morning, Miss Beatrice. How did you sleep?” She busied herself, setting the tray on my desk.

“Fine,” I said, feeling slightly more like my old self today.

I yawned and stretched.

Mrs. Dotts walked over and picked up the blanket I’d used last night.

She folded it and placed it back on the window seat.

She then picked my clothes off the floor.

It was Nelle’s job to tidy my rooms, but Mrs. Dotts was one of those who saw a need and handled it.

I glanced down and realized that at some point while I slept I’d removed everything except my underthings.

“It’s ten o’clock. Mr. Haddox will be arriving shortly. You’d better come and eat.”

I glanced over at the tray. As I requested there was a steak, along with some orange juice and fresh fruit, which up until yesterday had been all I ate for breakfast.

Determined to get my life back, I picked up a strawberry and popped it in my mouth, excited for its sweetness.

I could barely taste it. I tried another.

If anything I tasted the second one less.

I took a sip of orange juice.

In the past I’d treasured the flavors of the juice and the strawberries mixed together. Just like the strawberries, the juice was completely bland.

I cut into a piece of steak. It was rare, way too rare for my previous tastes, but I put it in my mouth anyway, practically drooling.

It was delicious. Ignoring the fruit, I quickly took another bite.

“Chew it well. You don’t want to make yourself sick.” Mrs. Dotts spoke as she went into my bathroom.

I took another bite and tried to chew more slowly.

The shower in the bathroom turned on. Mrs. Dotts returned with my clothes and towels in her hands. “Your shower is ready.” She gave me a once-over before her eyes found mine. “Will you need me to help you with your hair?” Her eyes kept a steady gaze on my face and not my almost naked body.

Now, she was doing Celeste’s job.

My hair was long and could be unruly.

I had a hard time dealing with all of it.

Celeste had been a master. Now she was gone.

“Yes, p - ” I paused, changing my mind, remembering I’d told Beck he would do it. “Beck will do my hair when he arrives.”

I watched her work to keep a smile off her face. “As you wish.”

“Th - pl - ” I let out a strange growl. “Send Beck up to my room when he arrives.”

“Yes, miss.” She left, taking the tray and my clothes and somehow managing to close the door behind her.

I went into the bathroom, took off my underclothes and got in the shower.

When I finished, I got out and spent extra time brushing, flossing, and sterilizing my teeth, tongue, and mouth.

I left the towel on my hair and went into the closet.

My phone rang and I dashed out. “Hello.”

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been calling you and calling you. I’ve left tons of texts. Why haven’t you returned any of them? I

mean you just left your party and we haven't seen you since."

It was Ashley. The girl knew how to have a one-way conversation.

"Bea? Are you there? Bea? Bea?"

"I answered the phone didn't I?" I put my phone on speaker and went back into my closet.

I needed something totally hot, yet casual, so Beck wouldn't think I was trying to impress him.

"Okay so talk. Tell me what's going on? Eva said you slept with that guy she liked. Greg. She's pissed because she saw you walk down to the wine cellar with him. After that she couldn't find him and he never came back. She thinks you have him stashed in your room." Ashley sounded pouty.

She constantly worried that I was mad at her. It drove me insane. Her personality made me mad at her.

I contemplated what to tell Ashley.

Obviously as soon as we hung up she would call Eva and tell her what I said.

Should I make Eva mad?

Should I lie and say Greg and I did hook up, even though it didn't happen? It depended on what I wanted.

"Beatrice!"

"What?" I pulled on matching underthings.

"Are you sad because your mom and dad left? That's impossible. I'd be beyond glad if my parents, especially my mom, would leave me the hell alone. Today she told me -"

I spaced out. Ashley's stories could last a while.

I found a Free People slip dress with the tags still on.

It was a bright blue and reminded me of Beck's eyes. I removed the tags and slid the dress over my head.

I had the perfect shoes to go with it, my Sam Edelman sandals.

They went all the way up to my knees, zipped in the back and were black.

“ - I mean isn’t that the stupidest thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I can’t believe it.”

“I know. I mean if she’s going to go to Lake Powell with some random dude, the least she can do is find out if his parents are rich.”

“Your mom?” I asked, confused.

“No. Cassidy. Have you heard a word I’ve said?”

I opened my accessories drawer and slid a set of Natasha Couture bangles on my wrist.

“Yes, of course.”

She exhaled dramatically. “When are you taking me for a drive in your Ferrari?”

I shrugged, sitting in my makeup chair and flipping the mirror up so I wouldn’t catch my reflection. “Soon. I’ll call you.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

There was a knock at my door.

“Beck.” His name left my lips before I could stop myself.

“Who’s Beck?” Ashley asked.

“I’ll tell you later. Gotta go. Bye.” I hung up and ran over to my window seat, grabbed a magazine and pretended to be reading. “You may enter.”

I internally snorted at my words. I sounded like an idiot.

Isaac walked in.

Beck trailed behind him.

I noticed he was slightly taller than Isaac and broader.

Today he wore a pair of tan chinos and a crisp white shirt.

His hair curled at the ends, touching his collar. The sunlight struck his locks and it shone, golden.

And his eyes? They were the brightest blue, like the sky on a clear

winter's day.

Not for long, I thought, irritated.

"Beck Haddox is here, miss." Isaac carried papers in one hand.

"Is that the contract?" I asked, closing the magazine and setting it on the seat.

"Yes, miss. Would you like me to place them on your desk?"

I could have said yes. Let Beck sign them right away. But that would be too nice, too easy.

He needed to suffer.

The buzzing came back at those thoughts.

I growled within, forcing it to stop.

"Take the contract to the office. Beck must first prove to me that he can do my hair and makeup. If he can't, it won't do to have him as my personal servant, now would it?" I allowed the sneer to show on my face.

OceanofPDF.com

HE WAS TENDER

"VERY WELL, MISS BEATRICE."

I could tell Isaac was unhappy with the decision.

That hadn't been part of the deal.

But I was a Cavanaugh.

I would do whatever the hell I wanted.

Isaac closed the door, leaving Beck and me alone.

He faced me.

I couldn't read his expression.

My stomach was letting off fireworks again.

In the bright sunlight his blond hair, blue eyes, and completely drool-worthy body seemed more perfect than yesterday.

"Come on." I walked into my closet and sat at my makeup desk.

He followed.

The mirror was still flipped up so it was horizontal.

I didn't move it. "Use this to brush my hair out and be careful."

"Yes, Miss Cavanaugh." He took the brush from my outstretched hand.

One of his fingers touched mine. A tingle shot up my arm.

I ignored it. I did not tingle.

"Do you mind if I remove the towel from your head?" Beck's voice seemed to flash through my body like lightning.

I crossed my legs and cleared my throat. "No, I don't mind. Go ahead."

He carefully unwound the towel, letting my hair fall down my back.

“Just put the towel in the hamper over there.”

“Yes, Miss Cavanaugh.” He tossed it from where he stood behind me.

The towel landed in the hamper. If they had been a basketball and a hoop, there would’ve been a swoosh.

I didn’t have time to be impressed because he took some of my wet hair in one hand and began brushing. He was tender, even more tender than his mother had been.

Once he’d finished with the ends he worked his way up.

We didn’t speak.

I had nothing to say and Beck seemed too intent on his work.

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to enjoy the sensation.

When my hair was completely tangle free I heard him set down the brush.

I opened my eyes, preparing to say something, but Beck began running his fingers over my scalp, massaging it.

My body responded immediately to his touch. Every nerve ending from the top of my head to the tips of my toes came alive.

My skin prickled and I shivered.

“Are you cold?” Beck asked.

“A little.”

He reached behind him and pulled a shawl from one of my shelves, then wrapped it around my shoulders.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the edges and pulling them close.

“You’re welcome, Miss Cavanaugh.” He began massaging my head again.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to shake off the feelings.

“I’m sorry, Miss Cavanaugh. I learned that a scalp massage stimulates the hair follicles. Did you want me to continue?”

“Fine.” I pulled the shawl more tightly around my body.

After several minutes, he ran his fingers through my hair.

“Now what?” I asked, irritated that my body had never been so relaxed.

“I’m going to braid your hair. The video I watched instructed I separate your hair into three pieces.”

“Oh. Well hurry up. I haven’t got all day,” I barked between gritted teeth.

“Right away.”

I didn’t respond.

Instead I closed my eyes again, unable to stop myself from reveling in the wonderful sensations.

If braiding was all he knew, I wouldn’t mind.

He could do this every day for the rest of my life. I sighed contentedly.

He must’ve taken the sound to be impatience. I felt his fingers move more quickly.

“There. I’m finished. Would you like to see it?” Beck asked.

“No.” I kept the bite in my voice, too afraid to see my reflection. “Get started on my makeup.”

He turned me in my chair. I realized I was very low and he was tall. My chair could raise and lower with the press of a lever, but I didn’t say anything. I wanted to see what he would do.

“Hang on.” He went over to my makeup and began going through my things.

For such a large man he was very agile.

He didn’t bump the bottles into each other.

It was almost sensual watching him touch my perfumes, handle my eye shadow, pick up my liner pencils and makeup brushes.

His eyes caught hold of my lip balm and he smiled. That snapped me out of my daydream.

Beck was supposed to be suffering.

“Get your grubby hands off my things!”

“Sorry, Miss Cavanaugh.”

“And stop smiling for goodness sake. This is serious business.” He stood straight, putting his hands to his sides, making his face stoic.

I huffed. “Better.” I pulled my makeup bag over and opened it. “What do you need?”

He didn’t meet my eyes when he spoke. “I need a light foundation with SPF in it, if you have it. Your skin is already flawless without it but a little would be nice.”

I felt my cheeks warm at his compliment.

“Some powder. Your makeup brushes. A pink shade of blush. Some brown eyeliner and some eye shadow in shades of brown and pink. Mascara in brown, if you have it. And then, if you don’t mind, I’ll apply lip balm to your lips.”

So that’s why he smiled.

The lip balm was something he recognized.

I took out the things he’d asked for and set them on the desk.

“There. Anything else?”

“No, Miss Cavanaugh, that should do it.”

“Great.” I closed my eyes. “You may begin.”

My chair began to rise and I was glad my eyes were closed. I felt his body come close to me. His breath caressed my cheek. It was warm and smelled like mouthwash. The effect was disconcerting.

“Don’t breathe on me,” I hissed, though there wasn't much authority behind it.

“Sorry.” He put some of the foundation on first, using only his third and fourth fingers.

He was extra tender. And I had a strong desire to lean into his hand.

With the powder, he brushed it over my face in an upward and outward motion. On my cheeks, he ran the blush brush in exactly the right spot.

“I’m going to line your left eye first.”

“Good.”

He lined my lids and then did the shadow. I heard him pull the mascara wand from the tube. He touched it to my upper lashes and brushed it on several times. Repeating the same process on the other side.

“Now for the balm and then you’re finished.”

For some reason the idea of him touching my lips made me nervous. “I’ll do the lip balm, thank you very much.” I opened my eyes and came face to face with Beck. He must’ve been holding his breath because I didn’t realize how close he was.

“Oh,” I said, breathing in, catching hold of the scent of his body, like cedar wood and something sweet yet earthy - pineapple.

“Would you like to see how I did?” He kept his features composed.

“Damn right I do.” I had to. So I took a deep breath and held it.

Beck turned me toward the mirror and pushed it so I could see myself.

I was too high though. Beck realized this and pressed the lever to lower my chair.

I kept my eyes forward, slowly watching my reflection come into view.

First impression was. Dayum!

My face glowed with freshness. The makeup wasn’t overly done. I pulled my braid over my shoulder. Each of the three sections was exactly the same.

“How did I do?” Beck asked. I bent down so that I could see his reflection in the glass as well.

I let out my breath. “You did a - ” the word awesome almost left

my lips, but I clamped a hand over my mouth. “Acceptable.” I shrugged, pressing some lip balm against my lips. “I guess.” I stood. “Let’s go sign that contract.”

“And then you’ll free my mother?”

“Yes. I said I would.” I kept my features blank.

Inside I was glad he’d done so well.

Glad! And happy!

I remembered the bird singing while I lay out next to the pool.

It’d been only two days ago, but it felt like a lifetime.

I’d wanted to know what it felt like to be happy enough to sing.

And suddenly I knew.

Knew the feeling soaring through my chest was happiness.

But it couldn’t be. That wasn't how I was built.

Yet, that was what I felt.

Clearing my throat, I walked past him. I sure as hell wouldn’t let Beck see it.

OceanofPDF.com

LOOPY LETTERS AND CHICKEN SCRATCH

THE CONTRACT LAY on the black desk in my father's office. Beck sat in a modern sleek chair across from me. A foot rested on his opposite knee.

My father's office was designed in the same color scheme as the rest of the house, but that was the only similarity. Where the rest of the house was decorated in a classic traditional in style, his office was sleek and modern. It smelled like sterilizer and metal. Chrome shelves lined the top half of the wall behind me and behind Beck. Books lined the shelves. To the right was a window. The black curtains with white stripes were pulled open. The view outside the window showed our tennis courts. An urge to play bubbled up inside and I thought about demanding Beck play with me.

Maybe tomorrow. Right now I needed to make a phone call.

I picked up the phone and dialed the police station. I'd brought my cell phone downstairs and noticed Eva and Cassidy had left messages.

Eva sent me a text: You didn't screw Greg did you?

I wanted to roar with frustration. No! I texted back.

Well then what were you and him doing in the wine cellar? And where is he?

So dramatic. I didn't answer.

Another text from Eva: ???

Getting wine. Duh. And I don't know where he is. I couldn't tell her that he was somehow in my phone and that he/she/it might be a ghost.

I turned off my cell. Then placed the office phone on speaker so Beck could hear.

"Salt Lake County police station," a voice said.

I sat up. “Who do I need to speak to if I want to drop the charges against someone who was arrested?” My eyes roamed over the signed contract. Beck’s signature was in black. It was a series of loopy letters and chicken scratch. I could read the A, the H, and the X. Everything else was scribbles.

“Let me transfer you.”

I was put on hold for several minutes. While we waited, I glanced out the window. A bird was perched on the tennis net. I had the sudden urge to chase it.

“This is Officer Mack. How can I help you?”

I took a deep breath. “I’d like to drop the charges against Celeste Haddox.”

“Her last name is Simmons,” Beck said, leaning forward.

“I mean Celeste Simmons. I had her arrested yesterday, but have changed my mind.”

“I see. And your name?” His voice was laced with sarcasm.

I huffed. “I’m Beatrice Cavanaugh, Officer Mack. Just in case you didn’t know, my family donates tens of thousands of dollars to the police department’s annual charity events.”

The officer coughed. “And you want Celeste Simmons to be released?”

“Yes, I do. Right away.” I glanced at Beck. His face was still stoic.

“Very well, Miss Cavanaugh. She’ll be released immediately.”

“Thank you.” I hung up.

“I appreciate you doing that,” Beck said. Tension seemed to leave his shoulders and he rolled them back. “I’ve been so worried about her.”

“It’s done and now it’s time to go to work. You may want to take notes.”

“Right.” He sat back in his chair and took out a small notebook and clicked a pen.

I was impressed, but didn't let it show. "Every morning you will do my hair and makeup. Sometimes, if I go to an event, it may need to be done more than once in the same day. You'll need to drop off and pick up my dry cleaning. Drucinda is in charge of the laundry and Nelle is in charge of cleaning my rooms, but it will be your job to make sure it's been done." I paused and watched him write. "You can use any of the cars in the garages, except my yellow LaFerrari. That is off limits, no matter what."

He nodded.

I opened the drawer, pulled out a black American Express card and slid it over to him. "Use that for purchases, for gas, and to pick up anything I ask for." He picked it up and turned it back and forth. "Don't even think about using it for anything personal. Understand?"

"Yes, Miss Cavanaugh."

I stood and walked out of the office. He followed. "I'll show you to your rooms."

We went down the hall, through the large industrial kitchen. Everything was slate or stainless steel. There were no colors but gray, except in the windowsill where we allowed Mrs. Dotts to grow fresh herbs. Mrs. Dotts was cutting up cucumbers. She was still humming. "Lunch will be ready in fifteen minutes. It's your favorite. Cucumber sandwiches."

"As long as it's accompanied by a steak, cooked rare - very rare - that'll be fine."

Mrs. Dotts frowned, wiping her hands on her apron and opening the refrigerator to retrieve a steak. "Very well."

"Beck Haddox, this is Mrs. Dotts. She's in charge of the kitchen. If you're allergic to anything, or have special dietary needs, Mrs. Dotts is the person to talk to."

"Hello, dear." She smiled at Beck as she unwrapped the package of meat.

Beck didn't smile, but nodded his hello.

“Would you like a steak as well, Beck?” Mrs. Dotts asked, eyeing the two T-bones on the butcher’s paper.

My mouth watered. “Beck will be massaging my feet while I eat. After that he’ll need to put away whatever stuff he brought. He can eat with the staff later.”

Mrs. Dotts’ smile fell. “Very good, Miss Cavanaugh.”

We went through the kitchen. “The garage is here.” I opened the door leading to the garage. My yellow LaFerrari was parked on the far end. I glanced up at Beck. “See that yellow car?”

“Of course.” Beck crossed his arms.

“That’s my LaFerrari and it’s off limits. Don’t even touch it.”

“I understand.” There was a catch in his voice, like he wanted to say something else. He didn’t.

“The rest of the cars are available for driving.” I watched his eyes check out each one. There were seven visible on this level and more underneath. Up top were my LaFerrari, a white Jaguar F-type R coupé, a silver Mercedes S65 AMG, a bing cherry red Lamborghini Veneno Roadster that resembled a modern version of the Bat Mobile, a cashmere colored Lexus LX, a green Range Rover Autobiography, and a black Lykan Hypersport. I overheard my father say he’d paid more than three million dollars for that last one and there were only seven made. He’d probably flip if he knew some random guy was driving it, but what did I care? He and my mom had left me for the entire summer without saying good-bye.

“Even that one,” Beck asked, pointing at the Lykan.

“Sure. Just get the keys from there.” I pointed at a key box on the wall. “Make sure the keys are put back immediately when you return. And never let any of the gas tanks get below half full.”

His eyes shone with unshed tears. Guys and cars - I didn’t understand it. Because the prospect of driving the Lykan seemed to make him so happy, I was tempted to tell him I changed my mind, just to hurt him. At the last second, I held my tongue.

We left the garage and made our way down into the basement. The stairs were wide and not very steep but they turned several times as we descended. The air grew cooler the deeper we went.

At the bottom of the stairs I pointed to the bathroom. “This is yours to use. Keep it clean.”

He nodded.

I opened the door to the bedroom. Isaac had done a nice job. The blankets and sheets were navy blue and white. There was a lamp on the nightstand, a computer on the small desk under the window over which was obscured by Navy curtains. That was probably for the best, since it was doubtful there was anything to see aside from the empty window well. A decent chair had been pushed under the desk. Next to the computer was a cell phone with a piece of paper under it. I picked up the paper. It listed the phone’s number. I quickly typed it into my cell. “So I can text or call at any time.”

He took the phone and flipped it over.

“This is my room?”

“Yes. It is.” I ran my fingers along the bedspread.

“Thank you.” He sat on the bed, bouncing.

“I get up at ten in the morning. I expect you to be done with all of your personal - stuff, and have my breakfast up to me by then so you can begin working on my hair.”

“Yes, Miss Cavanaugh.”

“Any questions?”

“No.”

“Good. Let’s go upstairs. I’m famished and my feet need to be rubbed. After that you can drive me into Salt Lake. I need some retail therapy.”

OceanofPDF.com

AGONY INSIDE OF ME

BECK DROVE THE LYKAN. Usually I rode in the back of a limousine, but I'd wanted to see how he handled the car. Our outing wasn't a date. He was my driver.

He knew how to drive and maneuvered the Lykan through traffic expertly. More than once I caught him watching me out of the corner of his eye. I pretended not to notice.

When we arrived at City Creek Center, I had him drop me off at the entrance. "Park the car and make sure nothing happens to it. Then text me. I'll let you know when I need your help carrying my bags."

He quickly jumped out of the car and ran around to open my door. "Very good, Miss Cavanaugh."

I didn't turn around or respond, but heard him pull away from the curb. .

As soon as I stepped inside the air-conditioned mall the aroma of cinnamon and roasted almonds filled my nose. Usually I picked up a bag. They were my favorite treat. But above the roasted cinnamon smell was that of grilled steak. And something else. It was a new smell. As I walked by people I realized the smell changed slightly with each person and that somehow I was smelling their individual scents. It was weird and it made my head hurt.

I stopped in Victoria's Secret to purchase some underthings. The scent subsided slightly because of the strong smell of the store's perfumes. It wasn't long though before I could still pick up the scent of the people again. Some actually did smell fresh while others smelled of more fat, and there were those who smelled lean and meaty, and delicious. My mouth watered and I started to freak out.

What was freaking happening to me?

I purchased a couple of different matching bras and underwear and quickly left the store. My head had started to buzz and I wondered if maybe I should see a doctor.

I took my phone from my bag and texted Beck.

On the second floor near Victoria's Secret. Please come. I realized after I'd sent the text that I'd used the word please. What the hell? But I couldn't take it back. I moved over, out of the way of those passing by and tried to hold my breath so I wouldn't smell anything - anyone. The escalator was nearby. I leaned against the balcony, checking out the people below. City Creek was busy. People bustled along doing their shopping.

I'd seen the movie Madagascar when I was little and there'd been a scene where the lion saw all the other animals as steak. I was having a similar moment. The people kept changing into different cuts of meat according to their scent. What was worse, the freaking buzzing inside my brain began to intensify. It grew louder and louder. I wanted to scream in pain, but a Cavanaugh didn't make a spectacle of herself. So I held on, wishing Beck would hurry. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his tall frame maneuvering through the crowd with ease, the same way he'd driven the Lykan.

Beck. I tried to call out, to let him know where I was. I reached out a hand, hoping I could get his attention. At that moment the buzzing exploded into a flash of white light. It was as though a dam broke behind my eyelids.

I felt pain. So much pain.

And then I was falling. Several people screamed. I prepared myself to hit the ground, thinking that at least when I died the pain in my head would stop.

But the ground never came. Instead large arms encircled me. "What happened?" It was Beck's voice. At least I thought so.

The buzzing subsided, but now there was something worse. It was even more painful than the buzzing and it seemed to attack my head

and my heart at once.

Emotions. Thousands upon thousands of them. They came hard and fast, like a baseball in the stomach, over and over again.

Tears filled my eyes. I'd never cried. A Cavanaugh doesn't cry, I heard my father say. But I couldn't stop them.

The pain racked my body.

"Beatrice." Beck's voice sounded urgent.

I opened my eyes, ashamed that tears were running uncontrolled down my face.

Beck sucked in his breath.

"It hurts so bad," I whimpered, turning my body toward his, willing him to take away the pain. There was something hard under his shirt, against his chest. If I hadn't been hurting so much, I would've asked him about it.

He pulled me closer, wrapping me in his arms. I heard whispers around us. People saying things. Beck pushed through them, walking rapidly. I sensed the change in temperature when he stepped outside.

"Hang on," he whispered.

Even through the pain I couldn't help but note he wasn't out of breath. It was true I weighed less than most but I was still over a hundred pounds. That was a lot of weight for anyone to carry for long distances.

"I'm going to set you down."

I let out a moan. Standing seemed like too much effort. I was drowning in emotion. I'd heard when a person died they saw their life flash before them. In my case, I did see my life, but worse, I felt it too. All of the emotions I should've experienced when they happened. There was agony when I broke my arm, pain when I fell out of the tree house and cut my forehead open. Worse than that was the guilt, the shame, and the remorse. More often than I'd been hurt I realized how much I'd hurt other people. And I felt their pain.

“No,” I cried. “Please. No.” The words ripped from my throat. I deserved to be alone, but I didn’t want him to let me go. I thought I might die without Beck’s touch.

“Hang on, Beatrice.” Beck adjusted me in his arms and got the car door open. “I can’t get you home if I don’t drive. I’ve got to put you in the car.”

“No. Please.”

“I’m going to buckle you next to me. You can rest your head in my lap.”

That meant whole seconds without his touch.

“Otherwise I’ll need to call an ambulance. Would you rather I do that?”

“No.” It was the only word I could get out.

He grunted and slid me into the seat and then buckled me in. Then he got in on the driver’s side and the Lykan roared to life. “I’ll hurry.”

I tried to lay my head in his lap but the gearshift was in the way. Another whimper escaped my lips. Shame washed over me, burying all the other emotions momentarily. But like the ocean waves, they came back, crashing through my body, stronger than ever. I felt like I was going to be sick. My head rolled to the side.

“Don’t puke in this car, Beatrice.” His voice was strong, not hard, but forceful. He took my small hand in his large one. My emotions abated slightly.

I covered my mouth with my hand. My face was wet. I realized I was still crying.

After a while the car stopped. Beck let go of my hand. As soon as the pressure of his touch was gone, the emotions came back, fiercer than ever. It was as though each one fought the others to be the strongest. They continued to build and build.

“Beck?” I wanted him to hold my hand. For some reason all of this was easier to deal with when he did. But he didn’t come. Had he just

left me in the car?

Feelings of abandonment hurled against my heart. I cried out, the ache was so strong. My fingers found the door handle and I opened it. My knees hit the ground and then the rest of me. The concrete was cool against my hot skin. It helped with the nausea.

But it didn't help abate the memories and the feelings I should've had for the past eighteen years. They kept going and going, like a TV show. Except instead of sound there were feelings. So many of them that I wanted to die if that would make the pain go away.

A distinct voice made its way inside my head. If she lives through the pain caused by the curse, there may be hope for her yet. It sounded like Fizban.

If she dies, all hope for the Vaktare dies with her. That was Greg or Fizban as Greg. It gave me a little satisfaction to realize she was talking to herself. Maybe she was crazier than me. Or maybe I was so off my rocker I just believed I was hearing two people that were actually one who didn't exist at all.

If that's what it takes, Fizban said, her voice hard, interrupting my mental ramblings. I wanted to sink my fangs into her wretched neck. Even as I had the thought I wondered where it came from. I didn't have fangs. Did I?

But one thing was becoming clear. The curse, pretend or not, had wakened emotions I'd never felt before.

"She's in -"

"Where the hell is she, boy?" That was Isaac. He sounded afraid.

"Help. Please." I called out softly.

Two sets of feet padded closer. I blinked my eyes open. Isaac squatted down. Beck lifted me into his arms from his standing position. Obviously the guy was strong.

"Take her upstairs."

"Something seems to be seriously wrong with her. Shouldn't we

take her to the hospital? Let the doctors help her?" As Beck spoke he pressed my body closer to his chest.

"No, Beck. I think you know human doctors can't help her now." Isaac said those words, but I must've heard him wrong. Why couldn't they help? If I were going crazy, a special crazy person doctor might be exactly what I needed. Maybe a white jacket, some strong medication. Anything to take away this pain.

"It hurts," I sobbed.

"Fine. I'll carry her upstairs."

"I'll make her some tea." That was Mrs. Dotts. Tea was my favorite drink, but even that didn't sound good. A nice T-bone. That might be better. But as I thought about eating the nausea came back. I leaned into Beck's chest and puked.

OceanofPDF.com

SO COMPLETELY EVIL

EVERY TIME I opened my eyes, Beck was there. Several times he was shirtless. And whoa, he should always be shirtless. It was a crime for him to wear a shirt. His torso was too beautiful to be covered up. It was like hiding a Monet painting.

I think I actually told him as much once while fading in and out of consciousness. His mouth twitched. I wanted to tell him it was okay to smile, but I couldn't find the words in between all of the emotions filleting my insides.

Whenever Beck held my hand, the pain subsided. His touch was icy relief to my furnace of pain.

Isaac and Mrs. Dotts took turns sitting with me as well, but their touch did nothing, though I did find it comforting to see that they cared even after all the years I'd treated them horribly.

After what seemed like forever, the pain slowly began to shift from all-consuming to a crackling and tearing around just my heart. In certain ways having the pain localized hurt worse.

Some of the worst agony was the most recent. Watching what I'd tried to do with Greg in order to hurt Eva. The way I'd treated Will. How could I have thrown his birthday present into the pool? It was so rude, so completely evil. As I watched my memories, experienced the emotions that should've gone along with them, I wondered what my friends and Will gained by continually spending time in my presence. I'd been awful.

"It hurts," I whispered.

"I'm sorry," Beck said, lifting his head. His hair was tousled and his lids were heavy.

He must've fallen asleep while sitting in the chair next to my bed.

His hand covered mine. The pain immediately subsided.

“Thank you,” I said, hoping he could see the sincerity in my expression.

He nodded, wincing.

“Are you uncomfortable? You can lie down on the bed -” His eyebrows lifted. “If you want,” I continued, totally humiliated.

Beck climbed on the bed and lay down beside me. He was so close his breath tickled my cheek.

“Is that better?”

“Much,” he said and was about to smile but stopped short.

“Smile whenever you like,” I said, forcing myself to breathe. Even that hurt.

“How are you feeling?” Beck asked, brushing some hair off my face. His finger was like a soothing balm for every place he touched.

“Well that’s just it,” I began. “I’m feeling. Everything. All at once.” Tears sprang to my eyes. “It’s hurts so freaking bad, Beck.”

Beck’s eyes softened. “That must be difficult.”

I nodded, brushing at a wayward tear. “I’ve cried more in the past - How long have I been like this?”

Beck checked his watch. “Nearly twenty-four hours.”

“That’s all?” I searched his face. “It feels like ages.”

“What’s going on?” Beck asked.

I shook my head. “I honestly don’t know.” How could I explain that some guy who could transform into a girl with red hair had cursed me?

He smirked. “I can tell you have a lot to say.” He turned so he more fully faced me. “I’ve signed a contract that states I’m required to be your servant until you let me go.”

Guilt swallowed me.

I closed my eyes at the hurt.

His mom hadn't stolen the diamond.

He didn't deserve to be here. "I know. I'm sorry."

Tears rolled down my cheeks. "That's - "

Beck touched my face.

I opened my eyes. "It's okay. I want to help. So tell me what's going on."

I smiled, a newfound joy spreading over every inch of my face.

The act of smiling so big actually hurt. I reached up and touched one of my cheeks, marveling at the difference between a real and pretend smile.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." I searched his face for any indication he would run if I told him.

But I realized I wanted to tell someone.

Say the words out loud.

If I did maybe it would help me make sense of my situation.

And if Beck did leave, I would be okay with that. It was the least of what I deserved.

"Try me." Beck took my other hand.

The emotional trauma raging in my body all but stopped.

I sighed with relief. And then told him everything - well, except that I'd tried to put the moves on Greg.

All but that.

When I finished he sat up, crossing his legs.

"So, let me get this straight. Some guy who can also turn into a girl cursed you?"

"That's right."

"What did he say, exactly?" Beck asked, his eyes searching my face.

I closed my eyes. It helped me see the words. "He said, 'For your vanity, your cruelty and your cold, unfeeling heart, a curse I leave

upon you."

"That's omnious," Beck said.

"There's more," I added, but didn't open my eyes.

"Sorry. Continue."

I couldn't help a small smile that pushed up my lips. "A year shall not pass before your true form will be revealed. You are Vaktare, daughter of royalty, born to deliver your people, created to save your species from the extinction they so rightly deserve. You, your father and your mother have been sentenced to die. Unless you can learn to give love unconditionally. Only then will your species have a chance.'" I opened my eyes and focused on his gorgeous blue ones.

"You are Vaktare. What is that?" He asked the question but he didn't seem surprised. His minty breath caressed my cheek.

I forced myself not to shiver. "I don't know. I've never heard the word before." I gauged his reaction. "Do you know?"

Beck stood, letting go of my hands. The pain came back in full force, making my heart ache.

"Do you mind if I use your computer?" he asked.

"No," I whispered, curious about what he was doing, but in too much pain to ask.

He suddenly seemed to notice my pain. "Oh, hey." He slid his hands into mine and pulled me off my bed. "Let's research the word Vaktare." He released one hand and sat at my desk. While he pulled up the Internet, he asked, "And up until now you haven't had any feelings, like no pain, nothing?"

"That's right." I moved to stand behind him.

Beck typed v-a-c-k-t-a-r-e and hit Enter. There were definitions and explanations in a different language. Clicking on Translate, it appeared the word, though spelled v-a-k-t-a-r-e meant security guard in Swedish. "So he cursed you to become a Swedish security guard?"

I laughed out loud. A real laugh. My body seemed to come to life

at the sound and the pain squeezing my heart subsided. “Probably not.” I shook my head. Beck’s eyes sparkled. He turned back to the screen and scrolled down, searching for more information. By the third page, it was easy to see there was nothing there. Nothing of use anyway.

He swiveled the chair so he could see me.

“And up until now you haven’t ever felt anything. No emotion whatsoever.”

“Right.” My bottom lip trembled. He rose, taking my hands again.

“And then you got a message from your mom?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know where your parents are?”

“No.”

“Can I hear the message?”

My cell phone rested on the bedside table. I picked it up, found the message, and played it on speakerphone.

While my mom spoke I watched Beck’s face. He seemed to be taking all that I’d said very well. He didn’t seem freaked out. He wasn’t treating me differently. At least I didn’t think so.

When my dad told my mom to hang up because she’d already said too much, Beck’s eyes scrunched together, but he didn’t say anything.

“Why aren’t you freaking out?” I asked him. I appreciated that he wanted to honor his contract, but if the roles had been reversed, I would’ve run away already.

Beck shrugged. “To be honest, I think the whole thing is extraordinary.” He took my hands. “When I watched you fall from the second floor of the shopping center I thought you were possibly suicidal.”

“How did you catch me? Why didn’t you get hurt?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I saw you fall and I reacted. I didn’t debate, I just knew I needed to save you.”

A rush of gratitude for Beck filled my insides. “Thank you,” I breathed.

Beck stepped closer. “Of course, Miss Cavanaugh.”

“I think you’ve earned the right to call me Beatrice.”

Beck leaned back, but I held his hands tightly.

“If you want. You don’t have to.” I exhaled. “The truth is you don’t even have to stay.” With the rush of emotions came the realization that I didn’t want to hurt Beck anymore. In fact I couldn’t understand why I’d had such a hateful desire in the first place. And the fact that I’d lied about the diamond made matters worse. I was a rude, immature girl who needed to figure out what Vaktare meant. Beck certainly didn’t need to be a part of whatever was happening to me. “See, your mom, she didn’t - ”

Beck pressed a finger to my lips. “I’ve signed a contract agreeing to stay until such time as you release me. I’ll abide that.”

I smiled, knowing the right thing was to release him. “Thank you, but that’s what I’m trying to say. You don’t need to stay. I am releasing you.”

Beck stepped back. Disappointment rolled over his gorgeous face. “Already? I’ve done nothing to make up for what you believe my mom did. I researched red diamonds. They’re worth millions.”

“I know. But she - ”

Mrs. Dotts pushed open the door. She was humming. “You’re out of bed.”

“Yes,” I said.

Mrs. Dotts set a tray on the table. On it were two steaks. “I thought you might be hungry.”

I hadn’t even thought about eating.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dotts. ” I went over and cut a piece of meat. Then realized I should’ve asked Beck which he wanted first. “Sorry I didn’t let you choose, Beck,” I said when he came to stand beside me.

Mrs. Dotts dropped the napkins she'd been about to hand over. "Is there anything else you need, Miss Cavanaugh?" Her voice quaked with surprise.

"Have you heard of the word Vack-tare?"

Mrs. Dotts froze. "Um, well." She stuffed the napkins in the front pocket of her apron.

Isaac walked in. "Miss Cavanaugh. May I have a word with you?"

I glanced over mid-bite. He held a strange box in his gloved hands. Beck squeezed my shoulders. I knew he was thinking the same thing I was - that Isaac might know what the word Vaktare meant. I dropped the fork and rose.

Mrs. Dotts scurried out of the room, closing the door behind her. Isaac stepped further inside.

OceanofPDF.com

FIRST SHIFT

"WHAT IS IT, ISAAC?" My heart began to race, pushing the pain out and back in with each thump.

He cleared his throat, glancing at Beck.

"He's fine to remain here."

"Very well, Miss Cavanaugh."

"When I came to work for your father fifteen years ago, you were just a small child. And while your parents were never kind to me they were never unkind either." He coughed. "I knew I was luckier than most. Your father paid me well. Very well. I came to respect, even admire him." Isaac cleared his throat again. "On your sixteenth birthday your father and mother came to me and asked if I would be willing to keep something for them." He lifted the box in his hands. "They made me promise that if anything bizarre began to happen with you and if the two of them suddenly vanished I was to give you this box." Isaac set it on my desk.

"Do you know what's inside?" I asked, goosebumps tightening my skin.

"No, Miss Cavanaugh, I do not." He stepped back. "I've witnessed many peculiar events in my life. I know your family is different." He paused, pulling on the bottom of his vest, uncomfortable. "Have you heard anyone use the word Vaktare?" Isaac was suddenly nervous. He gave Beck a cursory glance.

I nodded, excitedly, taking a step toward him. "Do you know what that means?"

He shook his head. "I only know that I overheard your parents say the word on many occasions."

I felt my face fall. It was weird. Normally my face didn't move

much.

“Miss Cavanaugh, your parents - you are different. Your parents knew I knew. Being in this house, I’ve heard things, even seen things.” He clasped his hands together. “Please know I would never do anything to betray your parents or you. I owe your parents my life. My allegiance is, and will always be, to your family.”

“Thank you, Isaac.” My eyes were misty. I wondered what my parents had done for him, but now wasn’t the time to ask. I quickly dabbed at the edges of my eyes. Crying was fast becoming annoying.

“You’re most welcome, Miss Cavanaugh. And if there is anything you need, you have only to ask.” He turned and left the room.

I scooted my chair closer to the box. It was beautiful. Not much larger than a sheet of paper. The latch had the head of a roaring lion. On the lid was carved the letter C. I guessed for Cavanaugh. Thorny vines wrapped around it and a single red rose bloomed in the center. Behind the C and the rose had been carved an intricate background. Creatures that appeared to be part man and part beast were in a forest.

“Aren’t these amazing?” I said touching one of the heads. As soon as my hand brushed the wood, the latch clicked open. I gasped, clutching my chest. And then laughed.

Beck smiled, crouching down so his head was even with mine. That must’ve been uncomfortable.

“Wait a sec.” I picked up the box and took it over to the bed. “This will be better.”

Beck seemed surprised by my actions. In truth, I was too. In the past, or even yesterday, the comfort of others hadn’t mattered to me.

I took a deep breath, eager for the answers that were sure to be inside.

“Go for it,” Beck said, noticing my hesitation.

Taking hold of the latch, I lifted it.

I didn't know what I expected to find. The inside smelled like fresh cut wood. It had been stained to match the outside.

I glanced at Beck. He rocked back, appearing to be as confused as I was. I reached in and picked up the only thing in the box: a piece of paper. It'd been torn out of a notebook. On the paper, scrawled in black ink were a name and a number.

"Is this you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "My last name is Haddox, remember?"

All of my courage deflated.

Beck squeezed my hand. "So you call the number. Your parents thought the name and number were important, right?"

"I guess." I placed the number back in the box and closed it. Exhaustion overpowered my limbs. "I'm tired, Beck. Would you mind giving me some time by myself?" I knew the pain would increase with him gone but it was becoming more bearable.

"Of course." Beck glanced at his watch. "I'll see you in the morning." He got off my bed and went to the door. "It'll work out. Everything happens for a reason.

I couldn't agree or disagree. "Thanks, Beck. For all of your help and for staying." As I said the words, a tendril of fear curled through my stomach, like a snake in search of its prey, it slithered inside. My heart raced. "You'll still be here in the morning?" I asked, timidly.

Beck opened the door. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

His words made me smile. I stared after him a few moments, thinking about how happy I was to have him in my life. I didn't have my parents, and while I missed them, which was weird and wonderful, but I had him. Beck. It seemed overly lucky that he'd come just after I was cursed. I didn't think Eva, Ashley, Cassidy or even Will would've handled the situation as well as he was.

I set the box on my nightstand, changed into some PJs and went over to the bed. I tried to sleep, but as tired as I was, I couldn't. So I

climbed out of bed and walked over to the window seat, pulling open the curtains. The moon was nearly full. I curled up with a blanket and a pillow and fell asleep.

I SNIFFED THE AIR. Another hunter was nearby. It was hungry, like me. And it needed to eat. But this was my territory. I roared, shaking my head.

In response the hunter howled. A wolf?

My ears pricked as I ran. Its large paws padded the dirt softly, making its movements barely perceivable. It was heading up the mountain, same as me.

Though it was summer the air this high up was chilly, especially at night. I found the temperature enjoyable and lifted my face toward the night sky. The moon shone brightly and the stars twinkled against the blackness. It reminded me of a map, the stars plotting points, telling me where to go. I stared at the stars more intently, as though seeing them for what they truly were.

Where should I go? I thought, searching for an answer.

To the right I heard the snap of a fallen tree branch. Instinctively I turned toward the sound, crouching low, preparing for the unknown. I'd been too caught up in the stars to listen to what was going on around me.

Whatever it was moved closer. I waited, shifting my body so that I was in good position. Twin pools of blue glowed as it stepped into view.

I squinted, trying to discover what it was.

"I wondered when you would finally shift." The deep, male voice came from the area where the eyes glowed.

OceanofPDF.com

I AM A BEAST

HE STEPPED out of the trees and into the moonlight.

It was a large black cat, but bigger than any wildcat I'd seen in my mountains, or at the zoo for that matter. Thick black fur covered his body. He was on all fours, but his back legs had more of a bend at the knee, like a human rather than a wildcat.

His paws were long and shaped like human hands and feet. Thick claws extended from them. They were sharp and pointed. His face held the shape of a cat, but it somehow looked human too.

"What are you talking about?" I backed up the way I'd come, the prey I'd been hunting long forgotten.

In answer he lifted one of his front paws and a ball of light came out. It headed right at me. For a single second I froze, unsure what to do.

In the next second instinct took over and I dove out of the way.

The light hit the tree to my right. It made a sizzling and crackling sound and then the light went out. By the light of the moon, I could see the tree had been charred and there was a hole deep within the trunk.

"Found out what your ability is yet?" He growled and sent another ball of light my direction.

I dove the other way, baring my teeth and making a hissing sound. That scared me almost more than the big cat and the ball of light.

"Please, what do you want? I can get you anything." I hoped to reason with him.

"Can you?" He paused, tilting his head, as though he were mulling over my offer.

"Of course."

The male cat roared, and it felt like the whole Earth shook.

I wanted to lower my head, to cower before him, but something inside told me not to.

So, I lifted my chin. “What do you want?” I was scared, but I forced those feelings away, and stepped toward him. “Either tell me or leave.”

The male cat laughed, and his long tail flicked back and forth randomly.

“Your family no longer has the right to give orders.” He snorted and his whiskers quaked. “Your father doesn’t even have his abilities any longer. They were stripped from him.” He seemed to know more about my family than I did.

“You know who I am? What I am?” My chin started to tremble.

He laughed harder. “Of course.” Something about the way he said the words sounded familiar, but I was too scared to really think about it.

I realized for all my feigned toughness, if he attacked, I’d be dead. He probably weighed five hundred pounds.

“It’s time the Cavanaugh family is destroyed, and a new royal line takes your place.” He charged.

I stood my ground, not knowing what else to do. As he got closer, he opened his mouth. Drool dribbled from his sharp teeth. He was so close I could smell his putrid breath. At the last second, I closed my eyes, preparing for the inevitable.

But it didn’t come. There was a rush of wind and a loud thump.

I peered through my lashes and was surprised to find that the male cat had been knocked on its side. He rolled to his feet and shook his head.

Standing between the cat and me was a gigantic blond wolf. His body was a similar shape to the cat, though he was bigger. His tail was fluffier, his ears were bigger, and his face was different. He was

every bit as scary, especially as he bent low, baring his teeth.

“Leave now and I’ll let you live,” the wolf said.

His voice was so deep I felt it in my bones.

“I wasn’t sure you’d come. Your fight isn’t with me. In fact, I’m on your side with the rest of your kind, Locanis. We can kill her together.” The cat tried to move around the wolf, but the wolf blocked him from passing.

“No.”

The cat growled and sent a ball of light at the wolf.

The wolf chuckled, batting the light away. “How does it feel to know you have the lamest of Vaktare abilities?” The wolf's garbled laughter grew. “I mean, it’s a ball of light. Oooh, scary.” The last part oozed with sarcasm.

“Shut up!” The cat shot another ball of light in the wolf's direction.

The wolf caught it. “Here kitty, kitty.” He threw the ball of light back.

The cat yowled, diving at the wolf.

They rammed into each other, their teeth snapping and tearing into the other’s fur. They rolled on the ground. Dirt kicked up around them, making their fight harder to see.

I watched the battle in amazement. Too stunned to do anything else. The creatures were like none I’d ever seen. Certain features made them obviously a cat or a dog, but they were much too big, their limbs too long.

Plus they spoke English, like me, which was stranger still.

It suddenly occurred to me that I was in the presence of horrid beasts, and that I should run.

The cat roared in pain and the combatants broke apart.

Panting, the cat said, “Look at her. She’s weak. Your mission is to kill her. Now’s your chance.”

The wolf barked once. “My orders are none of your business. Now

either you leave, or I kill you."

The cat laughed. "You've gone soft. What happened to the fearless Locanis I heard stories about? You're supposed to be a cold-blooded killer, not a simpering pup."

The wolf was on the cat before he had a chance to defend himself.

In the distance I heard another howl and then several more. The blond wolf's nose came up. He shook his head. "Get out of here!" He yelled those words at me.

"What? I - "

The cat took off down the hill.

The wolf perked his ears. They twitched and turned, listening.

"Hey," I called after the wolf. "What - the - hell?" I was terrified and confused but curious too.

He wouldn't look at me.

"Hey," I yelled again, feeling a strong need to see his face. I knew if I did everything would be okay.

"Shut up and run away. You don't know what you're doing and you're going to get yourself killed." He took off in the opposite direction of the cat.

I was suddenly very alone and very frightened.

The wolf was right.

If he hadn't come along, I'd be dead. I reached out after him. "Thank yo - " I yelled as I glanced down at my hand but it wasn't a normal hand.

It was large and the back was covered with honey brown fur. The claws were long and pointed. I thought about what I'd been doing outside, on the mountain, before the other cat showed up. I'd been hunting.

Was I like him? Had I somehow shifted into a creature?

Feeling a strong need to find out, I dashed toward my house, past trees of pine and ash. I jumped over large bushes and wild strawberry

patches. I ran through tiny trickling streams, burrowed under brush, and snapped at the heels of a family of elk I came upon. There was only one thought and it pushed me to run faster than I ever believed was possible.

I needed to see what I was even though I knew I was changed.

I would check my reflection in the pool behind our house. When I came to the border of the Cavanaugh land, I stopped. I'd forgotten about the super tall chain link fence that went all the way around the back part of our property.

How had I gotten out? I clawed my way up the fence. At the top was barbed wire. With effort I climbed over, though much of my fur snagged on the barbs.

Jumping to the ground I ran to the pool and then slid to a stop.

My pulse raced with apprehension. Peering over the edge, I saw what I'd been afraid of.

"No." I quickly stepped back, took a deep breath, and tried again.

The beast was still there, staring at me with a horrified expression. I touched a paw to my face, watching it move the way my brain told it to.

Except for my eyes, I didn't recognize myself.

Fizban had told me I was a Vaktare.

Was the hideous creature staring back a Vaktare?

"How did I get this way?" I whispered the words, feeling those blasted tears push at my eyes again. I roared. "I am a beast!" The thought made me sadder than I'd ever been.

My parents were gone, and I had no idea what was happening to me. I couldn't even call them and ask. The numbers I had for my mom and dad had been disconnected.

A pile of sadness seemed to bury me.

I walked over to one of the patio lounge chairs and tried to climb on. My claws tore through the polyester. But I didn't care. I rested my

head against the part that was still whole and closed my eyes.

“It’s all a dream, Beatrice. It’s all a dream.”

I uttered those words over and over until I almost believed them.

OceanofPDF.com

NAKED AND TANGLED

WHEN I CAME BACK into consciousness and opened my eyes, I was shocked by the brightness of the room.

Seconds later I realized I wasn't even in my room.

I was outside.

Birds chirped in the trees nearby.

Squirrels prattled on at each other as they searched for nuts.

I blinked several times, convincing my eyes to adjust.

The smell of pine and chlorine immediately told me I was by the pool. Shocked, I tried to stand, but my limbs were tangled within the broken patio chair.

That's when I remembered last night.

There'd been a large cat with the blue eyes. He'd tried to kill me.

And the huge blond wolf. The cat had called him Locanis. Was that his name or his species? Whatever he was, the wolf had protected me.

And then I'd seen my reflection in the pool.

I was like the black one. A large, weird, talking cat. I shuddered in dismay. If it had been a dream, how had I ended up outside in the exact spot where I'd lay down in my dream? Before I could find an answer, I heard my name in the distance.

"Beatrice," Beck called, an edge of fear in his voice.

"Miss Cavanaugh." That was Isaac.

"I'm over here," I tried to holler, but the words got caught in my throat.

"Bea. Bea, it's me, Will. Where are you?" He sounded close.

"Here," I called. The word came out raspy like I smoked two packs a day.

A shadow passed over my face. I squinted, trying to see. “I seem to be wrapped up in -”

Will laughed. “Oh, this is glorious.” He leaned down and started to unwind the polyester material from my legs. His hands brushed my backside and I realized with a start that I was naked.

I screamed, quickly covering up as much as possible.

Will laughed harder. “Naked and tangled up. It must’ve been some party last night.”

“I - no.” I felt my whole-body blush, from the tips of my toes to the top of my head.

“Miss Cavanaugh.” Isaac found me next.

Where Will was just standing there staring, Isaac quickly took off his jacket and threw it over me.

“Thank you, Isaac.” I tried to cover myself, but I was still mostly tangled.

Beck burst through the two men and bent beside me. “What the hell?” He ripped at the stupid lounge chair until I was free. Then he picked me up, making sure I was covered and practically ran toward the house.

“Wait for me,” Will called.

“Isaac, will you make sure Will leaves?” I asked, my gaze catching the butler’s.

“Of course. If you would,” I heard Isaac say.

Beck mumbled something under his breath.

“What?” I asked, mortified but trying not to be.

“I don’t like that kid.”

“Who, Will?” I shrugged, which made Isaac’s jacket fall off my shoulder and slide down my chest, so I was exposed. I gasped.

Beck kept his eyes forward. “Don’t talk. Don’t move until I say so.”

I glanced up at his face. He was clenching his teeth, his jaw flexing

and un-flexing.

“You’re kind of bossy,” I said, surprised.

At my words his bright eyes found mine. He made a point of focusing only on my face. “Shhhhh.” Then he faced forward, opening the back door, walking through the living room, down the hall, and up the stairs.

When he reached my room, he kicked open the door and basically tossed me on the bed. My limbs went flying, the jacket all but coming off.

My face burned, embarrassed.

Without a word, Beck was gone. The door slammed shut and I was alone.

“Rude.”

I thought I heard a bark of laughter from the other side of the door. “When you’re decent come find me.”

“Fine.” I jumped off the bed and ran into the bathroom, desperate to see my face. I was dirty but still me. There were no sharp teeth. There wasn’t any fur. No claws or paws. My breath shook with relief.

“Sleepwalking?” I thought aloud.

“More like shifting,” Fizban said from my cell phone.

I yelped. “How did you get in here?” I was asking my phone, which hadn’t been in the bathroom moments ago.

Fizban answered, “I can be anything. Why would you think I couldn’t move your phone?”

I took a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

Fizban popped out of my cell phone and was suddenly sitting on my toilet seat. The ends of her long red hair rested in her lap. She was dressed in fingerless gloves, a dress that’d seen better days and shoes with holes in the toes.

“Why are you dressed like Raggedy Ann?”

“Why are you not dressed at all?” She smirked when I suddenly

reached for a towel and wrapped it around myself.

“I’m in the bathroom, where I should have privacy,” I sputtered.

“Uh-huh. Well get in.” The water in the shower turned on.

“Not with you in here.” The shower was a snail cove, which meant I went inside the shower and had privacy, but knowing her, she’d climb in too.

“I solemnly swear not to peek.” As she spoke, she raised her right hand.

“Fine.” The faster I finished, the faster I could find Beck. I walked into the shower, hung my towel on a nearby hook and stepped into the water.

“So, tell me how you’ve been?”

I snorted. “You probably know more than I do.”

“Perhaps, but I want to hear you tell it.”

She sounded suspiciously close.

“I was shopping yesterday when I was overwhelmed by all of these emotions. I fell from the second story. Luckily Beck caught me.” I smiled at the thought of him. It was weird that I already cared for him. Cared. Yep, that was the right word. I freaking cared. For him and Isaac and Mrs. Dotts, too.

“I see. And what have you learned about the Vaktare?”

“Nothing,” I huffed, rinsing out my hair.

“That’s not true.”

I glanced around the corner. She stood right next to the opening.

“Get back,” I hissed.

She laughed. “Tell me what you’ve learned.”

I thought about it. “I can tell you what I think I’ve learned.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Last night I thought I was dreaming, and a big black cat tried to kill me. Then a large wolf saved me. And I - I saw my reflection.

“And?”

“There was a cat or a Vaktare staring back, which means I’m a Vaktare.” I ran a razor over my soapy armpits. “The evil Vaktare, the one who tried to kill me, he called the wolf ‘Locanis’ but I don’t know if it’s the wolf’s name or his species.”

“Wow. See. You have learned a lot.” She stuck her head around the corner.

I screamed, cutting myself with the razor. Blood immediately formed. “Ouch. Dammit. You said you wouldn’t peek.”

“I say a lot of things.” She moved her head back around the corner, out of sight.

I rinsed the blood and waited for more. But none came. “So, a Vaktare is a big hairy cat-beast. And I’m one of them?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Fizban said.

“Okay. And how did this happen? Did you turn me into one of these Vaktare when you cursed me?”

She peeked around the corner again, but this time I was prepared and splashed water in her face. She let out a yelp and moved back. “The curse isn’t really a curse. It’s more of a reverse curse.”

“What? You’re not making any sense?” I turned off the water and grabbed a clean towel.

She zipped her lips and then locked them with an invisible key.

“You aren’t going to tell me?”

She unzipped her lips. “Part of breaking the curse, or reversing the curse, is that you need to be the one to figure out what’s going on. If I help you, then you’ve really learned nothing. You need to experience what your life is truly about.”

“Oh, great. Like last night?” I exited the steamy bathroom and went into my closet. I wondered if she would follow or if she were somehow attached to my phone.

She was right behind me.

“Can I get a little privacy? Please?” I asked with extra sincerity, batting my lashes.

OceanofPDF.com

ACTING WEIRD

FIZBAN CLAPPED HER HANDS GLEEFULLY. “You’ve already changed, Beatrice. I hope it’s enough to save everyone.” She skipped out of the closet.

“Save? Who? My mom and dad?” I pulled on a lilac bra and undies.

“Sure, them and more. A lot has happened in eighteen years.”

I shimmied into a pair of dark jeans and tugged on a lilac peasant top. “I don’t understand.”

Looking back, the last eighteen years didn’t seem real now I could actually feel.

“Are you talking about my ability to experience emotions now? Why couldn’t I before?” I quickly buckled on a pair of wedge heel sandals.

Coming out of the closet, I went on, “My emotions are wonky though. I cry constantly.”

Fizban was sitting on my bed flipping through a magazine. “Last night you shifted. It means your true nature is returning much faster than we - I expected. You need to be careful.”

“No kidding.” I opened my bedroom door. “Celeste,” I called out of habit before I remembered she was gone. Beck had replaced her. I glanced down the hall. It was empty.

Isaac opened the bedroom door across from mine.

“Isaac,” I said, surprised.

“Miss Cavanaugh. I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of helping Beck move into this bedroom. I think it might be wise if he were closer to you.”

I turned my head, trying to figure out if he were being honest.

That he'd done something so huge without my consent would've been grounds for dismissal in the past. He never would've tried it with my mom and dad around. Isaac grabbed the ends of his vest. "I'm sorry if I've overstepped, Miss Cavanaugh. I'm just worried."

I rolled my shoulders back. "It's okay, Isaac. I appreciate your concern." Beck appeared behind Isaac.

"It's for the best," Beck said, still bossy.

I lifted my chin. "I agree. It's like Isaac read my mind." I tried to slam the door, but Beck stuck his foot in the way.

"Allow me to do your hair, Miss Cavanaugh." He winked; his face filled with mischief.

"You're acting weird."

He chuckled as he walked into the closet. "Have a seat, Miss Cavanaugh."

I did as he asked, wondering absently where Fizban had gone.

Beck picked up the brush and started on my hair.

"My weirdness is in direct correlation to your weirdness. So, it's your fault, you know."

My cheeks burned red. How did I respond to that?

Beck bent down so that I could see his handsome face in the mirror next to mine. "I'm sorry, Miss Cavanaugh." He nudged my cheek with his.

I thought about how I would've reacted to such familiarity a few days ago. I would've had him arrested. At least fired.

But he'd saved my life. He'd stayed up the entire night making sure I was okay. He -

"I already told you to call me Beatrice," I said, pretending to study my hands. They trembled slightly.

"Yes, Beatrice." He held my gaze.

A burst of pain seared my heart. It had become almost bearable. Sometimes I forgot it was there. But at that moment, the way he

looked at me, it came back with fervor. It was so strong it nearly knocked the wind out of me.

I couldn't put my finger on what the feeling was though.

Beck leaned his cheek against mine. "What is it?"

Inside the fireworks I'd felt before suddenly turned into falling rose petals. "I - I don't know," I answered honestly.

He stood up and continued working the knots out of my hair.

I tilted the mirror so that I could see his face. "Beck?" My whole body started to shake, and I realized I was scared. But I needed to tell him. He had to know what happened last night.

"What is it, Beatrice?" he asked, his eyes filled with warmth.

"What I'm about to tell you -" I railed off a moment. "Just know, if you need to freak out, it's okay. Feel free to freak out."

Beck lifted one brow in question, but his features were kind. "If the urge arises, I'll be sure to freak out."

"But don't leave," I said, worrying my hands.

"Beatrice Cavanaugh, you have my word that I will not leave." His gaze became serious. His mouth set.

I wanted to believe him. I hoped he was telling the truth. "Last night. I - had what I thought was a dream, but it wasn't."

"Go on," he said.

I told him what happened.

About the black cat and the blond wolf and about seeing myself in the pool.

When I finished, I said, "I believe a Vaktare is a cat-type thing." I couldn't hold his gaze any longer. "And I'm a Vaktare so that makes me one of those - creatures." At some point during the story, he'd paused in brushing my hair. I couldn't read the expression on his face. "Are you freaking out internally?"

He began brushing again, his touch tender. "It's quite a story, Beatrice."

“You saw the way I was tousled in the chair?”

He nodded.

“And I was naked,” I whispered.

He smiled at that.

“So, you’re like a werewolf, except a cat?” he asked, his jaw flexing.

Beck divided my hair into three thick strands and began braiding it.

“Pretty much,” I said, thinking it over. I’d seen at least one movie with a werewolf in it. In my changed form I was hairy and had large teeth. I liked to hunt. But not people. I shuddered at the thought.

“I’ve been craving red meat. And I’ve had a need to sleep under the moon.” I shrugged. “You’ve seen the changes I’ve been going through. Fizban told me I shifted, too.”

“Wait,” he wrapped the end of my hair in a tie. “Fizban? When did you talk to her?”

“While I was in the shower.”

“She was here?” Beck turned me around and started to work on my face.

“Yes.”

“So now what?” He brushed some mascara on my lashes.

“Now I need to call the number in that box and see where it leads.”

Beck finished my makeup and I stood up.

Together we walked over to the box. I opened it, since it would only respond to my touch, and took out the paper. Beck handed me my phone.

I dialed the number.

”Hello," a voice on the other end of the line answered.

“Yes, hello. My name is Beatrice Cavanaugh. I need to speak with Adam Henry.” I glanced at Beck, curious about what he thought of the

whole situation.

“Well, Ms. Cavanaugh today is your lucky day. I am Adam Henry.”

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. If he didn’t have the answers I needed, I’d be lost. “Have you heard of the Vaktare?” I figured I might as well get right to the point.

The other end was silent for several long seconds. Beck mouthed, “What’s going on?”

Shrugging, I said, “Mr. Henry? Are you still there?”

“How soon can you be in Boston?”

I shook my head, confused. “I don’t know. Soon, I guess.” My father owned a private jet.

“Excellent. Do not allow your flight to land after midnight.” He paused a moment. “The sooner you get here the better.”

I didn’t know this man. He could be a total creep.

“It’s okay, your father and mother know me," Adam said, as though hearing my worry. "Their names are Fisher and Lenora, correct?”

“Yes, but anyone could know that,” I hedged.

The other line was silent again. I nearly hung up.

“Recently you began experiencing emotion -” He trailed off when I gasped.

“How did you know that?”

“Please, Beatrice, come as soon as you can. We have a lot to discuss. Call me when you land.” Adam hung up.

“What did he say?” Beck seemed nervous.

“He told me to fly to Boston.”

“Fly?” His face seemed to turn several shades of green.

“Are you afraid of flying?”

He coughed. “No, not at all.”

I went to my bedroom door. “Liar,” I said with a smirk.

Beck ran a hand through his hair. “Just a tiny bit.”

“Isaac,” I shouted for my butler.

He came up the stairs. “Yes, Miss Cavanaugh?”

“I need you to have the plane readied.”

“Oh?” he asked when he reached the landing. “Where are we flying?”

“I am flying to Boston, Massachusetts. Please schedule me a car and driver, book me suite, and have my bags packed.”

“When will you be leaving?” It was obvious he didn’t like that I was leaving him here.

I glanced at the clock next to my bed. It was ten in the morning. “How soon can the plane be ready?”

Isaac turned to head back down the stairs. “I’ll make the calls and let you know.”

“Thank you, Isaac.”

His features softened. “Of course.”

“Oh, and Isaac?”

He paused.

“Yes, miss?”

“Please make sure that I land well before midnight.” I had a feeling Mr. Henry made that recommendation because of what was happening to me. What I'd become or whatever. A Vaktare? A werecat. I’d shifted after midnight last night. Maybe he did know something about me. The prospect scared the hell out of me.

“Of course.”

OceanofPDF.com

A KISS FULL OF FEELINGS

"I'M GOING WITH YOU," Beck said for probably the tenth time.

The truth was I wanted him to go. I didn't want to do this alone, but it was so obvious he was terrified of flying and I didn't want to do that to him.

"It's fine, Beck. I'll be okay without you. There's no need for you to fly." Strangely, I meant it. All of these feelings were freaking me out.

Beck's face went pale when I said, fly.

I was in my closet trying to decide what to pack. I'd already changed out of my jeans and into a Valentino casual suit. The jacket had three-quarter sleeves with black polka dots and black piping. The skirt went to mid-thigh. I paired the outfit with simple black Jimmy Choo pumps.

I had no idea what to take or how much, but finally settled on as little as possible. If I stayed longer, or needed more clothes, I'd buy them.

Beck took the floral dress from my hand and walked it into the bedroom, laying it carefully on my bed. "Really," he said hoarsely. "It isn't a problem."

But I could hear his lie.

"Stay here. See your mom. I'll be back before you know it."

Beck growled, frustrated. "I'm supposed to take care of you. That's my job, dammit." He caught my gaze and held it. "Who will do your hair?"

I laughed out loud. "I'll find someone."

"Miss Cavanaugh?" Isaac asked as he knocked.

"Come in."

He opened the door all the way and rolled in a suitcase. "The plane

will be ready in two hours. There will be a car waiting on the tarmac when you land in Salem, and I've reserved a suite for you at the Boston Plaza. Would you like me to drive you to the airport?"

"No, I'll drive her," Beck said, a strong edge to his voice.

Isaac glanced at me for confirmation.

I nodded.

Beck had given up. He wouldn't be going with me. Part of me was sad about that.

"Very well. Mrs. Dotts is on her way up to assist with the packing."

"Thank you," I said with a big sigh of relief. Just because I wanted to do more didn't mean I could. Packing was out of my league.

THE RIDE to the Salt Lake International Airport was mostly silent.

Beck drove the Lykan, his eyes focused on the road.

I tried to start a conversation with him a couple different times, but it never went anywhere. Finally, I gave up and focused on the view.

It was early summer, so wildflowers bloomed all along I-15. In the distance were the mountains. Seeing them reminded me of what I'd experienced last night.

Hunting and then seeing a werecat or Vaktare and then a werewolf. I found it odd that the Vaktare wanted to kill me while the wolf protected. It seemed like it should've been the other way around.

My phone vibrated.

It was a text from Will.

A wave of guilt washed through my body. He'd been the first to find me, but I hadn't even thanked him. And I'd thrown his present into the pool. I'd been terrible to him since the day we met.

His text read: Can I see you?

I quickly texted back: Can't. On my way to the airport.

Where to? he asked right away.

I debated whether to tell him.

“Don’t tell anyone where you’re going. Not until you’re sure who you can trust.” Beck watched me from the corner of his eye.

“How can you read my texts and drive?” I glanced away, irritated.

He tapped his eyelid with his finger. “Good eyesight.”

“Huh.” I turned the phone away from Beck’s gaze and texted back: It’s a secret. I sent the words, then decided I needed to say something more to him. I didn't want to text but it was better than nothing at all, especially since I didn’t know when I’d see him again.

Will, I began, typing his name and then pausing, debating how to put into words what I wanted to say. Finally, I went on: I wanted to apologize for the other day. I shouldn’t have thrown your gift in the pool. It was very thoughtful. Thank you, and I’m sorry. Really, really sorry.

I sent the text and waited for a response.

Finally, one came: Who is this and what have you done with my Bea?

I laughed. Then texted: She’s here. Just a little changed.

Now I really want to see you, Will texted back.

I’ll text you when I return to Salt Lake.

We arrived at the airport.

I directed Beck toward the private airstrip.

Our plane was silver and had a red rose blooming on either side. The name Cavanaugh was painted in large black letters over the top.

“Your family doesn’t do anything small, do they?” He parked and glanced over.

“Nope. Some of my dad’s business associates say his slogan should be: Go Cavanaugh or go home.” I smiled.

Beck got out of the car. I met him at the trunk where he pulled out

my bags and handed them to a waiting agent.

“Take-off is in twenty minutes,” the guy said.

“Alright, I’ll be there in a moment.”

“Yes, Miss Cavanaugh.” He took the suitcases and went up the stairs. I watched him, nervous about turning back to Beck.

Facing him.

Saying good-bye.

I didn’t want to do that.

Part of me wanted to demand he come.

I’d promised myself when I first met him that I would make him suffer. That hadn't happened and I was glad, too.

Beck broke the awkward silence. “If you need me, call. Or text. Or send me a text anyway, just so I know you’re all right.”

I smiled, fighting back the tears. “Okay,” I whispered.

He tugged on my chin, forcing me to see him. “I’m going to do something so crazy, like freak-out crazy. So, if you need to freak out, it’s fine.”

“What?” I asked, searching his eyes, enjoying him using my words from earlier back at me.

“This.” Beck leaned down and kissed me right smack on the lips.

A surge of emotion rushed through my heart and into my throat.

Fireworks exploded over and over in my stomach.

My pulse raced.

His lips were firm but tender.

I sensed he wanted to give me only a quick kiss, but I wasn’t ready to let him go. I dropped my purse and flung my arms around his neck.

He responded by pushing my mouth open, taking our kiss deeper.

He ran his tongue over my teeth.

I met him with mine.

We kissed and kissed and kissed and kissed.

His hands grabbed my waist and pulled me against him. Then they roamed up my back to my shoulders and into my hair. I felt him remove the tie. Tenderly he undid the braid with his fingers.

In that moment or in those minutes, everything but Beck and I disappeared.

There was only us.

We were no longer on an airport runway, but in a forest, my back pressed against a tree. Wildflowers grew all around us, perfuming the air as birds sang us their love song.

All I could do was cling to him. My body was alive with so many amazing feelings and emotions that I thought I would die from the glorious pain.

The agent cleared his throat.

We reluctantly let each other go.

Beck's eyes held mine though and for a moment I felt like he was still kissing me. He touched my bottom lip with his thumb, caressing it.

I was shaking all over with needs and desires and wants I'd never had before.

"The pilot is ready to take off, Miss Cavanaugh."

"Right. I'm coming," I said, keeping my focus on Beck. "Why did you do that?" I whispered, searching Beck's beautiful eyes for answers.

For some reason I had to know. I didn't mind. In fact, I loved it so much I wanted to do it again.

A mischievous twinkle lit his eyes. "I'll tell you when you get back." He bent over and picked up my purse and phone and then took me by the arm and led me over to the stairs.

I was so glad he did. My body had forgotten how to move and needed his encouragement.

"Hold on to the rail," he said, as he handed me my stuff.

I did, climbing the steps carefully. When I reached the top, I turned back.

He was still at the bottom. “Go on. I’ll see you soon.”

I nodded. I wanted to say good-bye, but the words wouldn’t come, so I raised my hand and waved.

“Miss Cavanaugh. We need to get you buckled in. Genevieve has prepared you a steak per Isaac’s instructions and once we’re in the air she’ll bring it to you.”

I allowed the attendant to lead me inside and to my seat.

After buckling up, I peered out the window.

Beck was by the driver’s side door of the Lykan.

He waved once and then got inside and drove away.

I watched until I couldn’t see the car anymore.

Genevieve came over. “We are about to take off. Can I get you a drink?”

“No. Thank you.”

She nodded and left the main cabin, I guessed to buckle herself in.

The airplane lurched forward, and we sped down the runway.

When the plane lifted off, I had the oddest sensation that my life would never be the same again.

OceanofPDF.com

IN TOTAL DARKNESS

I CALLED Mr. Henry as soon as I landed.

He gave me an address for Salem, Massachusetts, which I shared with the driver. Then I texted Beck just to let him know I arrived.

It was a little after ten in the evening. I stared out the window at the water and the lights. Salt Lake was a booming city. It had everything, but it wasn't until I drove in a city like Boston that I realized the city of Salt Lake was still pretty small.

The partition between the driver and me was down and he asked, "Are you here for business or pleasure?"

My mind thought one thing: business. But my mouth said the other, "Pleasure."

The driver winked. "If you want the inside scoop on where all the fun places are, just let me know."

I pressed my back into the seat. "My itinerary is already capped out, but thanks for the offer."

The driver chuckled. He was a big guy with burly arms and beefy hands. His hair was black, greasy, and slicked back. "Itinerary and pleasure can't mix." He laughed again.

"They do in my world." My words came with icy finality. I was done talking.

It took nearly forty-five minutes to get from the airport to the address Mr. Henry had given me. I realized it was a residence not unlike mine as a large mansion illuminated by dozens of lights came into view.

"Nice place," the driver said when he stopped.

"I agree." He came around and opened the door. I climbed out. "I'll need you to wait here. I shouldn't be too long."

“Yes, Miss Cavanaugh.”

I climbed the steps, my heart thundering in my chest.

Adam Henry had information about the Vaktare.

He had answers.

The prospect of finding out more was both terrifying and exhilarating.

I knocked on the door.

A guy around my age, maybe a little younger answered. “You must be Beatrice?”

“Yes, may I speak with Mr. Henry?”

“Sure, he’s waiting for you in his study.” The guy was tall, had lean muscle and that just-mussed hairstyle all the guys were going for.

“I’m Troy, by the way,” he added.

I glanced up at his pretty eyes. “Nice to meet you, Troy.”

“So, you must be in some kind of trouble. I know Pops has been flitting around the house like a scatterbrained - ”

“I don’t flit.”

Troy jumped and whipped around.

I leaned around Troy so I could see who spoke.

The man standing in front of me was older. He smiled, and the skin around his eyes wrinkled. His hair was graying. Yet, he was handsome. Kind eyes. He wore khaki pants, a button-up shirt and a sweater. Across his forehead was a set of silver reading glasses. And in his hand was an ancient book.

“Go on, Troy. I need to have a conversation with Miss Beatrice.” The man winked when he said my name and I had to smile. He was personable, friendly, and I immediately liked him.

“Got it." Troy jogged past Adam Henry and slapped him on the back. “See ya, Pops.”

Mr. Henry chuckled. “My whole life has been filled with boys. It’s

nice to see a female in the house again."

I nodded. "You are Adam Henry?" I asked, just to verify.

"Yes, but everyone calls me Professor Pops."

That was an odd name. "Ad - Mr. - " Professor Pops totally fit. "Professor Pops, you know what a Va - "

"Just one moment," he said interrupting. "Why don't you follow me, and we can talk in private." He started away.

"Sure." I complied and followed him through the kitchen, down a hall, to a set of stairs.

We went down until we reached the basement.

He opened a door to what appeared to be a storage room. In one corner was a furnace. Professor Pops walked up to it, pressed a button and the wall behind it swung open to reveal another set of stairs.

"We're almost there," he said when I hesitated.

I went down after him, nervous about where we were going and just how deep into the earth we were.

The air smelled like dirt and wet cement. The wall closed behind us but before we were in total darkness, lights along the walls flicked on.

When we finally made it to the bottom, there was another door.

Professor Pops took a key that hung around his neck and used it to open the door.

"It's peculiar," he said as he pushed the door opened. "I haven't been down here in years. But in the past several days I've needed to come down here twice." He gave a short laugh and flipped on a light.

Never in a million years did I expect to see what I was seeing. The door had clicked shut behind me. I had a feeling it locked automatically. But I wanted to test the theory. Because the room I'd just entered couldn't be real.

I pressed myself against the door, trying to turn the knob.

"Beatrice, it's okay. This is a museum of sorts. I once told someone

it was like a Museum for the Supernatural." Professor Pops walked over and patted my arm. "Nothing in here is alive, except you and me. And every creature in here gave me permission."

I swallowed and nodded my head. I wasn't convinced though.

Was he telling me the creatures agreed to allow themselves to be slaughtered so that he could stuff them and put them down here? And for what purpose?

There were creatures big and small inside glass boxes.

Some were from fairy tales, like a fairy, a troll, and a dragon.

Others were from nightmares or scary movies.

"What is he?" I asked, walking over. It was an extremely striking man with crimson eyes.

"That, my dear, is a Hunter."

I gasped, glancing back at Professor Pops. "Is he like me?"

Professor Pops came to stand next to me. "He is nothing like you. He is a blood drinker whose sole purpose was to mark children so that the Vampire Queen might claim them."

"Vampires really are real?" I held a hand to my neck.

I knew what I heard on the news and seen online, but until I started to change, I'd always believed the reports were fake.

Just another way for the government to invade people's privacy.

It was stupid.

And I realized that even the chayot - those angelic beings whose job it was to protect humans weren't just a cosplay, but real.

"Yes, they are." Professor Pops clamped his hands behind his back.

I wanted to ask him more, but the sight of a werewolf distracted me.

He stood on two legs and was covered in black fur. He didn't have on any clothes. His teeth were yellowed and sharp. Around his neck was a pendant of some sort. His eyes were bright green.

“A werewolf,” I breathed, walking over to stand in front of him.

“That’s right.”

“Locanis,” I whispered, pressing my fingers on the glass.

“So, you’ve heard the words,” Professor Pops said coming to stand beside me.

“What?” I tapped the glass as I studied the creature.

OceanofPDF.com

A WERECAT

PROFESSOR POPS BENT over and pressed a button. A latch clicked and a drawer popped open. There was a book inside.

He withdrew the book and placed it on a wooden podium. “Come here,” he said kindly.

When I was beside him, Professor Pops said, “Chapter One.”

The pages flipped on their own until they landed on a page with Chapter One across the top.

“How did you do that?”

Professor Pops smiled. “This podium possesses a special magic. Just give it a page number or chapter heading or even a specific word and it’ll flip to the correct page.”

“Oh.” I stood beside him so that I could see what the words on the page said.

His already serious features became grave. “Beatrice, many years ago I met you and your parents for the first time. They had heard about me and thought I could help.”

Mr. Henry took his glasses off his forehead and tucked them into the breast pocket of his sweater. “Before that fateful day I’d never heard of the terms Vaktare or Locanis and I’ve been alive a very, very long time.”

Professor Pops paused and glanced around the room. “These creatures were all created by the seven magics.”

Magics? I heard the word, but it was like he was speaking gibberish.

"What are you saying?" My heart ratcheted in my throat.

“Your parents told me about the Vaktare and Locanis and that they came from another realm."

I was still confused but Professor Pops went on without missing a beat.

"Of course, I knew that the seven magics had to exist outside our realm. The Universes are too vast, too huge for me to be that small minded and I've been outside of this realm. Hell, I've even traveled back in time. But I figured after so many years, I would've at least heard of all creatures who possessed the seven magics." He shook his head, and chuckled. "Boy was I wrong."

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to hold it together.

He'd met my parents. He'd met me. And he knew the word: Vaktare. Not only that but the Vaktare weren't from this realm. I mean, what the hell? Other realms? I was thoroughly freaked.

Instead of losing my shit, I asked: "Do you know where my parents are? Can you tell me what the words mean exactly?" I fought down the urge to grab the edges of his sweater and shake all I needed to know from him.

"I did see your parents three days ago. They asked to add something to these histories, but they didn't stay long, and they didn't tell me where they were going." He rubbed a hand over his face. "They didn't tell me they were without you. But since your phone call, I did some digging and made a few phone calls of my own. My sources haven't been able to get back to me yet, but so far no one knows anything about your parents' whereabouts."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Beatrice."

I gulped, fighting back more damn tears.

Professor Pops continued, "As for information on Vaktare, I can give you most of it." He moved and indicated I should stand in front of the book.

Why not all of it? He'd seen my parents three days ago? What didn't Professor Pops know and where would I find the answers?

Professor Pops waved a hand over the book. The movement sent particles of dust into the air, leaving a smell of old paper hanging

around us.

“Within these pages is most of the history of the Vaktare. It isn’t as thick as histories from other magical realms or creatures, but that’s because the species are relatively new to me.”

My fingers brushed the pages. “Have you ever seen a Vaktare? A werecat?” I said the words tentatively. They were new to me, and the words felt weird on my tongue.

He glanced at his watch. “I have not, at least not in their original forms.”

For some reason that made me sad.

“It’s eleven-thirty. Are you hungry? I can prepare you a steak,” Professor Pops said.

I’d eaten on the plane. “I think I’m too nervous for food.”

Professor Pops nodded. “Very well. Go ahead and read what's in the book. You’ll be safe down here. The only person with a key is me.” He patted at the key around his neck. “If you get tired, there’s a cot in the other room.” He pointed to a smaller room without a door. “There’s a bathroom as well.”

Did he think I would be down here all night?

No way.

Just thinking about being so far underground, away from the moon and the sky made my heart race. “Professor Pops, I have my driver waiting outside. I think I’ll have him take me to the hotel where I can get some rest and then come back in the morning.”

Professor Pops came forward, his eyes softening. “I know you have a lot of questions and that everything is new to you. This must all be so odd and not at all what you’re used to, but I think if you stay, you'll get at least some of your questions answered.”

"You expect me to stay down here and sleep on a cot?" My upbringing came rushing back. I was a Cavanaugh. American royalty. I did what I wanted when I wanted. And I sure as hell didn't sleep on a

cot.

“That’s right,” he said, tilting his head to one side. "I think staying down here would be for the best," he added. Then paused. “Have you changed forms yet?”

His question frightened me, and I couldn’t meet his gaze.

The sight on my reflection in the pool filled my mind.

I turned my focus to the words in the book.

The first two sentences read: Hiraken is the tenth realm of Earth. The Vaktare came first, followed by the Locanis.

I swallowed down my agitation.

So, the Locanis were a species and not the name of the wolf who’d protected me the other night.

One question answered.

I decided to come clean. “Yes, I've changed already,” I finally said.

“If you were to change in the hotel tonight, and needed to hunt, what do you think you would go after?” He pointed to a line in the book. “Read it.”

“The Vaktare and Locanis hunt and eat all flesh.”

“All flesh,” he reiterated after a moment.

I let that sink in. “Are you saying you think I would hunt people?” I was disgusted. How could he think that? I was a person too.

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “I don’t know for sure, but are you certain you want to take the chance?”

I glared at Professor Pops. So many wicked ideas ran through my head, but I forced them down. With my emotions had come a realization. I didn't want to be a bitch anymore. “No, I don’t.” I leaned on the stand. “I’ll remain down here, but don’t leave me for too long.” I met his eyes. "Please."

“Of course not. I’ll be down first thing in the morning.” He went to the door. “And if there’s an emergency, text me. You have my number.”

I'd forgotten I could text him or call him.

“I'll have the driver leave your suitcases here and then we can reassess the situation in the morning, after you have some of your answers.”

“I'd appreciate that," I said, feeling my shoulders sag.

"I'll see you in the morning," he said at the door.

"Professor Pops?" I couldn't help staring at the werewolf behind the glass.

He turned. "Did you need something else?"

“The werewolf over there. Is he a Locanis?”

Professor Pops seemed perplexed. “I don't think so. This werewolf came from a small town in Arizona. It was believed he was the last of his kind.” He shrugged. “Anything is possible.” His eyes twinkled as he came back and pointed at the pages of the book. “This is the history of your people but it's more than that. It's the history of your realm. Read it with care.”

“Thank you, Professor Pops.”

"Or course." He used the key to unlock the door.

So, it locks from the outside and the inside, I thought, making a mental note.

Before he closed the door, he turned to me and said, “I can count on you to keep this room secret, right? My colleagues and I are in the process of opening everything up to the public, but we aren't quite ready yet.”

“Sure. I won't say anything.” Who would I tell?

Professor Pops smiled. “Excellent. It's been lovely to see you again, Beatrice.”

When Professor Pops was gone, I checked my phone. I still had bars. Beck hadn't texted from the last time, but I texted him again anyway: Hope you're good. I'm getting answers. Talk more in the morning.

Thinking about Beck sent my mind immediately to our kiss.

What a kiss it was.

I'd made out with several guys over the years, but Beck's kiss was the first that came with real feelings, so I had nothing to gauge against it.

I thought about Will and the awkward way he'd tried to feel me up when we kissed. I had a feeling Beck's kiss was better than any other guy ever.

OceanofPDF.com

RED WARRIOR

TAKING A DEEP BREATH, I forced away thoughts of Beck and began to read.

Quickly, I came to understand that the history of the Vaktare and Locanis went back thousands of years.

The book included many details including several legends.

I read the first one.

It was about a Vaktare with red fur who would be born with all abilities and talents. She would be called Unduyee, which meant Red Warrior.

The Unduyee would restore peace between the Vaktare and the Locanis.

I glided over the other legends, including one about a demon spawn that was half Vaktare and half Locanis.

It seemed many Vaktare and Locanis indulged in sexual relations over the centuries, but they could never conceive.

I didn't delve into the details.

It was getting late, and I needed to read the material that actually happened in Hiraken.

After reading about several wars, I came to a part that mentioned my father's name.

It made me wonder about the author of this history.

"Show me the title page," I said, feeling weird talking to the podium.

Pages immediately flipped back to the beginning.

When they stopped, I leaned over, reading:

A History of Hiraken and its People

The Vaktare and Locanis

By:

Fisher and Lenora Cavanaugh

“My parents wrote this.” For some reason knowing they were responsible for the words on the pages made the histories all the more interesting.

Seeing their names also saddened me.

I needed to find them.

It bothered me that they’d left just as my life was turned upside down.

Though they hadn’t shown me emotion, they’d done lots to prove they cared for me.

I couldn’t believe they’d abandoned me when I needed them most.

Around two in the morning, when I was almost at the end, I found a very interesting piece of information about my parents:

Fisher Cavanaugh was next in line to rule Hiraken. When war broke out between the Vaktare and the Locanis, all of the Cavanaughs were believed killed except Fisher, his mate Lenora and their child, Beatrice.

“That’s me,” I whispered, feeling tingles run the length of my body.

Seeing my name in the histories of my people made me more anxious to know everything.

Near the beginning of the book, they mentioned that all Vaktare were born with a magical skill.

I asked the book to go back so I could read that part again.

There were hundreds of abilities.

Sometimes an ability was passed down from one generation to the next, but often, the gift was random.

“Do I have an ability?” I pondered aloud. I didn’t think so.

I went back to the part about my mom and dad:

After going to their medicine woman, Fisher and Lenora raced up the Wananoag mountains behind their castle, toward the place where they were told they could jump realms. The medicine woman gave Fisher a pendant and instructions on how to use it to open the portal. They almost didn't make it.

Several of the strongest and vilest of the Locanis chased them. The worst Locanis went by the name Beck.

"Not my Beck," I whispered, checking my phone to see if by chance he texted. He hadn't.

I read on:

Lenora used her gift with the elements to create a storm while Fisher spoke the incantation to open the portal. After Beck and Fisher fought, Fisher was able to jump realms at the last second. Beatrice was born soon after in the human realm.

After reaching the new realm, Fisher discovered Beck had stolen the pendant. "If Beck can find a way to use it, the remaining Cavanaughs may be in danger," my father was quoted as saying.

"This is incredible."

There were words scrawled in pencil down the right side of the book.

It read:

Other Vaktare survived. From the information I collected, they have formed a truce with the Locanis. I killed a Vaktare last night in the mountain behind our house after questioning him. He wouldn't tell me what they wanted or why they were trying to kill us. But they've found us. And worse than that, I believe the Locanis who goes by the name Beck has discovered a way to use the pendant and is closing in.

"Beck," I whispered, staring at the date.

Written above the words in the margin was a date three days ago.

I read the words again, a feeling of dread climbing into my

stomach.

Beck wasn't a common name.

But my Beck couldn't be the Locanis my dad spoke about. If he were, he'd had plenty of opportunities to kill me since we met.

He could've just let me fall at the shopping center.

Or smothered me in my sleep.

I remembered the way he brushed my hair, the sparkle in his eyes when we spoke about the weirdness in my life.

That would explain why he took your story so well though, I thought.

"No." I went over to the cot and lay down. Memories of his kiss filled my mind and warmed my body. "That wasn't the kiss of a man sent to commit murder."

I punched the pillow, determined to convince my brain of what my heart already knew. Beck cared about me. He wouldn't do anything to harm me. He wouldn't.

At some point, I went and lay on the cot, mulling over all I'd learned.

It was overwhelming and I'd closed my eyes.

THERE WAS A CLICK, and I heard the door to the Museum for the Supernatural open.

"What happened in here?" someone asked.

I was no longer on the cot but the floor. A quick glance at my body revealed I was naked.

"Don't come in," I shouted, grabbing a blanket off the cot.

"Beatrice?" It was Professor Pops. "Are you alright?" I heard the worry in his words.

"Um, yes." I wrapped the blanket around myself and glanced around the room.

It'd been dark and I'd been preoccupied when I climbed onto the cot last night.

Now it was easy to see it had been a weapons room. Every sword, ever kind of weapon with a sharp point had been embedded in the walls or the ceiling.

My pillow had been slashed to bits and the cot was bent at a funny angle.

I glanced down at my hands.

Had I done that?

"Jesse, get a broom, a dustpan, and a very large trashcan. Have Troy help, if you need it. Hurry"

"Right away, Pops."

The door clicked.

"Professor Pops?" I moved so that I could see into the Museum.

The room was wrecked.

Broken glass was everywhere.

The dragon's head had been ripped off and the body lay on its side.

The troll was missing his limbs.

The Hunter had been torn in half.

The werewolf had fared worst of all. His eyes had been removed, his head ripped off, and his body was in pieces. Fur was strewn everywhere.

Professor Pops bent over and carefully lifted something, cupping it in his hands.

"I'm so sorry," I said, guessing the destruction was caused by me.

Tears sprang to my eyes. Devastation caused my stomach to roll. "I don't remember doing this, but it had to be me." I tilted a unicorn upright and picked up its horn, trying to put it back in the place where I'd ripped it off. It wouldn't stay so I set it on a shelf still upright.

Professor Pops took a white creature that reminded me of a fairy and placed it carefully on a table. Thankfully, it still had its head and all of its limbs. The way Professor Pops cradled the creature, it obviously meant a great deal to him.

“Whatever it costs, I’ll gladly pay to replace everything.”

OceanofPDF.com

PROFESSOR POPS SMILED SADLY. “Beatrice, no amount of money can replenish this.”

I hung my head, a sob ripping through my throat. I’d never felt so horrible in all my life. “I know,” I whispered.

He walked over and patted my shoulder. “If anyone is to blame for this mess, it’s me. I left you down here.”

I glanced up at him. “Perhaps, but I promise to do whatever it takes to make sure your museum is filled with supernatural creatures once again.”

“Oh, my dear, how do you intend to do that? I certainly don’t want the creatures murdered. Do you?” He picked up the dragon body in one hand and its head in the other. It was then that I realized Professor Pops wasn’t just a human. I should have known. He didn’t really even have a scent, other than peppermint.

“No. No way.” I hadn’t really thought about how I would accomplish the task. “So, what kind of supernatural are you?”

His eyes flashed red. “A Hunter,” he said, cautiously.

I took a step back. “You’re a vampire?”

“More or less.” His eyes went back to their normal color.

“Wow. That’s -”

“Creepy? Scary?” Professor Pops chuckled. “Don’t worry, I won’t bite.”

I smiled. “I think I should just go.” I picked up a gremlin and stood it on its pedestal.

“I don’t think that’s wise.” Professor Pops stacked a bunch of papers that had been the history of the unicorns together. “You need to find a way to control the beast that lives inside you. Otherwise, this

type of thing will happen every night." His hands flourished around the room. "I've been doing some research and - "

The door opened. A guy with dark skin, short, curly black hair, and the grayest eyes I've seen came in.

I assumed he must be Jesse.

He was followed by Troy.

They carried a large trashcan between them. Jesse had a broom and Troy held the dustpan. They both eyed me warily, and I remembered I was only wrapped in a blanket.

Professor Pops took in my appearance as though noticing it for the first time.

Determination reflected on his features. "It's going to go like this," he began. "Troy?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Beatrice gets your room. You need to change the sheets and clean up. I don't want dirty clothes cluttering up the place."

Troy let out a loud sigh. "Aw, man."

"Then you're going to clean your bathroom. Scrub it. And then clean it again," Professor Pops continued, eyeing him seriously.

"Ugh," Troy threw his hands in the air.

"On your way up, I need you to take Beatrice's suitcases to your room. Make some space in your closet. When you're finished, let me know."

"What, right now?" He threw the dustpan on the floor.

Professor Pops seemed to glide over to Troy. It was so fast I didn't see his feet move. "Yes, right now. Do you have a problem with that?" His voice was low and menacing. It sent shivers up my spine.

"No, sir." Troy strode to the door.

Professor Pops followed and unlocked it with his key. Professor Pops whispered something to Troy.

Troy nodded. “I’m sorry, Beatrice,” he said, his features schooled into an apologetic gaze.

“It’s fine.” I waved a hand at him. “Thank you for lending me your room.”

When Troy left, Jesse whistled. “That was tense.” He went over to the corner near the dragon and started sweeping the glass into a pile.

I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to help but the blanket wasn’t all that secure. “I need some clothes,” I said.

“Oh, Beatrice, my apologies.” Professor Pops walked into the room where the cot was and went over to the table that had held all the weapons.

There were drawers underneath.

He pulled one open and pulled out a black pair of pants and a black shirt. “These are workout clothes, but they should cover the essentials.”

I moved closer so I could speak without Jesse hearing. “I need underthings as well.” I lowered my head. “I’m so sorry.”

Professor Pops cleared his throat and opened another drawer. Inside were underthings. “See if there’s something in there that fits.”

“Thank you,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Professor Pops walked to the opening of the weapons room and then stopped. “When you shift, your clothes disappear?”

I glanced around the room. I hadn’t thought about it before. “Yes,” I said. “The clothes I wore last night are gone.” That stunk. That suit and those shoes had been some of my favorites.

“Interesting. And then when you shift back, you’re in only your birthday suit?”

My face flushed. “Apparently.”

“Interesting, indeed.” He walked from the room, and I heard him and Jesse whispering and the swishing of broken glass.

Moving to the open drawer I found a sports bra and boxers that

might fit.

Then I went into the bathroom where I did a quick wash with a wet cloth.

I slid on the underclothes and the workout attire.

The outfit was like nothing I'd ever worn before. It was loose and comfortable. I tried to comb my hair with my fingers and wiped off some of yesterday's makeup from under my eyes. I still needed shoes though.

Professor Pops was a step ahead of me.

When I came out of the bathroom there was a pair of black socks and plain black shoes in my size outside the door.

I put them on and went into the Museum of the Supernatural room.

Jesse and Professor Pops had the entire floor nearly swept up. The trashcan was filled with glass. They were working on putting a book back together.

Shame scorched my body.

"I am really sorry," I said again, feeling helpless, and wishing I could do more.

"No worries, Beatrice." The Professor gave me a small smile.

I nodded, even though I felt terrible. He was being nice but what I'd done was horrible. "I'm going to clean up the weapon's room."

"Thank you," Professor Pops said.

I went over to a mace and grabbed the handle, trying to pull it from the wall. It wouldn't budge. "Stupid thing," I cursed, placing one foot on the wall to give me extra leverage.

Professor Pops walked in and smiled. "Your strength in this form is like that of a normal human."

I grunted my acknowledgement, determined to get the freaking mace out of the freaking wall and a little irritated that I felt like he was studying me.

“But I bet you could call on your beastly strength even while in human form.” Professor Pops took a pad of paper and a pen from his back pocket. Then pulled his glasses from the pocket of his sweater, put them on, and wrote something down.

“How would I do that? I asked, releasing the mace handle, and rubbing my hands. They were red and starting to really hurt.

“Hmmmm,” he tapped the pen to his cheek. “Do you remember any specific feelings from when you’ve previously shifted?”

I tried to think back. “I believed they were dreams, until a couple of night ago.”

“Which they probably were.” He tucked his pen in his back pocket and flipped his notebook shut. “Okay, grab hold of the handle.”

I did. “Now what?”

OceanofPDF.com

“TAKE a deep breath and feel for the werecat energy.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, held it, searched my insides for some kind of energy. I found nothing, but I didn’t want to tell him that.

Breathing out, I yanked on the mace - and it popped out.

“I did it,” I said, opening my eyes.

Jesse’s face was inches from mine. He wore a naughty smile.

My happiness deflated. “You pulled the mace out for me, didn’t you?”

Professor Pops shook his head, trying to hold back a smile.

Jesse tucked his hands in his pockets and twisted his mouth. “Yeah, I kinda did.”

Without thinking, I leaned over and punched him. He went flying backward, smashing into the trashcan full of glass. Shards rained down on him.

“I didn’t mean to,” I said, covering my mouth.

Both Jesse and Professor Pops started laughing. Jesse stood up and brushed off his pants. He didn’t have a scratch on him.

“Are you supernatural too?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Jesse walked back over.

Professor Pops clapped him on the shoulder. “Jesse is a relatively new member of our family. I adopted him just a few months ago.”

“What are you?” I asked, fascinated to meet someone different, like me.

Jesse glanced away, shoving his hands back into his pockets.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” I turned

away, moving over to the katana jammed into the ceiling. I reached up and yanked. It wouldn't move.

"Tell her, Jesse," Professor Pops urged.

He came over and pulled out the katana. "It's okay. I'm just still trying to get comfortable with who or what I really am."

I smiled at him. "It's totally understandable. Apparently, I look human, but I'm not. I'm a Vaktare, which is some kind of werecat, and I'm from another realm."

He returned my smile with one of his own.

And I realized he was handsome, in a tough guy kind of way. He wore a snug black tank top and loose-fitting jeans that hung below his plaid boxers.

He was maybe five foot seven and bulky.

Not overweight, just completely covered in muscles.

He didn't have a six-pack but a ten pack.

"Well, I'm a gargoyle." He shrugged, walked over to the opposite wall and pulled out another sword.

"Serious," I said, coming to stand beside him. "That's so cool."

"You think?" He rubbed one of his earlobes. "I have super strength and I can turn things, including myself, to stone. That's it. Those are my powers."

"I think that's awesome." I yanked on an arrow. That one came out, so I went to another. "Oh, what about wings? I've seen gargoyles with wings? Can you fly?"

He shook his head and glanced over at Professor Pops. "I don't think so. At least not yet." He bent over and picked up something. "Is this your phone?"

"Oh, I completely forgot about it. Thanks." Somehow it had escaped the carnage unscathed. I quickly checked to see if I had any messages from Beck.

There were messages from Ashley, Eva, and Cassidy.

I guessed Will had talked to them and they wanted to know where I'd gone. But there were none from Beck. The phone's battery was at twenty percent. I'd have to charge it later.

Since I didn't have any pockets, I set it on the table next to a jagged edged knife.

"I'm going to see what's taking Troy so long. I'll be back in a while. Will you two be all right down here?" Professor Pops asked.

I glanced at Jesse. "Sure."

"I'll be back." Professor Pops left, leaving Jesse and me alone.

"So, who do you think would win in a fight? A gargoyle or a vampire?" I asked, still surprised there were things like gargoyles and vampires in the world.

Jesse tapped his fingers against his mouth, thinking.

I started to laugh.

He joined in. "A gargoyle, for sure."

"I think so too."

I climbed on the table to pry out a Chinese star. It was so far into the wall I couldn't really get a good grip. I kept yanking, but it wouldn't come, and my fingers kept sliding off it.

"Try thinking about something that makes you really happy." Jesse was trying to fix the cot.

"Why?" I asked.

"Just get a good grip on the edge of the Chinese star, think of something that really gets your heart racing in a good way and pull."

I turned back to the star, closed my eyes, and thought about Beck.

The desire in his eyes.

The determination in his voice.

His lips had been so soft, yet hungry.

With every touch I knew he wanted my lips on his.

Then I thought about the kiss, the way it made my body come

alive.

After it was over, he'd caressed my bottom lip.

I shivered at the memory.

My fingers grew and extended. There was a pop.

I opened my eyes. The Chinese star was in my hand. "Oh, yeah, I did it," I shouted, doing a dance on the table.

Jesse stood and turned, putting his hands on his hips. He was laughing at me, but I didn't care. "See? It isn't so hard." He turned back to the bed, took the frame in his hands, and bent it back into alignment with a single shove.

"Show-off," I said, but I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. There was no doubt Jesse, and I would be lifelong friends.

Jesse and I spent the better part of the next hour pulling weapons out of the walls and the ceiling. Sometimes thinking happy thoughts worked and other times it didn't. Overall, I was happy with the success I had.

And Jesse was a great guy.

In a short time, I felt like we'd become friends. We'd told each other a lot. I'd told him about life in Utah, and what I'd learned from the book my parents had written. He got to hear about my party and what I'd done to Will. I'd also told him about the curse, or rather the reverse curse.

Then Jesse told me about some of his life growing up. He was a year younger than me and his parents had left him on the side of the road when he was five. He'd been in and out of foster homes for years until Professor Pops found him.

I could tell he had a lot of respect for the man. Listening to the way he spoke of Professor Pops made me like him all the more.

"Why does everyone call him Professor Pops?" I asked, setting the last knife on the table.

Jesse was shoving hooks into place to rehang the katana and some

of the other swords. “He is a Professor of Religion over at Harvard though now he’s mostly retired.”

“Oh, so it’s his actual title.”

“Yep.”

“That’s cool.” I picked up my phone and casually checked for messages. There weren’t any new ones. “Should we go into the museum and see if there’s anything else we can salvage?”

“Sure.” Jesse and I tried to walk through the opening at the same time and we bumped into each other. His skin was rock solid. I wanted to ask him more about himself, but door clicked, and Professor Pops came in followed by Troy.

OceanofPDF.com

WERECAT FORM

"HOW'S IT GOING?" Troy asked. He carried several large black bags - like body bags. Professor Pops followed, carrying more.

"Fine," I said. "Are those body bags?"

Professor Pops nodded. "They are."

A rush of fear immobilized my body.

They are going to kill me, stuff me out, and put me on a pedestal, I thought.

In the next thought, I tried to calm myself, but my body began to shift.

It felt like my blood boiled and moved in fast-forward.

My eyesight changed and I felt my face morph, followed by the rest of my body.

I heard myself roar as I dropped to all fours.

Professor Pops and Jesse dropped the bags in unison.

Troy tripped into Professor Pops, who caught him.

"This is going to be good," Troy said. He seemed excited about my change.

I licked my lips, feeling my razor-sharp teeth.

My whole being focused on the over exuberant boy. His heart raced.

I expected to smell fear, but he had a strange scent, which was very prominent in my Vaktare form.

He was unlike any human I'd smelled.

Not that it mattered. He was human. I didn't eat humans.

I changed my focus from Troy to Professor Pops.

There was a hint of alarm in his scent and his features, but mostly

he seemed curious.

He had his hands up.

They shook slightly.

“It’s okay. You’re fine, Beatrice. No one is going to hurt you.” The voice was Jesse’s.

He had no scent at all.

I saw he’d changed as well.

His shirt had ripped in places. Same with his pants. His dark skin was now stark white and marbled with black veins. His black hair had changed to glaring white and his gray eyes were black as coal.

Jesse touched my arm tenderly.

His fingers were rock hard and cold as ice.

A peculiar sensation crawled along my arm. It radiated from his touch. My ears flicked and my whiskers twitched, as did my tail.

A tail? That was new, and weird.

“Beatrice?” Jesse clamped down on my arm more tightly. The fur all around where he touched turned gray.

I yanked my arm from his grasp, the hair near my neck and along my back stood on end.

Jesse glanced at his fingers. “I - It’s okay. Sorry. I’m so sorry.” Jesse’s eyes went from black to gray and his hair turned from white to black. His skin returned to their normal color as well.

“The bags are for these bodies.” He indicated the supernatural creature all over the floor.

The ones I knocked over, shredded, and decapitated during the night.

He smiled. “Your werecat form is awesome, by the way.” His eyes roamed over my body. “I mean seriously, I thought the werewolf was cool, but he wasn’t even close to you.”

“Really?” I hadn’t tried to talk while in my Vaktare form yet. It

was difficult. The shape of my mouth was different, and it felt odd.

I touched my face and scratched myself.

“Yes.” Jesse came toward me.

I realized I’d backed myself into a corner.

He stuck out his hand. “May I?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want him to pet me. I wasn’t an animal.

Well, actually, yes you are. You’ve got the paws to prove it, I thought.

“Come on, please.” Jese reached out a hand.

I batted it away with my paw.

He laughed. Then sat down in front of me. Was that a show of submission or at least a sign that I had nothing to fear?

Either way, it helped.

Professor Pops and Troy were quiet, but they also approached slowly.

It made me feel weird, like how an animal in a zoo might feel.

Yeah, come check out the werecat.

She’s soft and fluffy and may just purr if you pet her.

I roared and hissed, showing my teeth, feeling the hair on the back of my neck stand.

Professor Pops and Troy froze.

Jesse moved closer. “You can’t hurt me, Beatrice. If you’re angry or scared, take it out on me.” His eyes turned a darker gray.

“Who do you think would win in a fight between a werecat and a gargoyle?” I asked, timidly.

Jesse laughed. “A gargoyle, for sure.”

I chuffed, a noise that sounded like a cat.

Troy seemed to perk up at the prospect of a fight.

“Should we find out? Test your strength?” Jesse asked.

He still sat cross-legged on the floor.

Professor Pops chuckled. “I think we’ll need a bigger room.” He went over to the back wall.

The dragon had covered most of it, but with the head gone and the awkward way the rest of its body was turned, he had at least some access.

He pressed an area on the wall a little above his head and a door popped open.

“What’s in there?” Troy asked, his interest causing him to forget how close he was to me.

I batted at him with one of my paws. His skin turned a strange color for the briefest second - almost gold. Troy glanced at his arm and then me. “Sorry, Bea.” He backed away.

Professor Pops called Jesse and me over. “Let’s go.”

Jesse went first and I followed him, swishing my tail. I decided I liked it. It helped me feel the vibrations of moving objects.

Troy and Professor Pops had already disappeared through the door.

Jesse stopped at the door.

I peered inside and noticed it led to set of stairs.

More stairs, I thought, uncomfortable with the prospect of going further down.

“You want to go down there?” he asked, his voice soft and kind.

I smacked him on the back with my tail. “Might as well.”

There was room enough that Jesse and I walked down the steps side-by-side.

Jesse rested a hand on my back.

My first instinct was to attack, and my body tensed.

But then he ran his fingers through my fur. It felt amazing. I lifted my body into his hand.

“Your fur is really soft. The werewolf fur in Professor Pops’ Museum was wiry and tough. Prickly.”

“Maybe it’s a cat thing? The Locanis may have prickly fur.”

“That’s possible.”

We reached the bottom on the stairs.

There was a door, but it was propped open.

We went in.

The room was vast, like, bigger than a football field.

The ceiling was really high, probably thirty feet.

“How deep underground are we?” I asked, thinking the room must’ve been created with magic.

“I have no idea. I didn’t even know this room existed.” Jesse still stroked my fur.

It felt really, really good. I caught myself almost purring twice.

That was annoying, but I liked the way it felt too much to make him stop.

I needed him to though.

It was hard to focus on anything but his hand.

So, I stepped out of his reach.

“Awww,” Jesse said.

“I won’t have you beat me because I can’t concentrate.”

“Understood.”

The floor was a strange material. It was cool against my paws, like concrete, but it had more give. The walls were covered in paintings of supernatural creatures.

There was a large dragon, several vampires, a troll, a black unicorn, an elf, and other creatures I hadn’t ever seen, including a human-looking girl with black wings.

The ceiling appeared to be made of concrete and was covered in dozens of large fluorescent lights.

OceanofPDF.com

INSTINCT WINS

"THIS IS AMAZING," Jesse said.

"I know, right," Troy agreed. He and Professor Pops were tossing a football back and forth.

"Why didn't you tell us this was here?" Jesse asked, turning in a circle, fascinated by the vastness.

"I have my reasons," Professor Pops said, and chucked the football at Troy.

Troy caught it and tossed it back.

"A long time ago, I used this for training. No one's been down here in years." Professor Pops caught the football and tossed it to Jesse. "I think it's time to open it up again. Don't you?"

"Or at least add a space like this below the Seven Magics Academy."

"What's that?" I sat on my hind legs, curling my tail around my front paws.

"A school where those with supernatural abilities go to learn. It's in Sharra, a realm outside the human one," Troy answered, his eyes shining. "I go there too."

"That's cool." The whole idea of different realms was weirdest of all. I struggled to wrap my brain around the concept.

"I'm going to go there too, once I figure out what's happening with me," Jesse added. He held up his hands, telling Troy to throw him the ball. "This space is really awesome."

I detected a hint of worry in his voice. What was he nervous about?

Troy clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Who's going to make the first move?" His eyes sparkled with excitement as he caught

the football and tucked it under one arm.

If I hadn't known what was going on, I would've assumed Troy was talking about Jesse and me making out.

Jesse snickered, giving me a half-smile, and I knew he was thinking the same thing. "I don't think we should do this. Who knows when you'll change back and I -" He stopped, tugging on his ear.

"You are worried you'll hurt me," I finished for him.

"Yes." He lowered his gaze to the floor.

Professor Pops heard the interchange. "Hang on." He jogged over to one of the walls and pushed. A click sounded and the wall opened.

"Another room?" Jesse asked.

"It's where we kept weapons and where I found that football." Professor Pops slid the wall behind the one next to it and turned on the light.

It wasn't very big. Inside were a few swords, a couple of sticks, and some free weights.

"Darn, nothing in here will work," Professor Pops said.

"I can't hold a weapon anyway. I have paws." I stood on my back legs and stuck out my paws.

"Okay, well how about Rocky turns himself to stone and we see if Beatrice can scratch it," Troy said, frustrated that Jesse and I weren't just going at it.

Jesse shrugged. "I can do that." He obviously wanted to make Troy happy.

Before I could blink, he went from Jesse with black hair and gray eyes to Jesse with white hair and black eyes. "Go ahead, try to scratch me."

I walked over. In my werecat form I was taller than Jesse.

He whistled and gave me a once-over. "You're seriously impressive."

I tried to smile, but my lips felt weird against my giant, sharp

teeth.

“Do it. As hard as you can.” Jesse dropped his arms to his sides.

I took a swipe at his arm. The ends of my sharp claws raked across his abdomen, but it was like striking rock. “Did you feel that?" I said.

He shook his head. “A tickle from a feather. Do it again and this time mean it. Who are you angry at?”

Beck’s face came into view. It seemed he held my happiest memory as well as my angriest.

I swiped at Jesse again, this time putting my legs into it.

Jesse went flying, landing on the ground. He quickly got up, unhurt.

“Nice,” Troy shouted.

Professor Pops remained quiet. Watching in earnest.

“Now, Rocky, go after her,” Troy said.

Jesse came closer. The black lines across his gargoyle face pulsed furiously. His eyes glared, pitch black.

“Rocky, huh?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah.” He tapped his knuckles against his head. Smiling maliciously, he said, “My turn.” Before I realized what was happening, his fist slammed into my head.

I shook back and forth as a strange sound left my throat. His fist against my face hadn’t hurt, but it’d made me momentarily dizzy.

“Again,” Troy shouted.

Jesse punched me in the face with his other hand. This time I moved slightly. But something unexplainable happened within.

All my feelings and needs took a back seat to one thing.

Instinct.

Without thought, I jumped on Jesse, pinning his body to the ground as I went after his throat. I wasn’t prepared for how hard his skin would be and I wasn’t able to grab hold.

He punched me in the stomach and used his feet to send me flying over his head. I flipped in the air and landed on my feet with a thud, my claws scraping into the ground as I slid backward.

Jesse's features were twisted and furious.

"Control your rage," I heard Professor Pops shout.

I didn't think he was talking to me. My emotions simmered in the background, but my instinct had full control.

Jesse's eyes blinked and I knew the professor was talking to him. He got out of his fighting stance and turned, walking to the exit.

"Jesse," I called. But he disappeared up the steps. I took a deep breath, wondering if I should go after him.

Pops and Troy were talking to each other in low tones.

I ignored them, feeling my body, and trying to get used to the Vaktare form.

Within minutes, my instincts simmered and allowed my humanity to return to the forefront.

I was sad. I hadn't meant to make Jesse mad. I didn't want our friendship to end the same day it began. I noticed something else. My body was about to shift.

And then I'd be naked.

"Oh no."

I glanced at Professor Pops and then I ran. Across the field made of strange concrete, through the door, and up, up, up the stairs.

My face already felt human.

I burst through the opening to the Museum for the Supernatural, slamming the door into the dragon body, knocking it over. My body changed as I stepped into the weapon's room.

"This whole naked thing is not cool," I whispered, opening the drawers, and grabbing clothes. I'd have to replenish the workout clothes before I left.

When I was dressed, I sat on the cot.

It groaned and I remembered that I'd broken it.

"Crap." Tears stung my lashes. I knew it was because I was sad about Jesse, but I was also frustrated with Beck.

Why hadn't he texted me?

"I need some freaking food and water."

"Sorry about that, Beatrice. Sometimes I can be insensitive." Professor Pops stood in the opening to the weapons room. "You must be starving."

I nodded, swiftly wiping at the tears, and exiting the weapons room.

Troy reached the top step out of the enormous room and shut the door.

He studied the dragon body.

For the tiniest second Troy's body seemed to change from tanned skin to dragon scales that matched that of the destroyed one in front of him.

I blinked; not sure I'd seen what I thought I saw.

His skin was back to normal.

"Next time, there'll be a feast before the fight so you can keep up your energy," Troy said, patting me on the shoulder.

"Where's Jesse?" I asked.

Professor Pops said he was the only one with the key.

Professor Pops glanced around the room. "Did you check the bathroom?"

I hadn't.

Professor Pops took the key from around his neck and handed it to Troy. "Take Beatrice upstairs and make her some breakfast."

OceanofPDF.com

STEAK A LA RAW

TROY OPENED HIS MOUTH, probably ready to complain, but Professor Pops' eyes flashed red.

"Fine." Troy unlocked the door.

I followed him as he stomped up the stairs, his shoulders tense.

He didn't speak until we reached the kitchen. "I'm like the maid. Sure, I'm the hottest damn maid you've ever seen, but still a maid." He put on a masculine brown apron, went to the refrigerator, and pulled out a steak wrapped in paper. He tossed it on the counter. Next, he got a pan out of the drawer under the oven and slammed it on the stove burner.

I sat on one of the barstools and watched, working hard not to smile.

He had no idea how difficult being a maid could be. "Totally hot," I said, working to keep a straight face.

He swore and kept working but took the time to flash me a heart-stopping smile.

I decided to give him a minute to calm down.

The kitchen was homey. The appliances were stainless steel.

White curtains hung in the windows.

Climbing ivy grew all along the wall near the back door. There was a bowl of fruit in the center of the counter. The granite was tan with flecks in brown, pearl, red, and black. The cupboards were painted an off white, making the room appear huge and bright.

"At least Professor Pops is nice to you," I said when he'd stopped slamming cupboards and drawers.

"You call this nice?" Troy took a butter knife, sliced some butter, and plopped it into the pan. He opened the paper around the steak.

Between the smell of melting butter and the steak, my mouth started watering. Troy sprinkled salt and pepper on the steak, rubbed it in and then slapped it into the pan. The meat immediately began to sizzle.

“You seem like a pro, and it smells delicious.” I crossed my arms, wondering if I should tell him that I liked the meat almost raw.

After a minute, Troy picked up a pair of tongs and flipped the steak over. “Yeah, well I have to be the pro because I’m the only one who cooks. If I didn’t no one would eat anything but peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

He removed a plate from the cupboard next to the refrigerator, placed it on the counter then grabbed a bottle of what I guessed was olive oil and drizzled a little over the plate. When he finished, he took some fresh basil, gave it a rough chop, sprinkled it over the olive oil and finished by slapping the meat on it. “There you go, Steak a’ la Raw.”

I couldn’t hold the laugh in any longer, but I covered my mouth to stifle it.

He glared, his hands on his hips. Then he laughed too. “I really like cooking, but it’s fun to be mad at Pops.” He gave me a fork and a steak knife. “Try it, see how it tastes.”

I cut into the meat and stuck it into my mouth. “Mmmmm,” I said, chewing. Then swallowed. “It’s delicious.” I cut another bite.

“Good.” Troy went about cleaning the utensils and pan.

In between bites I watched.

He was tall and lean. He had muscle though. His biceps flexed as he scrubbed the counters. His hair was cut close to his head and nearly the same color as mine, maybe a little blonder. His eyes were brown, and he was tan.

Ashley, Eva, and Cassidy would fall all over themselves for his attention.

Every once in a while, he brushed his forehead and I wondered why. He caught me staring, so I asked.

“I just got my hair cut and I can still feel phantom strands of it hanging in my face.” He smiled big and I noticed there was a dimple in one cheek. He whipped the dishtowel over his shoulder. Basically, Troy was adorable.

“The haircut looks nice on you.”

“Thanks.” He leaned over the counter and watched me take a bite. “So, what was it like to fight Rocky? You were awesome, by the way. I didn’t think anyone could take him. Some of us want Snow to fight him. I think she could beat anyone, but of course, she won’t even hear of it.”

“Snow?” I asked, cutting another piece.

“You haven’t heard of her?”

I shook my head, intrigued. It seemed Troy had a serious crush on her.

“She’s seriously kick a - ”

“You are so whipped, Troy Boy,” Jesse said as he walked in. He’d changed and was wearing a white tank top and another pair of loose-fitting jeans. His black hair shone, wet. I guessed he showered.

“Dude, she’s awesome,” Troy said, standing straight.

Jesse chuckled. “She seems nice,” he said.

Troy made a strange noise. “I suppose you want me to fix you something too?” Troy asked, feigning irritation.

Jesse shrugged. “Nah.” He glanced at me.

I froze mid-bite, waiting to see if he was still angry. “I need to speak to Beatrice alone, if that’s okay.”

“Kicking me out?” Troy threw the dishtowel on the counter and walked out. “No respect,” he mumbled.

I smiled after him.

Jesse sat on the barstool next to mine. He clasped his hands

together and was staring at them like he expected them to do a trick or fall off.

I took another bite, waiting. Apparently, he had anger issues and I didn't want to set him off.

"Sorry, Beatrice," Jesse said, his words tight.

I placed my fork on the empty plate and walked it over to the sink. It was more than I'd ever done in the kitchen. Then I turned back to him. Part of me wanted to hold a grudge. He'd hurt my feelings. But he seemed to be beating himself up more than I ever could. And I really did like him.

"I didn't mean to make you angry," I said.

Jesse shook his head. "I let down my guard." He blew out a harsh breath. "You're the first girl I've ever felt comfortable talking to." He crushed his hands together. "You can imagine how this - " he slapped his chest, "went over with the ladies."

I thought about it. If he'd been a student at my school prior to the curse, or the reverse curse, I would've been horrible to him. Just awful.

"I'm sure it wasn't easy," I admitted softly.

"It wasn't, which is why I stayed away from people. I never let anyone touch me. But in the space of an hour, we touched, laughed together, and you didn't run away or look at me with disgust - or turn to stone." His eyes were alight with wonder. "You're a special person, Beatrice."

I felt my face get hot. It was a compliment I hadn't believed I ever wanted to hear.

Jesse needed to understand I'd been the meanest person ever. "I was a total bitch in high school. I treated everyone with disrespect, but especially those who were different. I was truly beastly to them. And I never felt anything." I glanced away, ashamed.

"So, this curse has allowed you become all of who you are?"

“I guess so.” I hadn't thought about it that way. I moved closer to him. “If you’d met me a week ago, you would’ve been sickened by my behavior.”

OceanofPDF.com

A SURPRISE VISIT

JESSE PLACED A HAND OVER MINE. His was cool and hard. Certainly not repulsive. “When I’m around people I tend to bring out the worst in them. Over the years I’ve developed a really short temper.”

I tried to imagine him in high school. Had he turned someone to stone?

“Luckily,” he went on, “my abilities didn’t start to manifest until I turned sixteen.” He tugged his ear. “The first time I touched someone, and she started turning to stone, I ran away. Professor Pops found me in California. He went through all the channels to legally adopt me.” He shrugged. “That’s pretty much it.”

“Well except that in the battle between a Vaktare and a Gargoyle, the Vaktare totally won.” I did a little barstool dance and made a face.

Jesse shook his head. “Rematch?”

I laughed. “Maybe later, definitely not now. It was scary.” I had a feeling if he would’ve stayed and continued to fight, I wouldn’t be sitting on a chair dancing.

“We can wait a week, I guess. Then it’s round two.” He flashed me a brilliant smile.

“Deal.” I put my other hand over his. “I’m so glad we met, Jesse. You’re amazing.”

Jesse’s stormy eyes studied mine. “I feel the same way about you.” He leaned in as though he wanted to kiss me.

I didn’t want to anger him again, but I wasn’t ready. Gently, I put a hand on his chest. “I’m not ready for that,” I whispered.

Jesse whipped out of the chair. “Afraid I might turn you to rock? Don’t worry, it only happens when I want it to. I can control it.” He smacked the bowl of fruit off the counter. The bowl shattered and

fruit went everywhere.

I stood. “No, Jesse. That isn’t it. There’s - ”

Troy walked into the kitchen. “Jesse, chill. There’s someone here to see Beatrice.”

“Really?” I wondered who it could be. No one knew I was here.

“Hello, Beatrice.”

“Beck,” I breathed his name like I needed him to survive.

He strode in confidently.

The lights from the kitchen lit him up.

My heart froze. I’d never been so eager and so petrified to see someone in my whole life.

“Hi.” Our kiss flashed through my mind, and I felt myself blush. “What - How did you get here?” I knew he hated to fly. Had he driven?

Or did he run the whole way in his Locanis form?

“I drove,” he said, coming around the counter. “It’s good to see you.” Beck’s blue eyes sparkled with happiness.

He wouldn’t look so happy if he intended to kill me, right? Or maybe he was happy because he was close enough to commit murder.

I shivered. “I’m surprised you’re here. I thought you were going to stay in Utah and wait for my return.” The speed of my heart picked up.

Beck came close and leaned in. “There’s something I need to discuss with you.”

“Do you mind, we were in the middle of a conversation,” Jesse snapped, putting his hand on Beck’s shoulder.

Beck grabbed Jesse’s hand and spun away from him.

I was surprised he could move like that. I knew Beck was strong because he’d carried me from the pool up to my room, but that was different than having fighting skills. Not to mention Jesse was hard

and sturdy as a giant boulder.

He’s a werewolf, that’s why he can fight, I thought.

Jesse’s hair started to change, and I knew I needed calm him down.

“Let’s go.” I grabbed Beck’s hand and dragged him out of the kitchen toward the front door.

Troy followed us. "You need backup?"

"No, thanks." I shook my head. “Tell Professor Pops I’ll be back.”

“Yep,” he said coming around us and opening the door.

Beck went outside but I paused, worried about Jesse.

He'd stormed from the kitchen and out of sight.

“And could you tell Jesse I’ll see him soon? Please?” A loud clatter sounded from above and I flinched.

Troy patted my arm. “He’ll be fine.” He gave me his mega-watt smile. “Jesse just needs to break a few things and then he’ll be back to his mellow self.” He chuckled at his own joke, and I laughed with him.

“It was so great to meet you, Troy.”

He winked. “Maybe one day we can see who would win in a battle between a Vaktare and a dragon?”

I felt my eyes get big. Was he trying to tell me something? “Are you - ” I began, but he put a finger over his lips.

“Say no more. Even the trees have ears.” He referred to the fact that it was against the law for supernatural creatures to live in the human realm.

And I was a supernatural creature.

That meant I was against the law.

Where would I go? Was that why my parents were gone? They'd been taken to supernatural jail.

"Right. Let's talk again soon," I said, knowing Troy didn't have the answers.

"You better believe it," Troy responded.

I went down the steps. Beck was already at the car. He had driven the Lykan after all. I was glad to see he'd told the truth about that. Beck opened the passenger door.

I climbed in.

Troy waved. "See ya."

Beck closed the door. I waved through the window.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He kept silent while the motor roared to life, and he peeled out of the driveway.

I waited, giving him a chance to say whatever he needed to say.

We got on the interstate.

He weaved in and out of traffic like the rest of the cars weren't moving. I held on for dear life and was about to demand he let me out when he pulled off the interstate into Boston.

A few minutes later he pulled the car up to the entrance of the Boston Plaza.

As soon as Beck put the car in Park a guy in a hotel uniform came up to the car and opened the door.

I got out.

He gave me a once-over and I remembered I was shoeless, had barely freshened up in two days, and still wore the black workout clothes.

"Welcome to the Boston Plaza," the guy said, a question in his voice.

"Thank you," I muttered.

Beck handed the guy his keys. "Drive it carefully. No scratches or dents, okay?"

"Yes, sir," the guy said, climbing into the car.

Even though whatever Beck needed to say was urgent, he still took the time to watch the Lykan drive out of sight.

We walked into the hotel lobby and up to the front desk.

A perky blond was behind the desk.

When I walked over, she stopped typing on her keyboard, gave me a once-over, and turned back to her computer screen. “Can I help you?”

It didn’t matter that I looked like a homeless person and probably smelled like one too. I was also Beatrice Cavanaugh.

The receptionist’s nametag said her name was Diane.

I slammed my fist against the counter, causing Diane to jump. “Yes, Diane you can. My name is Beatrice Cavanaugh. You have a reservation for me, and I’d like to check in.”

She typed some information into her computer. “I’m seeing a reservation for a Beatrice Cavanaugh checking in last night, but she never arrived, so the reservation was cancelled.” She glanced up. “The room is now gone and I'm afraid we're full.” She smirked.

OceanofPDF.com

SWEAR AN OATH

I WAS ABOUT to slam my fist again, but someone grabbed it. I gasped.

Beck patted my hand, taking it, and tucking it under his arm. “Diane, my name is Beck Haddox. I’m here to check in.”

She smiled. “Let me check.” After a few seconds, she said, “It looks like you’re in the suite.” She winked. “I’ll just need a credit card and a driver’s license.”

“Right.” He took his wallet out of his back pocket, opened it, and handed her the black American Express card I’d given him, along his driver’s license.

Diane took them, casually brushing her fingers against his hand and smiling.

If I hadn’t been in complete shock, I might’ve punched her. Instead, I clamped my mouth shut, held on to Beck’s arm and waited while Diane did whatever she had to do.

“Please sign here,” she said, placing a piece of paper on the counter in front of Beck.

He did.

She handed him a key card. “Take the elevator to the top floor. Do you have luggage?”

“Not now. Thank you.” Beck pressed his hand into my lower back and steered me toward the elevator.

Something about his behavior brought back all my worries from the previous night and I wondered again if he really was the same “Beck” mentioned in the histories my parents wrote.

The thought hit me with such paralyzing force that I stumbled, only just catching myself before I hit the highly polished floor.

Reaching out, Beck righted me, a look of apparent concern that

situated on his gorgeous face. But was it genuine?

A tiny voice at the back of my mind told me to get away from Beck now.

But my thoughts were spiraling so completely out of control that I was helpless to escape.

I allowed myself to be led, barely noticing the beautiful ceramic floors or the way the sun struck the chandelier, making thousands of tiny rainbows dance everywhere. I barely knew when we entered the elevator and felt Beck guide me to the room.

When we were inside the suite, the first words out of my mouth were, “Are you going to kill me now?”

Beck walked us over to the couch. “No, Beatrice.” He shook his head. “Why would you say that?”

Relief punched through me when I heard his words, and instantly transformed to wariness. Could I really trust him? I still wasn’t sure.

I debated going into it, telling him everything I’d read. It was the perfect time. But when I opened my mouth, nothing came out. I pulled my hands from his grasp and walked over to the windows, checking out the view of the city.

“Why are you here?” I finally asked, deciding to start with that.

Beck came to stand beside me. “After you left, later that night a group of werewolves surrounded the mansion. They got in and ransacked everything. They seemed to be looking for something. Isaac, Mrs. Dotts and I tried to fend them off, but in the end, it was no use and I told them to hide.” He seemed to struggle with the words. Something still felt off.

Ask him! Ask him if he’s the Locanis who tried to kill your parents and stole your father’s medallion, I thought.

“Are Isaac and Mrs. Dotts okay? What about the other servants?”

“Yeah, they’re fine.” He leaned in and despite my fears I still wanted him to kiss me.

Except not yet. I stepped away, needing distance to keep my emotions in check. “Did the Locanis find what they were looking for?” I picked up a magazine and flipped through it before setting it back down. I hadn’t seen a word on the page.

Beck ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know.” He sighed. “Once I knew they were gone, I sent Isaac and Mrs. Dotts to stay in a hotel and then I came after you.” He tried to grab my hand, but I pulled away.

“What’s wrong? Is it that Jesse kid? I can tell he’s different. His hand was hard as rock. And I can tell he likes you, which is completely understandable.” Beck gave me a sideways smile.

It was a new look and I realized I didn’t really know Beck at all. Probably even less than Jesse.

“No, it’s not that.” I wished I had the guts to ask him.

But if he knew I knew the truth, would he try to kill me right away?

“Tell me why you’re really here.” I swallowed my nerves and tried to remember I was a vicious werecat that could take on a gargoyle.

Beck took a deep breath. “It’s just so difficult to explain. When I first met you, it was -” He walked back over to the window. “But I’m weak.” He punched the wall, and his fist went right through it. “Shit.” He pulled his fist from the plaster, shaking his hand. That was going to cost a bunch to fix. Hotels normally didn’t take kindly to their suites getting destroyed.

Beck went on, “I thought it would be easy to - ”

A howl echoed above the honking of horns, and the buzz of the city. It reverberated off the walls and seemed to sink into my toes.

“Stinking dogs,” I hissed.

Beck froze and I suddenly felt bad. “You heard that?”

“Yes, I heard it,” I spat, a ball of anger superseding my fear. I couldn't hold in what I knew any longer. “I know why you’re here.

You're supposed to kill me." I slammed my fists into his chest and he fell to his knees.

"I bet Celeste isn't even your real mother. You didn't come to my house to pay a debt. You came to kill me." When he didn't move, I glared, shooting daggers with my eyes. "Too bad you didn't finish the job while my mom was still pregnant with me."

Angry tears fell onto my cheeks, hot and wet.

He hadn't denied my allegations and his silence spoke much louder than any words.

"If you'd succeeded you wouldn't have had to waste your precious time coming after me now, pretending to like me and kissing -" A sob ripped out of my throat.

I put my hand over my mouth.

He still hadn't tried to get up.

"It was all a lie." I fell to my knees in front of him, unable to stop myself from pressing my cheek against his chest. "I don't even know you, do I?" The last words came out as a whisper. It felt like my heart was breaking.

Beck took hold of my arms and held me back, then took my face in his hands. "Beatrice." His eyes searched mine. He was scared. "Please, believe me when I say I'm sorry. I didn't know you when I agreed to the plan."

I heard his words but didn't understand them. I was drowning in pain. "You should've killed me, you stupid, stupid -" I thought of vilest word I could call him. "Dog."

"Beatrice." He spoke my name again softly.

"Shut up. Just shut up. If you want to kill me, do it."

"I'm not going to kill you, Beatrice."

My pulse responded to his words by speeding up. My breath came out in gasps.

Beck shook me. "I swear an oath on Altuatha." His eyes dropped to

my lips. I licked them. “You can trust me.”

OceanofPDF.com

DO WHAT I MUST

I WANTED to ask him who the hell Altuatha was but there were other more pressing matters.

Beck growled, pulling my face toward him.

Even on our knees he towered over me.

He tugged my chin upward and slammed his lips into mine.

I clawed at his face, but he just kissed me harder, deeper.

It only took a few moments and my own body betrayed me, and I was sighing. Freaking sighing into his kiss.

There was desperation and raw desire that flamed his movements.

I was suddenly in Beck's arms and on the bed.

His hands found their way under my shirt. I clung to him, wrapping my legs around his hips.

Beck. Beck. Beck. My mind kept repeating his name. Each letter filling up the ache in my heart. He had no intention of killing me.

I pulled his shirt from his pants so that I could feel his warm skin.

Another howl permeated the air around us.

"Okay, that one was closer." Beck quickly jumped up and ran to the window, pushing back one curtain.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Maybe nothing." Beck grabbed my hands, helping me stand.

My thighs were shaking. His eyes were hard with ferocity, and he gave me a little shake. "You can trust me," he said again, repeating his words from before.

"Trust?" I snorted. "Do you even know what that word means?"

Beck released my hands. "Yes, Beatrice I do. I trusted your father when he promised to protect my mom and my sister. But when my

mother was killed by his father, Fisher did nothing." The words ripped from his throat, and his agony hung in the air like a tangible thing.

"So, I was right. Celeste wasn't your mom," I muttered softly.

Beck went back to the window. I moved closer as a strong desire to comfort him swept through me.

"I have no idea who that woman is." He brushed a hand through his hair. "It was my job to infiltrate, destroy, and bring back the pendant." He closed the curtains and moved over to the couch in the living area. "I've been studying your family for a long time, and when I saw Celeste being taken away by the police, I used the situation to my advantage."

My heart pounded in my ears. "Did you kill my mom and dad?" The words came out barely above a whisper. I hadn't wanted to ask, but I needed to know.

He crossed him arms. "No," he said, his gaze holding mine. "I would have." He paused and started to pace. "Except they'd already vanished." He glanced at me.

I felt my mouth open and close as questions rose and fell from my lips in silence.

His jaw clenched. "Fisher always was a coward."

That pissed me off. I walked over and slapped his face. "How dare you speak like that about my dad?"

A wisp of a smile played on his lips. "When Fisher used the spell to allow you to cross realms, it took away all the best parts of you. For eighteen years your parents gave you everything, but you felt nothing. You may look human but you're not. You're Vaktare and not just any Vaktare, but of royal blood. On your birthday, when you were busy being a total bitch to your friends, you should've been in Hiraken preparing for your vision quest, allowing your people to see that you would stand against the terrible things still going on in your land." He was fuming, barely able to contain his emotions.

"My what? Do what?" I was seething too, my breathing coming in

ragged gasps.

“It’s a journey you take into the Fyrge desert and discover what your ability is.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling somehow right about that. “But not if your kind killed us all. I read the history. That was what the Locanis wanted. To destroy all Vaktare, to take Hiraken for themselves. I thought my kind were all dead.” I knew it wasn’t true even though I’d said the words. Obviously, there were more Vaktare alive than my parents first believed. Still, I didn’t know what to do. I watched Beck silently, my fingers gripped in fists, but the position felt awkward.

So, I walked away.

Beck swore. “Most of the Locanis wanted to kill all Vaktare, that’s true, and we nearly succeeded. But what’s also true is that most Vaktare wanted the Locanis to continue to be their slaves.” He stopped in front of me. “Slaves, Beatrice.”

I blinked and backed away. "You're lying."

Beck didn't deny my accusation but went on, “They thought of us as lesser creatures because we are born without magical abilities.”

I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around myself. “Where did my mom and dad stand on the matter?” For some reason the answer to that question was very important to me.

“Lenora was completely against enslaving us. Fisher was next in line to be king. He’d been raised by his tyrannical father, but -” Beck sighed. “I don’t believe he wanted to treat us the way his father did. I believe he would have been a much better king.”

I opened my eyes.

Beck’s face had softened. He was watching me. “I call him a coward because he didn’t stand up to Kevoney. He didn’t stand up for what was right. He was too afraid.”

“Did you ever think he ran away not because he was afraid to stand up for what was right, but because he wanted to save his wife

and daughter?" I didn't know what Beck's deal was, but I needed answers, and he was finally giving them.

"What about the pendant? My dad said you stole it from him." I moved over to the window. It was early afternoon but I thought I might still be able to see the moon.

"When Fisher jumped realms, my claws caught hold of the pendant. I took it and more." His face fell. "I took his ability as well."

So, it was Beck who stole my dad's powers. I remembered the black cat saying something about that the night he tried to kill me.

"Why would you do that?" I wanted to be angry, but I couldn't.

Beck sighed heavily. "That wasn't my intention." He came to stand beside me. "I don't know how it happened. Needless to say, being a werewolf with the ability to cast spells has made me the topic of a lot of conversation. In fact, my ability ended the war. I thought it would be a good thing. That perhaps the Vaktare and Locanis could truly become equals once again."

He laughed but it was without joy. "Some even believed I was the one your medicine woman spoke about. He shook his head. "When it became apparent I wasn't, I was reassigned to the position of glorified assassin. It seemed the new King believed that was all my powers were good for." He blew out his breath, frustrated. "After nearly ten years a few of the lower Vaktare and some Locanis formed a secret society."

"What kind of society?"

Beck smiled. "They are called the Society of Believers. They stole some of our most intelligent scientists, giving them access to Vaktare and Locanis victims with the sole desire to do what I did by accident - take abilities from the Vaktare and implant them in the Locanis?"

I gasped. "Has it worked?"

OceanofPDF.com

UNCONTROLLED ABILITY

HE SHOOK HIS HEAD. “They haven’t found a way - yet.”

“So, if you want nothing to do with this secret society and their ways, why did you agree to come here and kill my family and me?”

Beck stuffed his hands in his pockets. “The Society has my sister. She wasn’t killed during the last war, but they’ve sworn to kill her if I don’t murder the last of the Cavanaughs.”

My heart sank. That was sad. “Then do you even have a choice?”

His teeth ground together. “The first day I met you, I knew I could kill you. I wanted to. You were -” He paused, shaking his head and releasing a dark laugh. “Not the kindest person. You reminded me a lot of your grandfather.”

I hung my head. “I know. I was a total bitch. The only reason I agreed to hire you was so I could make you suffer.” I snorted bitterly. “I wanted you to become as beastly as I was.” I made a face. “Guess I’m too late. You’re quite beastly all on your own.” For some reason that made me laugh hard so hard I started to cry, which was weird, but totally what happened. “Anyway, sorry. Was it my sparkling personality that changed your mind?”

Beck pulled me to him. His eyes smoldered and kept going from my lips and back to my eyes. “That was part of it. Mostly it was your hot body.”

I held my breath, waiting to see what he would do next.

Beck chuckled. “Breathe, Beatrice.” His fingers caressed my cheeks. “When I showed up the next day, you were different. Then I found out your enchantment had somehow been removed and I was finally meeting the real you. Right away I knew you were different, special, spectacular.” He lifted my face to his. “Once upon a time there was a

dog that fell in love with a cat."

My face burned and tingles raced along my skin. "Love?" I asked, releasing my breath.

Beck's lips touched mine and caressed them tenderly.

I responded, unable to deny the feelings burning along my veins.

He wrapped me in his arms, pulling me against him, deepening the kiss.

I clutched his shoulders, in too much shock to do anything more than enjoy every second. Because despite everything, I wanted him.

But the Vaktare and Locanis weren't supposed to procreate.

It was one of the laws I read about in the history my parents wrote.

According to them, any children created between the two species would be considered demon spawn.

Still, Beck and I weren't procreating, we were kissing, and the kissing was amazing.

Our kiss intensified. His hands left my waist and went into my hair. It was a mess, I knew. I hadn't brushed it in I didn't know how long, but at that moment, with his fingers twisting the strands and tugging near my scalp, it filled me with desire.

My emotions were a whirlwind of need and want and longing. As the seconds passed, a small wind began to blow around us. It lifted the edges of my hair, soft and billowing. At first. But the more passionate the kiss I became, the stronger the wind blew until Beck paused.

"Are you doing that?" he asked.

The curtains whipped and knocked a picture off the wall. Beck's eyes grew big. "It is you. It's your ability. You can control the elements."

I nodded, feeling a small surge of excitement that was immediately eclipsed by fear. "I'm not controlling anything. It's happening all on its own. How do I make it stop?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. It was your mom's ability too. If

she were here, she could tell you."

My body started to shake. The wind was getting stronger, and a dark cloud began to form above us. In the room! "How do you stop your ability?" I had to shout against the noise of the storm.

He yanked me back into his arms and whispered against my ear, "Breathe in through your nose. Out through your mouth. Think calming thoughts."

A shiver ran down my spine and it started to rain.

Freaking rain, inside the hotel room.

Beck kissed my cheek. "Beatrice, you need to calm down. Use the animal part of yourself to control the ability. They are connected, one helps balance the other out."

I wanted to tell him that it was his touch, his breath in my ear, his lips on my cheek, and the way his body curled with mine, that were putting my emotions into a passionate frenzy.

I couldn't though.

All I could think about were his hands roaming my body, his lips on my neck, and more.

For the first time in my life, I wanted to go all the way, and even though I knew I shouldn't, I couldn't change the desire coursing through me.

"Beatrice." His voice was tinged with worry now. He let go of me and tried to step away, but I didn't want him to stop touching me.

As soon as I had the thought that he should put his hands back on my body, Beck obeyed.

Beck's eyes went from amused worry to serious uneasiness.

"Did you do that?" He tried to pull his hands from me, but they wouldn't budge.

My teeth chattered. I wanted to believe it wasn't me forcing him to continue to touch me.

"Maybe. I don't know." I shivered, unable to stop.

Rain soaked through my hair and my clothes and trailed down my face.

“Control it, Beatrice. Deep breaths. Calming thoughts.”

I’d never been so cold in all my life. Or scared.

I nodded and took a deep breath. Blew it out. It didn’t help.

Thunder rumbled across the cloud as though mocking me. “It isn’t working,” I said, crying, my tears mixing with the rain. “Help me, Beck. Please.”

There was a loud noise. The door to the hotel room shattered.

Wood flew everywhere, splintering against and into my skin.

“Isn’t this better than awesome?” Will walked into the room followed by three more men I’d never seen before. They all wore similar attire - black suits, white shirts, and black ties.

“Will?” The rain and wind stopped as abruptly as it started. I blinked water out of my eyes and wiped the hair off my face.

Beck’s body relaxed as the spell or whatever I’d done freed his body.

In the same second, he tensed again, growling at the men in the doorway.

“Beatrice, get out of here,” Beck said, his voice hard as steel.

One of the men standing behind Will flicked his hand and Beck’s mouth was clamped shut.

“What’s happening?” My gaze flashed between Will and Beck.

Beck rushed forward, placing me behind him.

One of the men raised a palm and moved his fingers slightly.

Thick rope coiled itself so tightly around Beck’s body he fell onto his back, smashing the coffee table in the process.

Unintelligible sounds came from Beck’s throat.

His lips tried to move, and I realized he was trying to say something.

I rushed to his side, pulling at the ropes, but they wouldn't budge.

"Stop," I shouted. "Will, what is the meaning of this?"

He appeared older somehow, and the kind face he'd always shown me was completely gone.

Will's eyes glimmered bright blue and I knew. Will was the werecat that had tried to kill me a few days ago.

"You're a Vaktare." Shock chained my feet to the floor. Now I understood why Beck hadn't liked the guy. I didn't like him either.

"Bingo." Will stepped over pieces of broken glass that had been the coffee table.

Two of the three men moved to either side of Will. The one with short black hair picked Beck up and tossed him over his shoulder. Will grabbed my arm. There was a quick rush, and we were no longer in the hotel room. We were back at the Cavanaugh Mansion, standing in the entryway.

"What the freaking hell?" How had we moved so quickly? I glanced around the room, shocked because we'd gone three thousand miles in seconds.

My house was a mess of broken furniture and scattered papers.

"How did you do that?" I asked, even though I guessed it was his ability.

OceanofPDF.com

LINGER ON THE BED

"THAT'S BETTER," Will said, ignore my question.

Still, I was grateful he'd brought Beck too.

His eyes glowed but he didn't shift.

In his werewolf form, Beck could easily break the ropes.

Will went over and punched Beck in the face. Laughed. "I bet it's killing you that you can't transform."

The three men with Will joined in the laughter.

"It's because of Rhem, you know. It's his gift. He has the power to bind not just the body, but also the ability. Pretty cool, huh?" He kicked Beck in the stomach.

Beck twisted and contorted his body, trying to get out of the ropes. His eyes were twin balls of rage. I knew if he got out of those ropes, Will was dead.

Will turned away from Beck and focused on me. "Alright, let's get down to business."

"What do you want?" My voice trembled with fright. "Is this because I threw your birthday present in the pool?" That was a stupid question.

Will's eyes burned with fury for a moment and then he laughed. Addressing the three men with him he said, "She thinks I'm angry because she's a bitch."

They joined in the laughter.

"No, Bea. That definitely isn't it." He cupped my chin in his hand. "I'm not angry. Why would I be angry? I've been your friend for years. We've been a couple for the past six months. I've put up with your shit. I've been patient, supportive, and an all-around good guy. Why the hell would I be angry?"

He leaned in and kissed me, his lips hard and unfeeling.

“Don’t,” I mumbled and tried to push him away.

He squeezed my chin, keeping me still. His mouth claiming mine as he forced my mouth open.

I held still, not responding to his kiss in anyway.

Will pushed me away. “No warmth. You are one cold-blooded bitch, aren’t you?” He didn’t wait for my reply. “I did what I did to get close to you.” He grabbed hold of my head, forcing me close as he licked my lips, our noses touching.

His breath seemed to burn my skin. “Where’s the red diamond, Bea?”

“Diamond?” I asked trying to breathe.

I kept hoping I’d shift, or that I’d be able to use my abilities.

My thoughts kept going to Jesse and what he’d said. That I needed to think about something happy, that I needed to breathe deeply.

I kept trying to recall the kiss between Beck and me, but I was too scared, and the memory was marred by questions. There were trust issues as well. He’d been sent to kill me. That was a fact.

Sure, he’d chosen not to go through with it. He’d said he changed his mind when he got to know me. But what was to say he wouldn’t change his mind again? His sister’s life was at stake. If he killed me, she’d be set free. Why wouldn’t he choose her?

Will shoved me, letting go.

My head smacked against the door as I hit the ground hard.

“Give me what I want, Bea, or the wolf pays.” He nodded at Beck and two of the three men picked him up. The third, the man Will had called Rhem held out a hand and turned it slowly.

Beck started to writhe, letting out a snarl.

“Stop,” I shouted, crawling toward him.

Will grabbed me around the waist and held me fast. “If you’re a good girl and give me the diamond, maybe I can talk to the King, put

in a good word. Maybe you won't have to die, maybe he'll let you be my lover." He leaned in, running his teeth against my neck.

I spat in his face. "I'd rather die." I grabbed hold of his shirt and tried to push him off.

Will pulled my hair, making my head fall back. "Oh, that's going to happen, don't worry." He bit my shoulder with mock playfulness. "Besides, I'd tire of you before too long. I mean you did fall for a worthless dog." He shoved me face-first into a wall, my head going through the plaster before he yanked me out.

My forehead was bleeding as well as my nose. I tried to reach back and scratch his arms, but it did no good. Will had me by the back of the neck and led me over to Beck.

He was still writhing. Occasionally, he would moan.

By the faraway look in Beck's eyes, I knew whatever Rhem was doing to Beck was killing him.

Then Will kicked Beck in the stomach.

The men hooted.

"If I wasn't under orders to bring his ass back alive, he'd already be dead." He kicked Beck in the face. "But there might be an accident. Sometimes shit happens, right?"

"Stop," I yelled. "I'll take you to the diamond."

Even through the pain, Beck heard me, and he seemed confused. I'd told him Celeste stole the diamond. "Sorry, Beck." Then to Will I said, "The diamond is upstairs."

Will took me by the neck and forced me to walk up with him. I didn't fight. When we got to my bedroom, Will smiled. It was sinister.

"It's in the closet," I said, pointing.

"Go get it." He shoved me and I flew forward, falling onto my hands and knees.

I crawled into my closet and over to the section where my pants hung on hangers. I pushed them aside, clicked the secret door open,

and entered the safe's combination. My hands shook as I pulled on the safe's handle.

"Figures," Will said, his voice hard.

I took the diamond and stood, handing it to him.

"Let's make sure you're telling the truth." Will lifted the red stone into the light. The diamond sparkled as he turned it back and forth. "Excellent." He pocketed the gem and grabbed my arm, dragging me out of the closet. I watched his gaze linger on the bed. He licked his lips, glancing from me. "After the hell I put up with playing your boyfriend, I deserve payment." He hauled me onto the bed.

Understanding what he intended, I tried to squirm away.

Will grabbed me by the leg and forced me onto my back, pinning my body with his.

"Stop, Will. This isn't you." I tried to knee him in the groin, but he forced my legs down.

"You have no idea what I'm like, Bea. You never cared to find out." His fingers wrapped around my neck, choking the life out of me. "You never gave me a chance." He licked the side of my face, forcing my legs apart. His hands roamed my body.

Tears leaked from my eyes. I wanted strength. I wanted to shift, to claw the smile off his awful face.

"You're so weak, Beatrice. Nothing but a mewing kitten." As he spoke, he shoved a hand down my pants.

"Stop. Stop it," I cried.

My tears only made him laugh. I didn't know how I was going to get out of the situation. I didn't think it was possible. "If you do this," I said, forcing myself not to stop fighting, "I'll kill you."

His eyes grew wide. "You th -"

Will couldn't finish because something crashed through my window and rolled onto the floor. It reminded me of a large boulder.

The boulder stood and I realized it wasn't a boulder at all, but

Jesse.

“Get off her!” In one breath Jesse stood and threw Will into my fireplace.

Rock and rubble rained down around Will as he fell to the floor.

OceanofPDF.com

FRIGHTENING CREATURE

"YOU OKAY?" Jesse came over and held out his hand.

I took it as a sob ripped from my throat as relief washed over me. "I am now," I said, letting him pull me into a sitting position.

Professor Pops burst through my window in the next second.

"Stand back," Professor Pops said, keeping his back to the window and directing Jesse and me to move against the wall near my headboard.

I gave Jesse a questioning look as a massive scaly dragon rammed through my window, taking out half my wall and my window seat in the process.

I yelped, grabbing hold of Jesse's solid shoulder. "What in the - "

The dragon shook himself, his large liquid eyes gazing at me. Something about them were familiar. "I can't believe Rocky gets all the credit for knocking this guy out." The dragon faced Will, who was on the floor, moaning. "Make a move, pussy cat, I'm begging ya." The dragon glanced over and winked.

I realized the dragon was Troy.

I covered my mouth, completely surprised.

"He thinks he's the shit," Jesse shouted. One look told me Jesse thought Troy was the shit too.

Troy shoved one of his talon-shaped hands against Will. "Come on. I want to fry your insides before your outsides have a chance to feel it."

I was in shock. It was a freaking-happy-to-see-them shock, but still.

Professor Pops came over. "Are you hurt, Beatrice?"

"No," I muttered, blown away by Professor Pops. He was dressed in all black, his scholarly sweater and reading glasses replaced with a

katana across his back. His eyes glowed red, like Hell fire.

“Doesn’t Pops look awesome?” Jesse said, slapping Professor Pops on the back.

The Professor grinned.

“Yes, he does,” I said, trying to smile, but only succeeding in making my lips quiver. “And Troy?” He was a very large, very wicked looking bronze dragon with silver tipped wings that were folded against either shoulder.

At the mention of his name, he turned and gave me a huge dragon smile. It took my breath away.

“I’m awesome, right?” Smoke left his nostrils as he spoke. Then he turned back to Will, heckling, and prodding his limp body.

I kind of felt sorry for Will. Okay, not really.

“With the three of you here, we might stand a chance.” I pushed myself out of Jesse’s hold. “I’m so happy to see all of you. It’s Beck -”

“Where is he?” Professor Pops asked.

“In the entryway, downstairs.”

Jesse went to my bedroom door and ripped it off its hinges, leaning it against a wall.

“They’re torturing him. Please.” Thinking about the look of Beck’s face brought tears to my eyes. “Hurry.”

Troy tossed Will onto his back and settled him between his shoulder blades.

“Be careful,” I said. “He can shoot balls of light from his hands.”

Jesse snickered. “Balls, huh?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes.”

“Got it,” Troy said, forcing his way through the door and tearing a dragon-shaped hole in the walls. I couldn’t help but be in awe of him. “I’ll try to watch out for flying balls,” he said, hefting his large body down the hall. Either side of his body grazed the walls, causing huge gashes.

“Flying balls. Duck and cover,” Jesse said, snorting.

Troy laughed.

I couldn’t believe they were joking at a time like this.

As we made our way down the stairs, I heard two of the three men talking. They were discussing what they would do with the wealth the King promised them for bringing Beck back and for killing me.

Professor Pops, Jesse and Troy heard them as well.

Troy quit laughing. So did Jesse. His hair changed from black to white and his skin pulsed with black veins. “Allow me to clean up the mess, Beatrice,” he said.

Troy followed, trying to shove past Jesse on the stairs. His scales scraped against the metal railing. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard. “Leave some for me. Dude, you can’t always be the hero.”

If I hadn’t been so worried about Beck, I would’ve laughed at the two of them.

“How many are there?” Professor Pops asked.

“Three,” I said. “And one can bind your abilities.” That thought made me worried for them.

Jesse laughed, slapping Troy’s scaled body. “No one is going to bind our abilities, right Smoky.”

“Best two out of three cleans the other’s bathroom for a month,” Troy offered.

Professor Pops chuckled. “I debated whether to bring them.”

“How did you even know where I was? What made you decide - ”

Professor Pops patted my arm. “I have my ways, Beatrice.”

I guessed it had something to do with his vampirism. “I’m glad you’re here, but how?”

“First class ride on the Boeing Troy-Seven-Seven,” Professor Pops grinned. He was a little disconcerting with his red eyes, and I had to look away. “Troy can fly like nobody’s business,” Professor Pops went

on.

Roars of pain interrupted our conversation.

I rushed down the remaining stairs.

The three Vaktare had changed into their werecat forms and were on top of the dragon and the gargoyle, snarling as they fought and trying to destroy them with their teeth and claws.

The Vaktare didn't seem to be making much headway.

Rhem kept using his abilities against them and his powers did seem to slow Jesse and Troy down, but not completely.

Will was on the floor surrounded by broken glass. He was coming to. Beck was still bound with ropes, but he no longer writhed in pain. I ran to him.

"Let me get this off you," I said, pulling on chords but to no avail.

Another roar.

Professor Pops was on top of Rhem, his teeth buried in the Vaktare's neck.

The sight sickened me, and truth be told, scared the crap out of me as well.

Professor Pops might look sweet when he wore his khaki pants and sweaters, but he was really, really terrifying.

Now, he scared me even more than Rhem.

It seemed Rhem felt the same way. The Vaktare was writhing and clawing, trying to push Professor Pops off him. It wasn't doing any good.

I watched Rhem's eyes flicker. Even Troy, Jesse and the other two Vaktare stopped momentarily, watching what Professor Pops was doing.

The Vaktare in Professor Pops' grasp looked like a kitty cat next to the menacing Hunter.

I guessed by the looks on Jesse and Troy's faces that it was their first-time seeing Professor Pops as the Hunter too.

When Rhem's eyes rolled back in his head, Professor Pops pushed the lifeless body away. His fangs dripped with blood. His eyes flashed bright blood red and he smacked his lips.

"Vaktare are delicious," he said, his voice deep and dark and unlike anything I'd ever heard.

I shuddered.

Beck scooted closer, putting himself between me and the Hunter. Even bound he was still trying to protect me.

Since Beck was still tied up and unable to speak, I realized that although Rhem looked dead, he couldn't be. Otherwise, Beck would be free.

"What have you done?" Will shouted when he was conscious enough.

He stood, looking around the room.

"What the hell are they?" he asked, pointing at Troy and Jesse.

When he saw Professor Pops, he automatically took a step back.

The vampire Hunter really was the most frightening creature in the room.

OceanofPDF.com

LET GO

WILL RECOVERED AND ROARED, running like lightning past Troy, Jesse and Professor Pops. He grabbed me by the neck and lifted me off the ground. Troy, Jesse, and Professor Pops moved as one toward Will and me.

“Do not take another step, or I’ll kill her," Will said.

“We aren’t scared of you and your balls of light, kitty cat,” Troy said, smoke curling from his lips as he spoke.

Professor Pops released his fangs again. Blood still dripped from his chin and onto his clothes.

Will pulled the diamond from his pocket. It started to pulse in his fingers. “You should be,” Will said, his eyes gleaming with an almost crazed expression.

“What is that?” Jesse asked. His hair was still white, and his black veins pulsed dangerously in his gargoyle form.

Will whispered some words that made so sense to me.

A vortex began to spin in the air directly in front of him and me. “Come any closer and I’ll send her into the abyss.”

The three of them raised their hands in surrender.

Beck let out a strangled cry.

The other two Vaktare came to and stood, shaking out their fur.

Will laughed mirthlessly. “That’s what I thought.” He eyed Rhem and then Beck.

He was still on the floor, his eyes large with fear and fury.

I wished I could do something to help.

“Time to finish this.” Will shifted into his werecat form.

His clawed fingers dug into my skin.

Blood pooled in the spots where his claws touched, and I felt it drip down my chest.

Will stared into my eyes, an eerie smile twisting his face. He glanced back at Beck. “You're going to love this next part.”

I wanted to tell Beck it would be okay. That my dying would ensure his sister received her freedom. Instead, I closed my eyes, trying not to feel, not to have any emotions, to go back to the way I was before the curse, or the damned reverse curse, as Greg and Fizban called it.

In the distance I heard a phone ring.

A female voice addressed me. “Beatrice, are you just going to give up? Allow these vile beasts to defeat you?”

I searched for the source of the voice, though I knew it was Fizban. It had to be.

“Fizban,” I whispered.

Will laughed louder. “Now she’s talking to herself. Stupid cowardly bitch.”

Rhem carefully perused the room.

Will lowered me so that we were face to face. “It was nice knowing you, Bea.” He released my neck and threw something in my face. It smacked me in the forehead before falling to the ground.

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to stop the dizziness and catch my breath. When I opened them, I caught hold of what Will had thrown at me.

It was Will's birthday present. The bee I’d thrown in the pool. He must’ve secretly come back and fished it out. It was facing down so I could read the inscription:

You’ll always be my Bea. Love, Will.

I stepped back, tripping over something and falling.

Will caught me around the neck and lifted me off my feet. He walked toward the vortex.

As I got closer to it, I felt my body being pulled inside. The tips of my feet were suddenly cold, and my body angled toward the opening.

“Don’t do this, Will. Please, don’t,” I said, trying with all my might to shift.

Will laughed. “Manners, it’s nice to know you have them, you cold, unfeeling bitch.” He bent his legs slightly, preparing to launch me.

“You are a beautiful beast, Beatrice.” Fizban’s voice sounded in my ears, loud and clear as though she were inside my mind. “You are destined to return the Locanis and the Vaktare into the allies they once were. Fight back. Become the Vaktare you are meant to be.”

I twisted my neck, ignoring the pain as Will’s claws tore into my flesh. I needed to see Professor Pops, to see Troy, to see Jesse.

I hardly knew them, but I would die for them.

They’d come to mean that much to me in such a short time.

And Beck, my gorgeous Beck. I tried to smile. My feelings for him went against the laws of our realm, yet I couldn’t stop them. They burned through me, filling me in ways I’d never imagined possible.

“You can save them all, Beatrice. You have the power. Use it,” the voice inside my mind said.

I felt Will’s claws loosen as he began to let go.

The vortex was bigger than my body.

I should be glad to be sucked away, knowing Beck's sister would live because of my death, but I selfishly wished to stay and see what kind of a relationship he and I could have.

"It's okay," I whispered.

Beck’s eyes bore into mine. I could almost hear him shouting that he loved me, and that he wanted me to live, to fight. He shook his head.

“To the end of the Cavanaughs,” Will said with a cruel laugh.

“Now, Beatrice!” Fizban shouted.

Up until the very second Fizban spoke, I had no idea if I would be

able to shift, if I would be able to do anything except allow Will to kill me, or throw me into the abyss, as he called it.

But like when Jesse and I had been fighting, instinct suddenly took over.

It was stronger than anything I'd ever felt before.

At once, my human body because that of my werecat form.

I roared in fury and grabbed hold of Will's arm with my claws.

One of Will's lackeys stumbled back at my transformation, surprised.

The stand-off was broken as everyone moved at once and the fight began again.

I went after the Will, taking his neck in my mouth.

"Bind her, Rhem," Will choked.

At Will's words, pain touched my body. My instincts immediately knew what to do with the pain. I mentally boxed up the pain and formed and folded it into a sphere.

This pain must be sent back to Rhem. It must hurt Rhem, I thought viciously.

As soon as the words entered my mind, the sphere filled with pain left my body and went into Rhem.

I released Will's neck so I could focus on Rhem.

To my left, Will was bend over, and coughing, but I kept my eyes on Rhem.

Shock filled Rhem's features, and he doubled over. Roared and feel to his knees.

"Stop her!" Will screamed, a ball of white light soaring from his hand and heading right at me.

Jesse jumped in front of me. The ball of light struck him square in the chest and he fell backward toward the abyss.

The suction from the swirling began to pull him into the opening.

“Jesse!” I reached for him. My claws caught the tips of his fingers. But his skin was like rock, and he continued backward. The opening to the abyss was directly behind him. The bottom half of his body disappeared into the swirling. "No," I roared.

I dove after him, this time with both hands and grabbed his shoulders.

"It's okay, Bea. Let me go. You can't stop this. I'll be okay." Jesse's words were soft but firm. His face was filled with peace, as though he deserved what was coming.

“No!” I screamed, holding fast.

The swirling had sucked Jesse in up to his shoulders so only his neck and head were visible. My hands touched the vortex.

It was cold, seemingly leeching all warmth from my body.

"Bea, let go," Jesse urged.

It had him up to his chin.

Then his mouth and nose.

I felt my feet come off the ground as more of my arms was sucked through. The pulling became stronger and more forceful.

Professor Pops grabbed hold of my waist and pulled.

With the two of us together, more of Jesse’s body appeared.

A zing of hope raced along my spine. "We've got you," I said, getting a better grip on his arm.

Jesse's mouth twisted and there came a sound, like rock splitting. He screamed in agony.

I looked back at Pops, questioning what I should do with my eyes.

He straightened. “You have to let him go. If you don’t, he’ll die for sure.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Beatrice,” his voice was soft, his features twisted in pain. “Let go.”

"I'm sorry," I said and let go.

"It's not your fault," Jesse said as he disappeared through the opening.

Angry sadness took over, seeming to swallow me whole but the vortex was still swirling and there was still a chance I'd be sucked in as well.

OceanofPDF.com

TALL TALE

"I'VE GOT YOU," Beck said and pulled me out of the way.

Immediately, the abyss began to close.

"I need to go after him. This is my fault." Determination had me desperate to do something, even though I had no idea where he went.

“You can’t, Beatrice. We don’t know where he went or even if you’ll end up in the same place,” Professor Pops said.

“What have I done?” I sank to my knees, burying my cat face in my cat paws.

But now wasn't the time to wallow.

There were still Vaktare, including Will angling for my destruction.

“Get her!” Will shouted.

I stood and turned, prepared to fight.

Professor Pops lunged for Will's throat, ready to take his blood the way he’d done with Rhem.

From behind I heard a loud roar and felt the heat of fire from the dragon.

I turned back and saw that despite the pain he was in, Rhem had finally succeeded in binding Troy with his rope. It tightened around his body, pushing his wings down at an awkward angle.

Troy struggled to break free, but the rope wouldn't budge.

Rhem’s body and abilities must be bound, I thought. In my mind, I watched the ropes magically unwrap from Troy and bind Rhem instead.

Just as I imagined, the ropes loosened from Troy and did as I thought and wound itself around Rhem.

"What the devil?" Rhem gasped in astonishment.

Tighter. Tighter, I thought. The ropes continued to squeeze him until Rhem cried out and then lost consciousness.

Troy stumbled, fighting to regain his balance. Then he roared and it was so full of anguish. I could tell he was devastated by what happened to Jesse.

I wanted to apologize but there was still too much happening around me.

The other two Vaktare came forward, cursing and swearing obscenities.

And then the room vanished, and I was out in a forest, hunting.

The vision was so real I smelled the mountain air, the scent of fear.

I heard the leaves rustling in the breeze.

The scene changed and I was feasting on a body, the insides torn out.

A quick look at his face told me it was Beck, his eyes open and staring blankly at nothing. His hair wet with blood.

If I hadn't had my primal instinct, I would've fallen victim and lost myself to the scene.

Instead, I took his ability, pushed it into a compact little box and sent it back.

Show him his worst fear, I said into my mind and sent the box out of myself.

Immediately, the Vaktare on the right started screaming, shifting as he crashed through the front door and out of the house. He stomped through the landscaping, tearing up flowers and trees, fighting invisible enemies that only he could see.

The other man's ability slammed into me, and I felt him try to take control of my body.

As with Rhem's and the other guy, I reversed it, compiled it in a mental box, and sent it out of myself and into the Vaktare ruining the front yard.

To the death, I thought.

Beck was at my shoulder. "Beatrice?" He took my hands, his eyes full of concern.

I shook away the mental scene and focused on him. “Are you okay?” I asked, feeling terrible about the whole situation.

“I’m fine. The bigger question is are you okay?” His features twisted with worry as he ran his hands up my arms.

I didn't answer but stook still and closed my eyes.

What was I? Not okay. Taking a deep breath, I focused on Beck. “No, actually, I’m super pissed off.” I stepped around Beck and shoved Professor Pops off Will so I could get a hold of the asshole. “Where the hell is he? Where did you send Jesse?”

I grabbed Will by the fur at his neck and shook him. Hard. He glanced away, swallowing, one hand clamped over his bleeding throat. I smelled his fear.

“You’d better tell me, Will, or I’ll take your ability, you’re little balls of light, and send you and them to the bottom of the pool.

Will laughed. “You’re a big talker, Bea. Nothing more. Just a spoiled bitch.” He opened his mouth. Whispered a word. A ball of light formed in his throat.

Will’s ability will no longer work for him, I thought, my eyes boring into him.

Immediately the small light in the back of his throat vaporized.

I smirked. Even though I didn’t comprehend how such a thing was possible, I was grateful.

“What have you done?” Will gagged. He flicked his hand, but no light appeared. He tried again with his mouth.

“It’s gone, Will. I ordered the power away and now it's gone. Apparently, that's my ability.”

Furious rage boiled over, and he roared, twisting out of my grasp.

Professor Pops was a step behind, ready to grab him if I needed his

help.

Beck was on the other side of me.

Troy stood behind Professor Pops, his wings flapping irritably.

Will shook his body. He was breathing heavily. “You won’t win, Beatrice. You can’t. You lack the courage and conviction necessary to lead your people or save our realm.”

Freeze! I put an arm out as I spoke the word in my mind.

Will’s body did as I commanded.

“What the hell?” Will was truly scared now, his features contorted in anger and shock. “How are you doing this?”

I didn’t know and at that moment I didn’t care. I just wanted to stop him.

The first thought in my mind was to put him to sleep.

Will became stiff and fell onto his side with a thud. His eyes closed.

I glanced down.

It made no sense that I could make other Vaktare’s abilities do as I directed within my mind.

I moved closer to Beck and hugged him. “You’re a mess,” I said, my voice shaking.

Blood streaked his blond fur and there were wounds all over his body. A chunk of his ear was missing.

Beck gave me a once-over. “You should see yourself. You’re incredible.”

“Really?” I was thinking he was pretty freaking amazing, but I held up my paws, checking them out. My fur was no longer honey brown but a deep rusty red. “What happened?” I asked, surprised.

Beck smiled. It was one of awe.

“Yeah, why is her fur a different color?” Troy asked. His eyes were no longer brown but a deep bronze with silver rings around the

outside. Professor Pops had a hand on Troy's scaly shoulder. I sensed a great sadness rolling off them both and I knew it was because of Jesse.

Did they blame me for what happened?

Beck smiled, but it was filled with sadness. "I never would've believed it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes."

"What?" I asked.

Beck glanced at Professor Pops. I did too. His eyes no longer glowed as red though they were still flashing.

I figured he sensed the danger was gone for the most part.

Beck wrapped an arm around my waist, keeping me close.

"There is a story told to all the Vaktare and Locanis children about the Unduyee, a great red warrior that would one day come to Hiraken. It was said that the red warrior would be the keeper of all abilities and that her humility, benevolence, and warm giving heart would return peace and equality to the land. Of course, we all believed it was a tall tale."

I remembered the story. I'd read it back in the Museum for the Supernatural. "What are you saying?"

He spun me around, allowing me to see myself in the piece of broken glass still hanging on the wall. "See. Red fur."

I stared at my reflection. That was the first time I'd truly seen myself, other than the one time in the pool water. But it'd been dark then. Seeing myself in the glass was much different.

My face was shaped like a large cat and covered in red-brown fur. My teeth were long, sharp, and white. My eyes were fully orange, like the final light just before the sun went down.

I stood back so I could see more of myself.

Beck was still taller than I was and a werewolf instead of a cat, but we made a good-looking pair. A rush of feelings sweltered through me. I turned around and hugged him with such force that I nearly knocked him to the ground. I was so happy he was okay.

OceanofPDF.com

GRAND ENTRANCE

BECK RETURNED MY HUG FEROCIOUSLY. “You shifted on purpose this time. Do you have any idea how to shift back?”

“No. My body just kind of does its own thing.” I rubbed my nose against his furry cheek.

Professor Pops cleared his throat.

I let go of Beck as guilt filled my guts. “I’m so sorry about Jesse,” I said to Professor Pops, barely able to meet his or Troy’s gaze. They’d lost so much because of me. “But I’m going to get him back.”

I walked over to Will. He was no longer in his Vaktare form, no longer the scary black werecat. Instead, he lay on his side, still asleep and totally naked. I went to the main closet, grabbed a trench coat that was my dad’s and covered the worst of his nakedness. “Wake up,” I commanded, kicking him lightly in the ass.

His eyes blinked open. “What? Where am I?”

I squatted and grabbed his neck, piercing it with my claws. “You’re still at my house, Will.” I squeezed. “And you aren’t going anywhere until you tell me how you opened that thing and where Jesse went.”

I felt the presence of the others coming in close and flanking me.

Except Professor Pops. He came to stand on the other side of Will. The Professor’s eyes were red again. “Young Vaktare, Jesse is my son, and I will find him. So, this conversation is going to go two ways.”

Will’s eyes flickered back and forth between Professor Pops and me.

“One, you can choose to tell me how to find him.” He paused and brushed some of Will’s hair out of his eyes. “Or, you can say nothing, and I will kill you.”

From behind, I heard Troy growl and felt the heat of his breath. It

singed the walls over my head.

Tears leaked from Will's eyes. "Then I'm dead either way. So do what you must." He clamped his mouth shut.

Troy's large head appeared beside mine. "I can make him talk. Let me do it, Pops."

The Hunter glanced at Troy. His face changed from scary to calm.

"No, Troy. I want you to go home." Professor Pops glanced away, his eyes searching the sky outside.

I followed his gaze, wondering what he was looking for. "If your father shows up -" Professor Pops didn't finish his sentence, but I got the feeling he believed there was someone or something scarier than he was out there.

I watched Troy's face fall. "But I can't leave. Jesse - " his voice broke.

"I know, Troy. I know."

"Anyway, he can't be mad. I haven't seen him in years. You're more my dad than he is." Troy shook his head. A thick tendril of smoke escaped his nostrils.

Professor Pops reached across Will and patted Troy's shoulder; his face filled with tenderness. "Thank you, son." He gave Troy a wisp of a smile.

"Jesse is my best friend. I won't abandon him." Troy's dragon face became even more ferocious.

I watched their interaction with extreme interest.

Will continued to cry.

I didn't know what Beck was doing, but I knew he was back there, probably feeling like I was - that it was best to stay out of the way when a dragon and a vampire Hunter were arguing.

Professor Pops nodded. "I understand." He looked at Will. "We're doing this the hard way." He tilted Will's head out of the way. Then Professor Pops sank his teeth into Will's shoulder. Will screamed,

trying to push him away, but Professor Pops had him in such a grip Will didn't have a chance.

A minute passed as Will's face became pale and the life started to go out of his eyes. But he started blubbering. "There are dozens of possible realms. Jesse could've gone into any one of them. I don't know which one. No one can know," he said, the words almost unrecognizable.

"What are the names of the realms? How can we get there?" Troy asked, blowing smoke in Will's face.

Will coughed. "I don't know, dammit!"

Professor Pops withdrew his fangs and wiped his mouth. He seemed surprised by what Will had just said. "It'll take time." Professor Pops paused as if thinking some things through, a bleeding Will held firmly in his grasp. Will's eyes fluttered as he tried to keep them open.

At last Professor Pops said, "I know what to do." He sounded like he was in pain, and I wondered if he was wounded. There was blood and dirt all over him. It could be his or someone else's.

Will flinched at the sound of Professor Pops' voice, though it wasn't nearly as chilling as it had been before.

Professor Pops just looked at Will as if he'd forgotten he still gripped the Vaktare. Then Professor Pops released Will and stood, rolling his shoulders back.

"We are leaving, Beatrice," Professor Pops said.

Will let out a noise and curled away from the vampire.

"My apologies for the abrupt departure, but I know you'll be in good hands." Professor Pops glanced behind me, and I knew his focus was on Beck.

"If you know where Jesse is, tell me. I want to help," I said, outraged he was leaving so abruptly.

"We both do," Beck added, coming to stand beside me.

Professor Pops gave us an understanding nod. “I know. And you will. But first I must take care something alone.” He grabbed me in a hug. “Stay safe, Beatrice. I know we’ll see each other again soon.” He released me and shook Beck’s clawed paw-hand. “Be good to her, Beck.” His eyes flashed a bright red.

“I will, sir,” Beck said, clearing his throat.

Professor Pops walked toward the door. “Say good-bye, Troy. The faster I get you home, the faster I can get this done.”

“I’m coming,” Troy said, stepping around Will, his wings and tail swishing the air. The tip of his tail found Will’s face and slapped him. Will let out a very girly, very unmanly scream.

I went to Troy. “You are freaking cool,” I said softly, touching his face. His scales seemed to ripple under my skin as though caressing my clawed hand.

Troy tried to smile. “Right back at ya.” He pressed his snout against my furry cheek.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were a dragon,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I’m all about making grand entrances,” Troy snorted, sending smoke against my back.

I leaned away, staring into one of his big eyes. “Who do you think would win between and dragon and a werecat?”

Troy let out a snicker. It started out small and grew into a full-on belly laugh. Fiery sparks flew out of his mouth.

I joined in, as did Beck.

I could even hear Professor Pops chuckling in the yard as he waited for Troy to finish his good-byes.

“No contest. A dragon,” he said, making his way toward Professor Pops.

“When we get Jesse back, you and I will have to give it a try. Deal?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s on, Beatrice.” He smacked me in the back with one of his wings.

Professor Pops waved. Troy pushed through the doorway, ripping a giant hole in the entrance.

“Sorry,” Troy said, even though it was obvious by the snickering that followed he wasn’t.

OceanofPDF.com

A LITTLE NAKEDNESS

BECK and I followed them out.

The other two Vaktare were still fighting. Professor Pops and Troy ignored them. So did I. Professor Pops climbed on Troy's winged back as he beat his amazing wings deftly against the night air and they took flight.

"That's something you don't see every day," Beck said, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

"Agreed." I rested my head against him.

Beck cleared his throat. "You realize when you do shift, you'll be naked?" He pulled me tighter against him.

"So will you," I said as desire coursed through my body. I glanced away, unexpectedly really, really glad for my fur.

Will ran past Beck and me, surprising us. He ran down the stone steps and toward the fighting werecats. Thankfully he quickly shifted back into his werecat form. The other two Vaktare didn't seem to notice him. Will let out a roar as he got down on all fours and took off. When he thought he was a safe distance away, he turned back toward Beck and me. "You'll pay for what you've done, Bea. You and the dirty dog!"

Don't move, I ordered Will in my mind, reinforcing the command with my thoughts, allowing my strange magic to reach through the space between us and attach to Will.

Will froze mid-stride, falling on his side. "Release me, damn you."

"You're going to have to tell me how you do that," Beck said.

"I promise, just as soon as I know," I responded. "But what about the red diamond? Will had it in his hand when he opened the abyss. Do you think he dropped it?"

Beck walked over to the place where Will had been standing before he shifted and began lifting large chunks of debris and furniture out of the way.

I kept my eyes on Will and the other two Vaktare. “What happens to things like jewelry or a wallet when we shift?”

“That’s easy. If they're magically oriented, they will drop to the ground where you shift.”

“Oh?”

He picked something up and held it out for me to see. “Got it,” he said.

“Awesome.”

Beck came back over.

“What should we do with Will?” I couldn’t kill him. We’d gone to school together. He’d been my boyfriend. Sure, he deserved to die, and I knew without a doubt Will would’ve had no problem killing me, but I wasn’t Will.

“Whatever you deem worthy, Beatrice.” Beck gave me a look that promised he would support me no matter what.

“Okay.” I knew what I’d do.

Will and the fighting Vaktare need to go back to Hiraken, I thought.

As soon as the thought passed through my mind, Will and the others were gone.

“Where did they go?” Beck asked.

“Hopefully back to Hiraken,” I said, shrugging.

“Maybe you should’ve killed them. The King will probably torture and kill them anyway for failing.” Beck flinched and I wondered if he was thinking about his sister.

“Then I guess they'll get what they deserve.”

"Very well." Beck took my clawed hand in his. “Let’s go back inside.”

I went with him. Rhem's body changed into tiny lights and dissipated, like thousands of lightning bugs.

"What happened to him?" I shivered. Death wasn't something I would ever get used to.

"In this realm, that is what happens to the corpse of a dead Vaktare," Beck said, pulling me against his side. "It's okay," Beck said.

I nodded, kicking at a portion of the ceiling that had fallen to the floor. My house was a mess. It looked like a tornado had blown through it. "Tell me about the diamond," I said, trying to take my mind off everything else that had happened.

"What do you want to know?"

"I mean, sure, it's beautiful, but why did Will want it so badly?" I asked, cupping it in my paw.

"Do you mind?" Beck took the diamond from me. "It possesses very strong magic. It's one of two diamonds in existence that can be used to jump realms. I believed there was only one - until I saw yours." He smiled sadly. "Obviously, you have no need for such trivial magic, but for most Vaktare, it's a much-desired stone that makes up a very powerful charm. I recommend keeping it close."

"I will," I said, taking it back. Then I really thought about what he said. "Where's the other diamond?" I remembered he'd said he took it and my dad's powers. That meant he still had the other one.

Beck glanced down. "It's safe," he finally said. "And that diamond? I thought Celeste stole it."

"I lied. I wanted to cause her pain." I turned away, disgusted with myself.

Beck shook his head. "So, you had it all this time?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"It's a good thing I believed your lie, otherwise I might not have had the opportunity to get to know the real you."

An electric bolt of anxiety shot down my spine at his words. There

it was again, the reminder that he'd been sent to kill me.

"What next?" Beck asked.

I glanced around the entryway. Thoughts of my parents, the new king of Hiraken and those Vaktare who wanted me dead, worry over my new friend Jesse and even my friends Eva, Ashley, and Cassidy swirled through my mind.

Life was going to get even more complicated.

"I should probably have this mess cleaned up. Bring Mrs. Dotts and Isaac back, and -" I looked down at myself, at the thick fur, and my hands that were more beastly than human. "I guess first I'd better figure out how to shift out of this form. As soon as I do, I'm going to take a shower."

"Maybe you should get to your room right away just in case you shift sooner rather than later." Beck hugged me. "Not that I'd mind." He winked.

I snuggled into his shoulder.

"Your fur is so soft, Beatrice."

Heat burned my cheeks. "So is yours." I ran my hands up and down his back.

Embarrassment gave way to desire.

Sexual tension snapped the air around and between us.

But kissing in our were-forms, at least kissing the way I liked to kiss, wasn't possible.

It seemed my body understood. I felt my skin tingle and immediately I shifted.

Beck quickly turned away.

"Humiliating," I said, feeling my whole-body heat with mortification as I carefully picked my way through the debris and made my way upstairs.

FIZBAN APPEARED AS SOON as I walked into my room, or what was

left of it. “That was awkward,” she said, glancing with distain around my room.

I let out a belated scream, covering my girly parts. “You scared the freaking daylights out of me.”

Fizban laughed, picking up and tossing large chucks of plaster off my bed and onto the floor. “Nothing wrong with a little nakedness.” After brushing off a portion of my bedspread, she sat, crossing one leg over the other and began to pick at one of her long nails. “You are rather jumpy though.”

I thought about everything I’d just been through. Being a little jumpy seemed appropriate, considering. Before I could express such thoughts, I heard Beck yell.

“Beatrice!” The sound of claws scraped against marble stairs and then Beck crashed through the door, teeth bared, and growling.

OceanofPDF.com

MORE BEASTLY THAN YOU

FIZBAN TUTTED Beck when he rushed into my room. “Calm down, Beck. I just surprised our Beatrice.”

I yelped. I didn’t want Beck to see me naked, even though I knew he had before, mostly, when he ran me up to the house after the first time I changed.

Fizban laughed as I jumped over broken furniture and pieces of the wall, climbing into my closet. Surprisingly, it was still intact.

I pulled a silk robe in the darkest blue off a hanger and tied it around myself.

When I came back into the room, it was to see Beck pacing, his body between Fizban and the closet, protecting me. “Beck, meet Fizban, the - What are you exactly?”

She smiled. And then Greg appeared on the bed next to her.

Beck growled again, preparing to attack.

Greg sat beside Fizban. “Relax, Locanis. No harm will come to you or Beatrice on this day.”

The hair on Beck’s back stood on end. “That does nothing to comfort me.”

Standing beside him, I stroked his fur, trying to help him relax.

Fizban and Greg exchanged a look.

“We are called the Unknowns. We are the creators of all the realms, of all magics, and of your species,” Greg said.

Fizban met my gaze. “I wasn’t too happy about how things were going, what with your grandfather turning into quite a jackass, so Greg and I decided on one last hurrah.” Fizban laughed and rocked back like she was telling a funny story. “It was either that or destroy all of you.”

I ground my teeth together, astounded. “Creators? Like Gods?”

“Something like that,” Fizban said with false modesty.

“The legend of the Unduyee was our creation and we brought you, Beatrice, in to being.” Greg smiled, his turquoise eyes dancing with happiness.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to live up to your potential, but you came through.” Fizban’s eyes locked on Beck. “Didn’t she?”

Beck - who was still in his werewolf form - growled.

“And you weren’t so bad yourself,” she went on.

Greg’s gaze never left Beck as he spoke. “We were worried when you first showed up, especially when the two of you seemed to have feelings for each other.” Greg tsked. “You know better.” Beck gave a low snarl. “Beatrice, now you know better as well.” He stood. “So, let’s put this craziness behind us and get you to Hiraken where you can become Queen and begin working on your destiny.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t ready to begin working on my destiny. I didn’t even know how control my ability to shift.

“Fizban. Greg. I really appreciate what you’ve done.” That was a large overstatement. But I was at least glad to be alive. Since they were Gods of some sort, I felt obligated to lay the graciousness on thick.

“The curse, reverse curse thing you did has helped me become a better person.” I gave Fizban a pointed glance. “I think I understand what you meant when you said sometimes those that appear the most beastly are the most beautiful.”

Fizban smiled. “Of course, you do.”

“But I’m not ready to be Queen. I don’t even know how to control the werecat part of myself, or my ability, for that matter.”

The Unknowns turned to each other. They seemed to be communicating without talking. And then their bodies started to change, to shimmer, and become like mist or ghosts.

Beck hadn't seen them change before and I was worried how he'd react. But when I glanced over, I saw he was no longer in the room. It was probably for the best. The Unknowns and I had come to know each other slightly.

"Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. How dare you question those more powerful than you?" The voice sounded like Greg even though I couldn't see his mouth anymore.

"If you wish to see your parents again, you will obey our commands and go to Hiraken and take back the kingdom that is rightfully yours." That was Fizban's voice.

The mists hovered in the air, their scent like that of a rain shower. I stepped backward, trying to keep my distance, but I'd run into what was left the wall next to my bathroom.

My parents, I thought. It sounded as though they knew where my parents were.

Beck came back. "Hold on, Fizban and Greg." He was in his human form and dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved black tee shirt. "The curse -" He paused, shaking his head. "Or the reverse curse you put on Beatrice gave her a year, right?"

The mists both changed direction and headed toward Beck.

"Perhaps." Fizban said, floating around him.

"What business is it of yours?" Greg hissed.

"Well, right now she's way ahead of schedule. So, what if you allowed her to train?" Beck glanced at me. I nodded. I liked the idea. "I will teach her to control her werecat form and assist her in learning how to use all of the abilities she's been given. Then, when the year's up, she'll be more prepared to fulfill her destiny."

Fizban and Greg's misty forms gathered. I heard whispering in a language I couldn't comprehend.

Beck came to stand beside me. He took my hand and squeezed it.

After several seconds, the mists reassembled into Greg and Fizban.

Fizban came forward and held out her hand, indicating I should take it.

Hesitant, I reached out and grabbed hold. She grinned. “We will give you the remainder of your year. We’ve decided you’ve earned it.”

“Thank you,” I said, pulling her close and hugging her. She returned my hug carefully.

“There are conditions,” Greg added.

I nodded. “I’m listening.”

Fizban locked her hands behind her back and began to pace. “Number one: You will keep away from Adam Henry and the dragon child. Their destiny and yours is no longer meant to cross paths.”

"But, why? I want to help them find Jesse."

"That is one of our conditions. Either you agree or you don't. The choice is yours," he snapped.

“Agreed,” I said, gritting my teeth together. I didn't like being told what to do.

"Good," Fizban said, glancing at Greg.

As I watched the Unknowns, the way the moved, the secret smiles they gave each other, the strangest feeling came over me. Was my life even my own? Even though I believed I controlled my own fate, the Unknowns seemed to create problems and then demand I fix them while they just sat back and watched. Like a character in a TV show doing what the directors ordered.

“Number two: You will train with Beck and learn to control your beast and your abilities,” Greg said.

So far, the conditions were easy. “I understand,” I said, solemnly.

“Number three: You will memorize the laws of your species, including no cross-species procreating.” Fizban’s scrutiny roamed between Beck and me.

My heart fell. It wasn’t like I wanted to do that now, but I did like Beck. Like a whole freaking lot.

“Did you hear me?” Fizban asked.

“Yes.” I picked at some dead skin on my hand.

“Beck?”

He growled, low. “I understand.”

“Excellent,” Greg said.

“The final condition: You must go to Hiraken and rescue Beck’s sister.”

I heard Beck suck in a breath.

“This last is of the utmost urgency. The vicious Vaktare king ruling the land has been torturing her.” Fizban’s features softened. “She’ll be dead within the month.”

I took hold of Beck’s arm. “We’ll go immediately.”

He nodded.

“The sooner the better, Beatrice, but make sure you have a plan. Beck is an enemy to those in control now, just as you are. Remember that.”

“I will.”

“You’d better,” Fizban and Greg said together. Their bodies started to shimmer and I knew they would evaporate shortly.

“Wait,” I said. There was one more thing I needed to know.

“Yes,” they said together.

“My parents? Do you know where they are?”

“Of course, we do, Beatrice. We’re the ones who took them.”

It was hard to tell if the Unknowns were good or bad.

Maybe they were neither. Maybe they were both. Or maybe those words, good and bad, meant nothing to such creatures.

“What? Why? To keep them safe?” I hoped that had been the reason, but the look on Fizban’s iridescent face told me otherwise.

“We took them to keep them away from you.” Their forms were almost transparent and I could barely make them out.

I knew they'd vanish any second. "Wait."

"We grow weary of you, Beatrice. Ask your question so that we may go."

I swallowed. "Did you - kill my parents?"

The Unknowns laughed. The sound echoed off the walls.

"They are alive. Perhaps you'll see them again," Greg said.

"If you do as we say," Fizban added and they were gone.

"Of course, I will, just bring them back." I spoke the words to empty air. Devastated, I let out a shuddering breath. "Why would those things take my parents?" I asked, relieved they were gone but still upset by what they'd done.

Beck's shoulders sagged. He sank onto my bed.

I knew his heart was as heavy as mine.

I sat beside him. At least I knew my parents were alive. Beck's sister was being tortured.

"We will get her out. We have to."

Beck ran a hand over my cheek, causing my whole body to quiver. It was great to have him close. I wrapped my hand over his, pressing my face into his touch.

"Beck." My emotions were overflowing with need.

"I'm here." Beck scooted closer. His lips were inches from mine.

I sighed. "You heard what the Unknowns said." I felt I should at least state the obvious, even though I wanted him to kiss me with every ounce of my being.

Beck's lips tilted in a smile, and he leaned in, kissing my cheek. "I did hear what they said." He kissed my other cheek.

My breathing increased, and the fireworks that lit up every time he was near exploded into the softest rose petals.

There was much we had to do, but first, I wanted Beck.

The Unknowns be damned.

Need fluttered around inside my lower belly. “And?” I couldn’t even think. Every nerve was sparking with desire for the man in front of me.

Beck kissed my forehead. “They said we couldn’t procreate.” His lips kissed the tip of my nose. “There are ways to ensure we don’t make any babies.”

“You’re right,” I whispered. Hope beat through my heart.

Beck’s lips claimed mine. He lay back on the bed, pulling me with him.

Beck and I had a lot to think about, a lot to deal with. My parents. His sister. Training. But for right now, it was just the two of us.

“You’re bad, Beck Haddox. So, so bad,” I said against his mouth.

Beck smiled, nibbling on my lower lip. “What can I say, you accomplished your goal.” He growled, rolling on top of me.

“I did?” I asked, breathlessly. I had no idea what he meant.

“I am more beastly than you are.” With those words, he covered my mouth with his, pushing my mouth open and kissing me so passionately, I felt it down to my toes.

YOUR INPUT MATTERS. If you enjoyed A Beauty so Beastly, please email me. I’m working on book 2 but need to verify reader interest. If there isn’t enough, I won’t be continuing Beatrice’s story.

OceanofPDF.com

HIDDEN PRINCESS

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

WHO AM I

WHEN I THINK BACK to the days before the crap hit the fan, I can't help but see all I missed. My innocence or naivety. That girl—past me had no idea what her life was to become. Days spent worrying about a first kiss and a high school boy. It seems sweet, but also trivial. As I look back and think about my life before fairies and magic, my heart softens, and part of me longs for the ease of that time once again. But what's the point? My life has wholly shifted. I'm no longer just a girl with a crush. Honestly, I'm still trying to figure out who I am.

OceanofPDF.com

"TELL ME YOU LOVE ME." Carson holds my face in his hands. His green eyes search mine waiting, as his minty breath caresses my cheek.

I shiver, forgetting about the lights or the fact that there are people in the audience watching us, and promise myself I won't faint. As I study his mouth, an image of my Auntie Macey comes to mind. Not very romantic, but it's true. Since I can remember, Macey has shared motivational quotes like giving out candy on Halloween. Though it's more what she said to me before I left for school than it is her that's on my mind. She said something like, "You have to think it to achieve it."

A moment similar to this one has played over and over in my daydreams for a long time. Now, here I am, with Carson's hands on my face, as he gazes at me longingly. I can't help thinking my Auntie Macey isn't as crazy as I thought. She is right. I'm living proof. I thought it and now I'm about to achieve it.

My heart skips several beats.

A line from the movie, ***Dirty Dancing*** comes to mind. The main character says something like: "*I'm scared of leaving this room and never feeling the rest of my whole life the way I feel when I'm with you."* And that's why I'm here in our high school theater, up on stage, standing in front of Carson Hayes, batting my eyelashes.

"Juliet?" One eyebrow goes up questioningly. "Tell me you love me," he says again.

My mouth curves into an O as I work to live in the moment. Even though his words aren't meant for me, but for the character I'm playing, I want to believe them anyway.

We are acting out a scene for our school's interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*. I'm just the stand in while the real actress is busy doing

something else. Still, I'm going to pretend anyway. My line enters my head. "You know I do. More than anything," I say and mean it. I put my small hands over his and step closer. The kiss is coming.

In seconds his mouth will cover mine.

I will not faint.

I will not faint.

I will not faint.

"Say it then, Juliet. Say the words my soul longs to hear." His lips nearly touch mine as he speaks.

I swallow. Feel my knees buckle. My heart is pounding in my ears. "Romeo. Sweet, Romeo. I love nothing in the world as much as I love you. Despite our family's differences, my love is only true."

"My Juliet." His lips touch mine. They're soft and move slowly. At the caress, my chest tightens, and fiery warmth spreads through my body. It's my first kiss. With each passing moment of bliss, I sense a change come over me. The feeling is unexplainable, but something within my belly flutters to life, and I return the kiss with fervor, hoping he won't stop.

Too soon he pulls back and smiles. "Say you'll go to the dance with me."

The play takes place in modern day and the dance is the turning point. Carson and I are standing in what looks like a contemporary living room, next to a sleek couch. He takes a heart-shaped box from one of the end tables and hands it to me. "For you."

"Thank you." Following the stage direction written in the script, I take the box, and open it. There are actually chocolates inside. They smell tasty and my stomach growls. Embarrassed by the sound, I glance up at Carson, but he doesn't seem to notice.

The stick of gum and juice I had for lunch did nothing to fill my tummy. "Well it depends," I say pretending to pick up a piece of chocolate and pop it into my mouth. As much as I want to eat the

chocolates, they are part of the set, and I'm not allowed.

"On what?" he asks, watching me fake chew, a glimmer of a smile on his lips.

I pick up another imaginary piece. Pause before I put it into my mouth and watch him from under my lashes. Then phony swallow. "Whether or not these are yummy enough." I smile, showing him I'm joking because of course they are delicious and so is he.

"And?" He crosses his arms playfully.

I step in closer to him, allowing myself to be overwhelmed by the heady scent of his cologne. It's clean and manly. I close my eyes, leaning my face up toward him. "My answer is… yes."

He lifts me off the ground in a big hug, and I laugh, placing my hands on his shoulders, my eyes on him as he swings me around, before setting me back down. Breathless, I wish the moment will never end.

"Okay, that's a wrap," Mrs. Barrows, our theater teacher says, bursting my happy bubble.

I sigh internally. *Dang!* I should've pretended I forgot some of my lines, so we would have to practice the scene more than once.

"Did you get the lighting done?" Mrs. Barrows shouts up to the booth as Carson and I watch each other. He's smiling and I think I am too, but who knows. I'm sort of an awkward girl.

"Yeah, we're good for now," Justin, the lighting designer responds.

"Great." Mrs. Barrows stands, her focus on me. "Rory, get that dress off right away, please."

And the fairy tale is over, I think. "Yes, ma'am." I look up at Carson and smile shyly. "You're going to be great as Romeo. Hope I helped."

"You did, thanks. You're actually a really good actress, too," Carson says sounding only slightly surprised.

I feel my face heat up. "Thanks." I know his words were just meant to be nice. Acting isn't my thing. Painting the sets, doing the rigging,

organizing costumes, and touching up makeup are what I enjoy. “I’m sure the scene will be much better with Kelly.” I start to walk off stage, but he grabs my arm.

“Hang on.” He pulls me close. “Hey, Rory.” One side of his lips raises in a half smirk.

“Carson.” My heart hasn’t stopped racing since our kiss. I want to go home and document what’s happened in my journal. The first line will read: He kissed me! And my journal will totally know who *he* is because I’ve been talking about Carson Hayes since Junior High. But I’m also trying to do a better job of living in the moment. “What’s up?” I ask lightly, thinking it doesn’t matter that he didn’t kiss me because he likes me. He. Still. Kissed. Me. In real life, not just my dreams.

“Why haven’t you and I gone out before?” Carson’s gaze flits from my eyes to my lips and lingers there.

“Because,” I begin, pulling out of his grasp. “You don’t like me.” Which is true. He’s the most popular guy in school, and the star of the soccer team. With flawless blond hair, green eyes, rippling muscles, and a killer smile, all the girls want him. Including me. No point denying the truth. And he can do whatever he wants. Whether it’s star as the male lead in the school play, drawing, or participating in the photography club, the normal rules don’t apply to him.

And no one questions him.

But while he’s untouchable, I’m not. Like not even close.

When I reach the wings of the stage, I peek back at him. He hasn’t moved and is still watching me. I never said he was a smart guy, just hot. Okay, I happen to know he’s taking Calculus, but whatever. I smile. “If you ever want to practice your lines again, I’d be happy to.”

“Cool.” He tucks his hands into his pockets before heading downstage, probably to get notes from Mrs. Barrows.

I run into the dressing room and remove the short, pale pink Grecian gown, hang it up with the rest of the costumes, and change

back into my regular clothes.

OceanofPDF.com

"YOU READY?" Tiana asks. She and Merida walk in while I'm tying my shoes.

I stand. Grab my backpack and my jacket. "Yeah. You?"

"We've been ready," Merida says, rolling her eyes. She's sucking on a lollipop and hands one to me.

I take it and unwrap it, throwing the incriminating evidence into my backpack since there's no food allowed back here. "Thanks," I say linking one arm around hers and the other around Tiana's. The three of us leave the dressing room, giggling as we walk down the hall and out one of the theater's side doors.

Tiana and Merida seem extra quiet as we cross the courtyard to where my car is parked. I think maybe they weren't in the theater when Carson and I kissed, but by the time we reach my old VW Rabbit, I'm sure I lucked out. I'm a little bummed. I want to talk to them about the kiss, but don't want to sound like I'm bragging. They're my best friends. They need to know.

I put my car in drive and open my mouth to tell them the awesome news when they burst out laughing. They do know, I realize, but were waiting until we had some privacy.

"What?" I ask innocently, slamming my mouth shut.

From the backseat, Merida speaks first. "We want a play-by-play of that kiss." She pauses a second. "Is he amazing?"

"Are his lips soft?" Tiana chimes in. She has her backpack on her lap and pulls out some lip-gloss, puts it on and then puckers.

"Firm?" Merida asks.

"Did he use his tongue?" Tiana wriggles her eyebrows.

I smack her on the arm, but giggle. "No." The feel of his lips on mine, and the confident way they moved makes me smile and my

body melts.

“Look at her. She’s smiling *and* sighing. Double proof that Carson is a good kisser.”

“Rory has all the luck,” Tiana grumbles, crossing her arms.

I sit up straight. “We were acting.”

“Maybe he was, but you weren’t,” Merida says, looking at me like I can’t fool her.

And she’s right. Tiana, Merida, and I have been friends since childhood. We’ve lived by each other and grown into more than friends. “Fine. He was acting, so the kiss didn’t mean anything.” I say wishing it wasn’t true.

“That’s a bunch of bull. You’re practically glowing.” Tiana turns in her seat and leans her elbows on her backpack.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “It was wonderful.”

“Right? I mean you kissed Carson Hayes.”

“Give us details. Come on. He’s the hottest guy in school. We want to live vicariously through you,” Merida adds. Her curly red hair bounces as she talks.

“Fine. Okay.” I roll my eyes and laugh as I pull into my driveway. “He’s a very good kisser.”

They squeal enthusiastically as they pile out. I check my reflection in the rearview mirror, hoping to see a changed woman. Someone more mature. All I see are slightly swollen lips and my face heats. Carson kissed me!

“I knew it,” Merida says wistfully. She bites down on the lollipop, chewing the candy in her teeth. “He needs to practice on me next.” She salutes with the stick and heads across the street toward her house, walking backward so Tiana and I can still see her face. She pretend kisses her arm.

“You’re crazy, Mer,” Tiana shouts.

I laugh. “Since he kissed me, don’t I have dibs?” That seems like

the fair way to treat the situation.

Merida frowns. “No calling dibs.” At her front door she unlocks it, turns back, and waves. “Homework later?”

“Definitely. I need your help with Calculus. It’s kicking my butt.” I look over at Tiana who just smiles.

“You got it.” Merida disappears inside her twentieth century brick Tudor that’s the same style as mine.

I turn to Tiana. “I suppose you want dibs too?”

She shakes her head. “I’m holding out for *Charles Michael Davis*, but I’m no fool. If Carson asks, I’ll go ahead and kiss him.” She knocks her hip into mine lightly.

“Isn’t that the guy from *The Originals*?”

“Shut your mouth. He isn’t just that guy. He’s *the* guy. The whole reason I binge watch the show, and he’s beautiful.” She clasps her hands together, pretending to look into *Charles Davis’* dreamy eyes.

I can’t help laughing. “Isn’t he also thirty?” I lock my car and head up the walk to my front door.

Tiana glares playfully. “I’m eighteen. That’s only…” she pauses a moment. “A twelve year age difference.” She shakes her head, making her curly black hair wiggle. “When it’s true love, age means nothing,” she says dramatically, moving across my lawn. It crunches under her boots.

“Okay,” I say. There’s no arguing with Tiana about her serious crush. “I’ll text you later.”

“Yep.” She turns and jogs the rest of the way past my lawn and into hers before I hear her front door slam.

OceanofPDF.com

"Ooh, what if he asks you to the dance?" Tiana chews on the eraser end of her pencil.

"He won't. If he takes anyone, he'll take Kelly." I work through the problem, wishing I could pull my hair out. Math makes my head hurt.

Merida glances at my paper. "Nope, you've got to take the *ln* of the equation before you solve for *k*."

I yowl in frustration. "I see the words coming out of your mouth. I even hear them, but I don't understand. It's like you're speaking a different language."

Merida laughs. "Well Calculus is kind of like a different language. So you just need to learn it and then the math will be easy."

Tiana slams her book shut. "I'm switching out of this class. It's obnoxious."

"No," I say, shaking her arm. "I need someone to not understand with me."

She rolls her eyes. "Life is too short. I don't have time for this crap."

Merida runs her fingers through the loose curls in her red hair. "It's really not that bad."

"You're right. Calculus is worse." I snap my gum and close my book. "I'm done for tonight. My brain hurts."

"Fine." Merida closes her book and shoves it in her bag.

"I want someone to ask me to the dance. I don't care if that seems cliché. I want to have a cute boy dressed in a black tux come to my door with a bracelet corsage. I want him to look at me in my emerald green dress and tell me how gorgeous I am. Then I want him to open my doors and hold my hand all night." Tiana clasps her hands together like she's praying.

“Is that all?” I ask, shutting my book and stuffing it into my backpack.

Merida takes a sip of her soda. “That sounds about right. Except the dress will be turquoise instead of emerald green.

Tiana drinks her water. “Humph. No. At the dance he’ll only have eyes for me. There will be dozens of other beautiful girls, but he won’t even notice them.” Her dark brown eyes get dreamy and I realize she’s imagining herself at the dance. I want that for her. She deserves to have her dreams come true.

“Awwww, you’re such a romantic,” I say, sipping my hot chocolate. “Would you show him how to do one of our dances?”

Tiana laughs. “You mean this one?” She turns on the song we made up our latest dance to, stands, pushes in her chair, and pulls Merida and me out of our chairs.

For the next three minutes we do our dance. And then we fall on the floor laughing.

When the clock chimes ten, Tiana stands. “I have to go. Curfew.”

I get up and help Merida to her feet.

“I suppose I should go too,” Merida says, raking her hands through her hair.

I sip my cocoa. The chocolaty goodness is no longer hot, and the marshmallows are melted, but I can’t waste cocoa. “Hey, T. Does this guy that asks you to the dance look like a certain actor from *The Originals*?”

She shakes her head. “I haven’t met him yet, but when I do, I’ll feel it in my bones.”

From somewhere outside comes the sound of a loud growl. I know Tiana and Merida hear it too. I’m guessing the whole neighborhood did.

“Oh, no, not again, that stupid spe—” She stops and glances first at Tiana and then me. “I’m frazzled.” She shakes her hands through her

long curly hair before tucking it behind her ears. “Gotta go.” Merida grabs her backpack off the table, knocking it against the wall. It rattles the china.

“Oh, no,” I hear one of my aunties say.

“That poor dear,” another auntie says.

“Perhaps we should help her—”

“No,” the other two respond at the same time.

The three of them proceed to whisper a conversation I can’t understand.

Merida shakes her head and we all look at each other and shrug.

“Sorry,” Merida says.

“No worries,” I respond as Fae walks in carrying a tray.

“Hey, Auntie Fae.”

“Hi dear. I brought you girls some cookies.”

“Thanks,” I say as she sets them on the table. “But they have to go.”

My aunties are super sweet, but they’re also a little flitty, easily agitated, and incredibly nosy. Mostly though, they’re quick to love. They are all the family I have and I’m grateful for them.

“Want a cookie, Merida?” Auntie Fae’s azure eyes, almost exactly like mine, dart around the room, looking for broken glass, I guess.

Merida shakes her head. “I need to get going, but thanks for the offer.” She heads out of the room.

“Everything alright, dear?” Fae asks her.

“Yeah, I—” She glances at the cookies. They don’t look that great. In fact, they’re a mess, but Merida says. “What the heck?” She takes a cookie. “See you girls tomorrow.”

Auntie Fae sighs after Merida is gone. “Her poor mother. Hopefully one of these days she’ll get herself under control.” She heads back into the kitchen. Under her breath she says, “If the boys have changed too,

our trash will be everywhere in the morning."

Tiana and I look at each other and laugh.

"Your aunts are kind of nuts."

"Yeah, but that's just part of their charm." I take a cookie and so does Tiana. "I'll try it if you will," I say. "On the count of three."

"One," Tiana starts, sniffing the one in her hand.

They look like blueberry chocolate chip cookies.

"Two," I say.

"Three," Tiana says.

We each take a bite of our cookie at the same time. I shake my head.

"Are they done?" Tiana asks, setting hers back on the tray.

I put my down too. "I don't think so," I reply, spitting the contents in my mouth out into a napkin before throwing it away. Tiana has better manners than me and swallows as she organizes her books and papers. Her face says it all though. The cookie is gross.

"I'll teach him a dance that's just for me and him," Tiana says slowly, her features thoughtful.

At first, I don't understand what she means, but quickly recover. She's talking about my previous comment on teaching the guy she falls for one of our dances. I wrap an arm around Tiana's shoulders. "He'd like that, for sure."

OceanofPDF.com

"SOMEDAY YOU'LL GET your happily ever after. I know it," I continue.

Tiana nods, her gaze serious. "So will you." She hefts her pack onto her shoulder.

I shrug. "Maybe."

My cell phone pings. I pick it up and gasp.

"What?" Tiana asks, glancing over.

"The text is from Carson." I'm stunned and fall into a chair, rereading his text multiple times.

"No way. Serious?" She grabs my phone. "Sweet bees on honey, it is his number."

Is it sad that even though Carson has never called me I know his number? I think every girl at Hellgate High has his number memorized.

I take back my phone. "What should I say?"

Tiana sits back down as well. "I'd start with returning his "hi" with one of your own." She sets down her bag, rubbing her arm.

"Right." I text back: *Hi.*

Do you know who this is?

"He has no idea about the girls at this school, does he?" Tiana says, chuckling, scooting her chair beside mine so she can read while I type.

"Nope." I text him: *Yes.* I hit send. Then add: *Do you know who this is?*

LOL. Of course I do. You're my acting partner. My Juliet.

I think of his kiss and shiver.

"He's sweet," Tiana says, sounding surprised. Then studies my face. "Oh, you have it soooooo, soooooo bad." Tiana knocks her shoulder

into mine.

“No, I don’t,” I lie because I can’t stop staring at my phone. He called me his Juliet. I never figured Carson for a romantic, but he kind of is.

“Better text back, something.” She rests her head on my shoulder.

“Right.” I click the letters as fast as my fingers will go. *Did you need something? More practice?*

“That isn’t very romantic,” she says and I can practically hear her eyes roll inside her head.

Well, yeah. But, I also wanted to know if you had a date to the dance next Friday?”

Tiana and I squeal at the same time.

“Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.” She claps her hands. “I’m always right.”

No, I quickly text back, swallowing. My heart races.

I know this is a terrible, horrible way to ask a girl to a dance, but since it’s next week, I hope you’ll forgive me and let me make it up to you.

Tiana and I read the text.

“Is that his way of asking you? He’s right, that’s terrible and horrible.” Tiana crosses her arms, irritated. “Where’s the grandeur?”

“It’s fine.” I watch her shake her head and my heart stops beating a minute. Is she really telling me not to go to the dance with him? He didn’t specifically ask, but still.

My phone chimes.

I’m an idiot. Rory, would you do me the honor of going to the dance with me?

“Much better,” Tiana says when she sees the text.

“It works.” I’m dying inside unable to believe this is really happening.

“Hurry and text that boy yes.” She giggles and I join in.

I type my response but stop. “Why would he ask me to the dance? I thought him and Kelly were going out.” I see them together a lot at school.

“They might date, but that doesn’t mean they are exclusive.” She shrugs. “They’re part of the same group. Besides, he can ask whoever he wants.” She leans over and gives me a hug. “Say yes,” she whispers in my ear. “I’ve got to go. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yep. Bright and early.” I stare at my phone.

Rory? Carson texts along with a bunch of smiling faces. *Do you already have a date for the dance?*

No, I text back, hoping he isn’t changing his mind.

Are you interested in going to the dance with me?

Well… Are you sure you want to go with me?

I wouldn’t have asked if I weren’t.

I leave my backpack in the dining room and walk out. “Night, aunties. I’m going to bed,” I say, heading to my room.

“Night.”

“Sleep good.”

“See you in the morning.”

I close my bedroom door and fall onto my queen-sized bed.

Rory, please say the words my soul longs to hear.

He’s using words from the play. It’s sweet and dorky and even though I probably shouldn’t think it’s wonderful, I do. *Yes. I would love to go to the dance with you,* I text back.

Cool. See you at school tomorrow.

Not if I see you first.

LOL. Nice. Goodnight.

Night. =D

OceanofPDF.com

SCHOOL the next day is slow going. I'm antsy. Excited to see Carson, but nervous as well. What if last night was a joke? During lunch I go to the library again. I want to get my English homework done so I have plenty of time to spend in the theater. Near Carson. *Gah,* I hate that I'm acting like one of those girls and not like the feminist I believe myself to be.

"Focus, Rory." I write down some notes.

"Talking to yourself?" Carson sits in the chair opposite me at the table.

I feel my face get hot. "Um, no. Just speaking out loud." My throat constricts and my heart pumps loudly.

"Isn't that the same thing?" He picks up one of my books, flipping through the pages.

My face gets hotter. "I guess so." I'm so focused on my paper I think I might melt a hole in it.

"Hey?" Carson asks softly.

I glance up.

"I'm just teasing," he says, pulling out his phone. "I actually have a few questions."

Crap, I think, swallowing down a whole bunch of nerves. I brush my hair off one shoulder and onto the other. "Okay?"

"What's your favorite food?"

The question surprises me and I have to think about my answer. "Probably fried chicken and waffles." I shrug, considering where he's going with the questions. My aunties aren't the greatest cooks, but they always take me out to eat for my birthday and I order the same thing—chicken and waffles.

"Mmmmm, that sounds good." He makes notes in his phone. "I

know I just asked you to the dance last night, but have you thought about the color of your dress?"

So the questions are about the dance, I think, finally understanding. He is serious! I glance down at my clothes. They aren't anything special, old skinny jeans, a white tank and a bright pink sweater, but pink is my favorite color. "Probably pink," I say.

He makes a note. "Last question." His green eyes shine with joy.

"I'm ready," I say crossing my legs, relaxing a little.

"Your favorite flower?"

That's easy. "Dahlias."

"Dahlias?" Carson repeats, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, they're beautiful." I unlock my phone and show him a picture. "See?"

"Oh, yeah. Pretty." He makes a note. Then puts his phone in his backpack.

I can't help but watch him move. His broad shoulders flex and shift under his tight white tee shirt.

When he sits up, he catches me watching him and smiles. "I brought you something." He slides a single piece of chocolate sitting in a small pink wrapper across the table, toward me.

"What's this?" I ask. The smell of milk chocolate and cherry fills my nose. My mouth waters.

"I saw how much you wanted to eat the chocolate yesterday while we were rehearsing and thought I'd bring one that's new and hasn't been handled."

I'm blown away. Before a few days ago Carson and never had a real conversation and now he's bringing me chocolate. The gesture is thoughtful, and I realize he isn't at all what I expected.

"Go ahead," he says, indicating the chocolate in his fingers. I pick it up and put it in my mouth. As soon as the chocolate hits my tongue I close my eyes. The chocolate is delicious. I push the flavors around

in my mouth a moment, allowing the incredible taste to linger. A sweet burst of cherry mixes with the chocolate and I sigh.

From across the table I hear Carson laugh. I open my eyes. “You didn’t like it,” he says with a smirk.

I try not to smile and shake my head. “Totally gross.” For some reason I’m embarrassed and look down at my paper.

Carson slides another chocolate across the table. “Will you run through my lines with me again tonight after school?”

I glance at the chocolate and then him. “Are you trying to buy my help with chocolates?” I pick it up and take a bite. This one has an orange filling. My favorite.

“Are they working?”

“Yes,” I admit, pressing my lips together to get the chocolate off.

“Good.” He stands, pulls an entire heart shaped box from his backpack and set it on the table.

I feel my eyes get wide.

He winks, and I’m smitten. No one should be allowed to be so amazingly good looking and nice. The combination seems unfair to the rest of the world. “Meet me at my house around four.”

“Wait, we aren’t practicing in the theater?” I turn to watch him walk away.

He pauses and glances back. “We can’t tonight. The lighting crew is using the stage to do a last run through before we start final rehearsals.”

I remember Mrs. Barrows saying that. “Okay, but Carson?”

He adjusts his backpack and lifts an eyebrow, waiting.

“What about Kelly?” I whisper, worried someone might overhear.

He walks back to my table and leans over. The smell of his cologne fills my nose. “Kelly is a friend. We went on a few dates, but she and I aren’t a couple.” He takes my hand. “I can hang out with whoever I like and so can she.” He laces our fingers together. “But it’s cool you

were worried. Says a lot about you."

"Oh." My pulse pounds, making me jittery like I drank too much coffee. "All right." I'm embarrassed again. "Uh, Carson?"

"Rory." He gives me a cheeky grin.

I like the way my strange name sounds when it leaves his mouth. "I don't know where you live."

He squeezes my hand before letting go. "I'll text you." He heads back to the door. "Anything else?" He flashes me a huge smile.

"Nope. I'm—Oh wait. Thanks for the chocolates." I hold up the box.

"You're welcome." He leaves and I lean back in my chair. I'm shocked. And a little confused. A strange thought keeps running through my mind. What if I'm the brunt of some kind of joke?

"What do you think you're doing talking to my man?" Kelly slinks into the same chair Carson was sitting in. Her dark hair is up in a tight ponytail and she's wearing thick eyeliner, making her brown eyes look like a cat's. She's wearing black skinny jeans, a purple top, and a black shrug.

"Hi, Kelly." I try to sound nonchalant.

She ignores me. "You and Carson?" Kelly gives me a look that says she doesn't believe what she saw. "You know the only reason he's spending time with you is to make me jealous." She lifts the lid off the chocolates and takes one, chews a second, and then spits it into the trash. "That's disgusting." She laughs. "Cheap chocolate for a cheap date." She walks away and I glare after her.

OceanofPDF.com

I DRIVE ACROSS THE BRIDGE, following the directions Carson texted me. Missoula is a sprawling city with a population of more than seventy thousand people. The city sits along Clark Fork River and is surrounded by thick woodlands. The local news usually includes stories about bear poachers along with gun control, but there is also a vast art community, and the University of Montana. Missoula is a great city for anyone who loves the outdoors.

I head toward the University. In the distance are the Rocky Mountains. They're topped with snow. Usually at this time of year there's a lot more, but Missoula has had a mild winter.

I turn onto Carson's street and park in front of a small white house. There's a chain link fence around the front yard with a gate. The lawn is covered in snow and overgrown shrubs line the rickety porch.

After locking my car, I open the gate and walk up the broken concrete path toward the door. Before I see the dog, I hear it running from somewhere in the back. I debate what to do, either try to make a break for the fence or freeze and hope the dog doesn't eat me. The Rottweiler has a face bigger than mine. He dashes around the corner.

When he sees me, he skids to a stop.

"Hi, boy," I say tentatively, holding out my hands.

He growls deep in his chest. Takes a step forward. Then another. I keep wishing Carson will show up and save me.

"Easy, puppy," I say.

His nose presses against the palm of one of my hands. He sniffs and then licks my fingers.

"Oh, you act tough, but you're actually a big softie, aren't you?" I speak quietly but still don't move.

After a few minutes, the dog sits. I reach out and pet him. He lets

out a whine and lies down. I squat next to him and scratch his back. He rolls, showing me his tummy.

“You’re such a good boy. Yes you are. A very good boy.” My voice has taken on the baby-talk tone.

The front door opens. Carson comes out. I glance up. “Hey. Your dog and I were just getting acquainted.”

Carson’s mouth is hanging open.

“What?” I say, standing.

The dog follows and nudges my hand.

“That’s Butch.” Carson walks down the steps and meets me. “The dog usually doesn’t like people.”

“Oh?” I look at Butch “Are you a big, scary dog who doesn’t like people? I don’t think so. No, I don’t,” I say, scratching his head.

Carson snorts. “No. Serious. My friends hate coming over because Butch tries to attack them.”

“Huh.” I shrug and pat Butch’s dark brown head. “I guess I didn’t know better, so neither did he.” Butch rubs his head against my hip.

Carson laughs. “I have an even ornerier cat inside. Maybe you can work your magic on him too.”

“I can try,” I say following Carson up the creaky wooden steps. One side of the porch is falling down and the screens on both windows are torn.

When I get inside, I’m surprised to see the living room is small but clean. Beyond, there a kitchen with a two-seat dining table to the right. The cupboards are a light oak and the appliances are orange. The kitchen looks like it came from the seventies. A wall with an opening separates the living from the rest of the house. I think it used to have glass in it, but no more. Now there’s a giant hole with a dead potted plant resting on the sill.

A dark opening is toward the back of the living room. I’m guessing the bedrooms and bathrooms are back there.

The walls of the house are covered in dark wood paneling and the ceiling is low and appears to be covered in white popcorn. The living room is decorated with brown carpet, two windows, a couch, a coffee table, a reclining chair, and an old TV, the kind with rabbit ears, sitting on a stand. It's cozy though.

OceanofPDF.com

"WELCOME TO THE CAVE," Carson says.

"Cave?" I ask, touching the stack of books on the TV stand.

"It's always dark in here—even when the curtains are open, and all the lights are on.

"I think the room is nice," I respond, picking up a book from off a counter. *The Old Man And The Sea*. "Doing some light reading?" I wave the spine of the book at him.

"Not me," Carson says, but he takes the book from my hands and sets it back on the TV stand. "Come on. Let's go to my room."

I follow him down the hall, past a bathroom and a closed door. When he opens the second door, I ask, "Where's your parents?"

Carson shakes his head. "It's just me and my dad and he's at work."

"What happened to your mom?" I ask, checking out his room. There's a bed, dresser, a desk with an old laptop sitting on top, and a bookshelf. It's filled with books and soccer trophies. The walls are covered in a mishmash of posters including soccer balls, cool photos, a signed poster of Chris Evans as *Captain America*, and other random stuff.

"She left when I was five. Couldn't take marriage to my dad or being my mom." He pauses and looks away, uncomfortable.

I want to tell him that can't be true. How could anyone not love Carson? "I'm so sorry," I say, studying him. "I didn't mean to pry. I have no idea who my parents are so it's always on my mind. Sorry." All the years I saw him at school I never guessed he didn't have a mom or that he lived in a tiny house. I judged him. Believed he was another one of the rich kids from the popular crowd who have everything and look down on the rest of us. I was so wrong. "That

must've been hard as a kid." *And probably still is,* I think.

"Are you adopted?" He sits on his bed and picks up the script.

I sit next to him. "It's just me and my three aunties. They've taken care of me since I was a baby. I haven't met my parents even though they're supposed to be alive somewhere."

Carson faces me. "I may have misjudged you." He hands me his script.

"There's a lot of that going around." I glance at the page and recognize the same scene we worked on yesterday. My heart jumps. The kissing scene. I clear my throat and stand. We're alone in his house and in his room. Kissing can lead to more stuff and I'm not even close to ready for that. The kiss yesterday was my first. I'm still reeling from that experience. "Where'd you get this?" I ask, tapping on a Broncos poster signed by John Elway.

He shrugs. "My dad."

"Oh." I move on to the next one. A poster of—

"The posters are stupid. Can we just work on the script?" Carson asks.

I sense his distain and hurry back over to his bed and sit. "Sure. Where do you want to start?"

"Let's take the scene we worked on yesterday from the top." He takes a pack of gum from his computer desk and offers me a piece. "Want one?"

"Definitely." I remove the wrapper and put the red stick in my mouth. Carson does the same with his piece.

"Ready?"

"Yeah, give me a sec." I read over the first few sentences in my mind, clear my throat. "I'm good."

Carson faces me. Our knees touch and I pretend my body isn't jittery with excitement.

His face softens and gets serious. "Tell me you love me." Carson

takes my face in his hands.

Just like yesterday, my body shudders. “You know I do. More than anything.” I search his eyes, begging him to see the truth, even though I realize I’ve loved the idea of him and not the actual him. I didn’t actually know Carson, but I’m happy that’s changing.

“Say it then, Juliet. Say the words my soul longs to hear.” He’s so close I can smell his gum.

My eyes fall to his lips, remembering the feel of them and I crave them against mine again. “Romeo. Sweet, Romeo. I love you. Despite our family’s differences.”

“My Juliet.” His mouth covers mine.

And I’m lost. Adrift in the feel of his lips caressing mine, the way he deepens our kiss without being forceful. I wait for his tongue to find mine and Carson doesn’t disappoint.

Like before, something strange stirs in my chest, a tightening and a burst of golden fire. I’m panting.

Carson scoots closer, moving his hands to my neck and down my back.

In the other room a door slams.

Carson jumps back and I swear his face pales.

“Who parked their car in front of our house?” The voice is deep and filled with anger.

“That’s my dad.” He climbs off the bed, takes my hand, and adjusts my hair.

OceanofPDF.com

"WHAT'S GOING ON IN HERE?" Carson's bedroom door opens, and Carson's dad hovers in the doorway. He looks me over and sneers. "Aren't you a looker."

He turns his attention to Carson, and I'm relieved, until he starts talking again.

"You're so lucky you're still young. A hot new girl every night." He chuckles spitefully. "Remember one day they'll realize what a waste of air you are and leave, just like your mom."

I feel Carson's body tense.

And I don't want to be here anymore. "I should get going," I say.

Carson's dad blocks the door with his tall figure. He has thinning dark hair and wears a plaid shirt and dusty old jeans.

"Let her leave, dad," Carson says.

I notice Carson's usually bright eyes turn dull and his confident posture is sunk in.

From where I stand, I can smell the whiskey on his father's breath, and my pulse spikes with worry for Carson.

"Why, Cary? She doesn't need to go. I didn't mean to interrupt." The words seem like an apology, but his tone is laced with sarcasm. "Just do what you do best." Carson's father starts to walk away, then he changes his mind, comes back into the room, and punches Carson's wall so hard his fist goes through the plaster. He pulls his hand out and laughs. I can see there's blood on his knuckles. "My name's Bud. If you ever get tired of the boy—" He glances at his son.

Carson shoves his dad out of his room. "Get out. Don't disrespect Rory like that." Carson is furious. I feel the anger radiating off him.

His dad laughs harder and stumbles down the hall.

Carson closes his door and locks it. He walks over to the dresser,

opens one of the drawers and pulls out another soccer poster. Takes some tape and hangs the poster over the area where his dad punched the wall. When he's finished, he puts the tape back in the drawer and sits on his bed. "I'm really sorry about that," he says putting his face in his hands.

Now I understand why there are random posters all over the room. They don't represent what Carson loves, only what he wants covered up. I kneel in front of him and grab his face, so that I can see his bright green eyes. "It's okay," I say. "Carson, really."

He searches my eyes. "Rory." His gaze falls to my lips. He kneels on the floor in front of me, grabs my shoulders and kisses me. Really kisses me. There's no tenderness, just need and hunger and desire.

I take his shirt in my fists and bring him close and then run my fingers along his back and down to his hips. His body is taut, chiseled. He tastes like cinnamon, and his body smells like clean laundry.

After several long minutes his lips release mine. He smiles. "We may need to practice this scene a lot until the final performance."

My lips feel swollen, but in a way that makes me want more. "I'd like that."

WHEN I'M IN BED, Carson texts: *Thanks again for practicing with me.*

I text back: *Anytime.*

You got home kind of late. Where were you? The text is from Tiana.

Nothing gets past my best friend. She probably somehow knows exactly what I've been up to. *I was at Carson's.*

OMGeeeeee!!!!! Tell me there was kissing involved.

Maybe.

You're evil. Then she texts: *How was it?*

Isn't there a rule about kissing and telling?

That's only between guys. Girls are supposed to kiss and tell.

LOL. He is a great kisser. My lips feel bruised.

Nice. You know Merida is going to freak when she finds out, right?

Yeah. I'll give you both the play-by-play tomorrow. Night.

Night, she says. And then, *Oh, wait a sec. Are we going dress shopping this weekend?*

I hadn't thought about buying a dress, but I need one. I'll have to talk to my aunties about the dance first. *Don't know yet. I'll tell you tomorrow.*

OceanofPDF.com

THE NEXT MORNING I take extra time getting ready. I put on a gray and pink striped sweater, a pink skirt, and gray tights with matching heels. I even try to curl my long blond hair. But after burning my forehead once and my ear a second time I give up and stick my hair in a ponytail.

“Rory, hurry up. You’re going to be late for school,” one of my aunties hollers.

“Coming,” I apply some light pink lip-gloss and brown mascara. Grab my backpack and my phone and head into the kitchen. Our house is a rambler with the bedrooms and bathrooms on one side separated by the front entry and then the living areas, including the kitchen, dining room and family room on the other.

“Morning,” I say, setting my pack on the small kitchen table. “What’s for breakfast?” None of them are very good cooks, but they all try.

“Apple pancakes,” Auntie Vera says. She has flour on her cheek and the tip of her nose.

“Thank you,” I say as she sets a plate of what looks like a jumbled mash with sliced apples on top.

“Don’t forget the whipped cream,” Auntie Fae says, spraying the cream high.

The three of them stand in front of the small table waiting for me to take a bite.

“Oh, and she needs milk.” Auntie Vera pours some into a glass, slopping some on the granite countertop. She ignores the milk droplets and brings the cup over. “Here you go, Rory.”

I cut into the pancakes. They’re a little gooey in the center, but I chew focusing on the apples and the cream. Swallow. Take a drink of

milk. “Delicious,” I say, smiling.

“See, you thought they weren’t cooked,” Auntie Fae whispers to the other two.

“Pish posh. I think she’s just being nice, like usual. She’d probably eat dirt to please you,” Auntie Macey says.

I hide a laugh behind a bite of apple and cream and decide to change the subject. “I was invited to the school dance.”

“Oh my word.” Auntie Fae claps.

The other two do a do-si-do, linking elbows.

“When is it?” Vera asks.

“A week from today.” I take another sip of milk and then get up. Tiana and Merida are probably outside waiting for a ride to school.

“That’s wonderful.”

“Who’s the boy?”

“I’ll tell you all about him when I get home tonight, but I wondered if I could go shopping for a dress this weekend?” I have no idea where my aunties get their money, but I know we don’t have a lot. I don’t want to put a strain on the budget.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Auntie Vera says, after glancing at her sisters.

It’s funny. They call themselves sisters, but physically they look nothing alike. Vera is tall with dark brown skin and long black hair. Macey is short with creamy skin and red and gray hair. And Auntie Fae is covered in light brown freckles the same color as her hair. The love they have for each other is apparent though and they’ve always loved me as their own. I don’t know if they’re actually related or not. They never come out and answer my questions.

“Okay. Thanks. See you later.” I blow them kisses and run outside.

Tiana and Merida lean against my car, talking. Merida has her curly red hair up in a messy bun. She wears ripped faded jeans, a long-sleeved tee shirt, and boots that go to the knee.

Tiana has on sea foam green jeans, matching shoes, and a white blouse. Her black hair is shiny and lies against her head with two clips on one side. On me, the fashion would look silly. On her, it looks amazing.

“Hey girls,” I say.

“Told you,” Tiana says when she sees me. “Look at her outfit.” She flicks my skirt.

“And her hair,” Merida adds, touching my hair.

I push her out of the way and get inside my car. Merida and Tiana do the same.

As soon as I pull out of the driveway, Tiana starts, “I told Merida that you were at Carson’s house last night. She guessed that kissing was involved. Now we both want the deets.”

“Yes, like how did the kiss happen? Where did he put his hands? Where were yours? What did he say afterward?” Merida watches me as she speaks.

I spend the next ten minutes giving them the particulars about last night, except the personal stuff Carson shared about his mom.

“You are too lucky,” Merida says when I park, and we head into the school.

I can’t stop looking for Carson, even though I should. It isn’t cool.

“Gotta get to class, I’ll see you both at lunch.” Tiana waves as she takes off.

“See ya, T.”

Merida and I have our first class together, but I need to go to my locker. “I’ll see you in English Lit.”

“Sure.” She takes off toward the girl’s bathroom.

I walk down the hall, determined to steer clear of students, and search for Carson. I’ve seen him many times before in this hallway with his friends. Today is no different. He’s leaning against a locker. Three of his friends surround him. They’re talking and laughing. Kelly

is there too. She sees me first, smirks, and leans into Carson, taking up his attention. She puts a hand on his neck and pulls him toward her, kissing him. On the flippin' lips.

Ugh. My heart falls into my stomach. Was I just another girl to him? I see him look up just as I walk by. He seems surprised and quickly pushes Kelly away.

She laughs.

Tears fill my eyes and that makes me angry. I focus on my feet, putting one foot in front of the other. Out of the corner of my eye I see a flicker, like the soft beating of butterfly wings. There's a sparkle. I blink, clearing the tears, and look over, but there's nothing there.

"Weird." I walk into class.

OceanofPDF.com

THE REST of the day is similar. Carson ignores me. Tiana and Merida can tell something is wrong, but I can't tell them. I don't want to break their hearts the way mine is broken. And part of me can't believe the way Carson is behaving is for real. He shared personal stuff about his life, his family. We made out. That has to mean something. It does to me.

By the end of school I can't deny it any longer. He really is avoiding me.

And I'm devastated.

At play practice Kelly is there. She and Carson run through their lines. Juliet tells Romeo she loves him. They kiss. They leave and I'm stuck hanging up costumes and tidying up the dressing room. Since it's Friday night I take my time. When I get home, I know my aunties will want to ask questions about Carson and I don't want to answer them. Tiana and Merida text me too. They want to make plans about shopping for a dress tomorrow.

I finish my work and sigh. My phone chimes and I take it out, reading the texts. What do I say to them? Do I share what's bothered me today? Tell them that Carson has a cruel streak? "I can't."

"There you go again, talking to yourself."

I see Carson's reflection in the mirror. He smiles, but there's no joy. When he comes closer, I notice the bruise under his eye. I didn't see it during play practice.

"What happened?" I ask, trying not to care.

He gives me a questioning look.

"Your eye?"

"Oh?" He touches the area that's the most swollen. I can tell its sore. But he shrugs. "It's nothing."

I can't help but think about his dad and the way he punched a hole in Carson's bedroom wall last night. Carson covered up the hole, pretending nothing happened. This scenario feels the same. If he doesn't want to talk about what's wrong, who am I to pressure him? *No one, that's who,* I think, woefully.

"Did you need something?" I ask, standing. When I'm upset, I clean, and now is no different. I grab a disinfectant towel and wipe down the counters like I'm being timed and failure isn't an option.

"I don't know. Just thought I'd say hello." He tucks his hands into his front pockets.

I glance at his reflection.

Jerk. "Really? Or do you want another make out session and think you can use me because you're *the* hot and popular Carson Hayes?"

"You think I'm hot?" He smiles and I feel a spark.

"Ugh, you're infuriating." I chuck the towel into the trash, grab my phone and my backpack and push past him.

He grabs my arm. "Hey?"

"What?" I stomp my foot. "What do you want, Carson? Because if you're just after someone to kiss, I'm not that kind of girl." I wipe an angry tear streaking down my cheek. "I thought…" I pause and stare at my gray heels. I believed he liked me. That we might date and become a couple. Stupid ideas!

Carson chuckles. "You thought what? You were something special?"

I gasp. Try to pull away, but he holds me tight and grabs my other arm. "Because you are, Rory." He leans in to kiss me, but I turn my face away.

"I don't believe you." I push against him, trying to escape his grasp. "You completely ignored me today. Didn't even acknowledge me and you let Kelly kiss you."

Carson releases my arms and rolls his shoulders. "I know." He

turns away. “I’m sorry about the way I acted today. It was unfair to you, but I didn’t know how to handle my feelings.” He stops and faces me. “If my friends knew how I’m feeling, what I feel—” He shakes his head. “They wouldn’t be kind. To you. Or to me. They would take what I feel and use it to hurt you, to hurt your friends.” He reaches out. “They can be so cruel.” His hands open in supplication as though he’s pleading with me to understand. “Everyone thinks I hold the power, that I’m this popular, untouchable guy, but the truth is, I’m nothing. Just like my father said.” He turns away again. “I’m sorry, Rory. Truly. It hurts me to know I hurt you. I just didn’t know what else to do.”

I watch him walk away and I’m torn. Should I believe him? He’s seems sincere, but I barely know him. Still, there’s that piece of golden fire within my chest that tells me he isn’t lying. Throwing caution to the wind, I chase after him. I still have one question.

He’s on the stairs.

“Carson.”

He turns, smiles hopefully. “Rory.”

“What about the dance? You asked me to go. People will see us there. If you’re big problem is your friends using your feeling against you, us, whatever, then why ask me?” I realize when I’m done talking, I’m breathless.

He nods, walks toward me. “I really do want to go to the dance with you. When I asked, I thought I could be strong, deal with the consequences, but when I saw what Kelly did, I knew I had no idea how they would treat you.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t want to be selfish.”

He’s worried about me. That’s sweet. “You think I’m weak? That I can’t take care of myself? Or that I even care what they say or think about me?” I shake my head. “I don’t. I haven’t cared since Junior High and I still don’t care now. I’m tougher than I look.”

“I’m starting to see that.” He’s close, so close I can feel his breath

on my cheek. “But I don’t know if I am.”

The truth. It’s ugly, but I can’t belittle his honesty.

“So, we aren’t going to the dance then?” My voice quivers with emotion. Because I really want to go.

“I want to.” He swallows, tucking his hands in his pockets. “Yes. We are definitely doing this. If you don’t care, then neither do I.”

“You’re sure?” I don’t know what he means about “doing this.” My heart is beating fast. Is he asking me out? Like to be his girlfriend? Or does he just mean the dance? I know nothing about dating protocol or even if it’s called protocol. It probably isn’t. *I’m a dork.*

“Definitely!” He walks backward, pulling my hand with him. “I’m going to walk my girlfriend to her car.” He says the words like it’s a statement, but his features question whether he’s right or not.

“Cool,” I say in response as a bubble of happiness fills my insides.

OceanofPDF.com

OVER THE NEXT week Carson and I walk the halls of Hellgate High. We hold hands, eat lunch together, and occasionally yield to personal displays of affection—my favorite part of the day. Kelly and Carson's other friends seem to take our dating better than expected. In fact, they barely say anything at all.

Merida and Tiana worry his friends are planning something, but I hope they're more mature than that.

"We need to have a plan just in case Carson's friends decide to try something," Tiana says, the night of the dance.

We're in the bathroom at my house. Merida is nearly done curling my hair.

"I've heard they want to do a prank along the lines of *Carrie*, with a bucket full of pig's blood," Tiana adds.

"No way. That's so cliché," I say. My eyes are closed because Tiana is working on my makeup. She says she's going for smoky, whatever that means, but she has skills, so I trust her.

I'm nearly done curling your hair," Merida says. "And then we can discuss back up plans."

"I don't need a backup plan. Nothing's going to happen, except Carson and I are going to dance."

"Finished," Tiana says.

"Good." I open my eyes. "They aren't going to do anything." But I wonder if I'm just naïve. It wouldn't be the first time. Carson's group has been extra quiet lately. I brush that aside. "Carson is going to be here soon. I need to get dressed."

"K, we'll be in the kitchen if you need us." Merida fluffs one more piece of hair and then they both leave.

I check my reflection in the mirror. My makeup looks amazing.

Tiana nailed smoky eyes. My hair rocks, too. Merida curled it and pinned it up in a loose bun, showing off my slim neck.

Slipping out of my robe, I put on the rose pink dress the girl's and I picked out last weekend. It's a vintage inspired sleeveless dress with heavy pleating from pin-tuck shoulders and an uneven ruffled hem. A thin belt made of the same material as the dress ties at the waist. The dress is short, the hem rests mid thighs. My shoes are gorgeous. They're nude in color and tie in front with a thick ribbon. Knot drop earrings, the same color as my dress, and a heart shaped necklace complete my outfit.

When I'm finished, I check out my reflection and admit to myself that I look good. My hair and makeup go well with the dress. In the living room Tiana squeals with delight when she sees me, and Merida jumps up and down.

"I don't care what the jerks have planned. Regardless, you look amazing." Merida brushes my bangs above my brows and hugs me. "I hope we're wrong," she whispers.

Tiana joins in the hug. "We're going to the dance. We'll see you there. Good or bad, we're your back up, got it?"

I nod, holding back tears, so grateful I have such amazing friends.

OceanofPDF.com

TIANA AND MERIDA are gone by the time Carson arrives at the house.

"You look nice," I say, admiring the way his black tuxedo skims across his broad shoulders and fits his muscled body flawlessly. In one hand he holds a bracelet corsage.

"Thanks." He takes my appearance in, paying special attention to my dress. "You look amazing. Wow." He smiles, opening the plastic container that holds my flowers. "You want them on the left or right hand?"

I hold out my left and Carson steps close. His clean scent along with a hint of cinnamon gum tickles my nose. As he slides the bracelet over my hand, his fingers brush against my skin. The flowers are dahlias—two pink and one that's white. They're beautiful. I lift them to my nose and breathe in, enjoying the scent. "They smell amazing."

He lifts my wrist and the corsage to his nose, breathing in. After a few seconds, he raises an eyebrow. "I can't smell anything."

Surprised, I smell them again. The scent is distinct, like nutmeg and cinnamon with a hint of another spice I can't place. "Really?"

He takes my hand and laces his fingers with mine. "Rory, I'm—"

At that moment my aunties decide to make an appearance. They flit around us like giant-sized hummingbirds, commenting on my dress, my shoes, my hair, and my makeup. Then they do the same with Carson. I immediately feel the air get chillier.

"Introduce us to your friend," Auntie Vera says. Her green dress and white apron looks fresh and her black hair is up.

Auntie Macey is in a purple dress and white apron and Auntie Fae wears a blue dress, also with a white apron. They've spruced themselves up nicely.

"Aunties, this is Carson Hayes. He's playing Romeo in the play I'm

helping out with at school."

Carson holds out a hand. "Hi," he says, shaking first Vera's hand, then Macey's, followed by Fae's.

Macey and Fae are easily smitten. I watch Fae's cheeks brighten when Carson takes her hand.

Vera isn't as taken by him. "What are your plans tonight?" Vera asks, eyeing him.

He smiles. "We're going to have dinner at Lofty's." He glances at me. "I hear Rory likes chicken and waffles."

"I do," I mouth, excited.

"Once we're finished eating, we'll go to the dance. When it's over I'll bring her home."

"And that will be?" Auntie Macey asks, glancing at the watch on her wrist.

"I'll have her back no later than midnight, if that's okay."

"Hmmmm," Vera says.

Auntie Fae produces a camera. "That sounds wonderful." She turns to me. "Can we get a picture?"

"Sure." I roll back my shoulders and smile.

Auntie Fae clicks the camera. "K, now the two of you together."

Carson wraps a hand around my waist, and I lean into him.

Vera glares.

I try hard not to laugh as Fae clicks the picture.

"We'd better get going," Carson says. "I know the restaurant is going to be busy." He walks me to the door and holds it open for me.

"Bye aunties."

Auntie Vera comes close. "Be safe."

"I will."

CARSON HAS a table reserved at Lofty's so we get right in. The

restaurant is busy, but I don't see anyone else from school. Most of the patrons consist of older couples and a few families.

The waitress takes our order, which is chicken and waffles. Of course. Once she brings our drinks and rolls with strawberry butter, Carson says, "You really look amazing tonight."

"Thanks," I say, taking a sip of water. "Merida and Tiana did my hair and makeup." I shrug. "They know a lot more about that stuff than I do."

"They did good, but I think you're beautiful even without all the makeup and fancy hair." He smiles and puts a chunk of roll in his mouth.

I study his face, hoping to verify he's telling the truth. There doesn't seem to be any dishonesty in his gaze. "Thank you."

Carson swallows. "And your aunts?" He shakes his head. "They seem nice, except Vera, she's kind of scary."

I take another drink of water. Try to relax and quit being nervous about spending time with him, but I can't. "They are over-protective, but very sweet."

"Want a roll?" He polishes off his first one and goes for another.

"No, I've got to save room for the chicken and waffles."

"But you are going to eat?"

"Oh yeah, I'm telling you, I love, love, love chicken and waffles. Just wait."

"We'll see." He chuckles and takes another bite of roll.

The waitress finally shows up with our food and my mouth waters. The plate holds four waffle quarters and two crispy pieces of chicken. There's a dab of butter on each waffle and underneath is maple syrup. The food is also served with the best honey mustard I've ever had.

Carson stares at his plate and then mine. "Tell me how to eat this."

I pick up my fork and knife and move the chicken to the side. "The first thing I do is butter the waffles." He does the same. "There's syrup

under the waffle, so you don't need anymore, unless you like it really sweet.

"I do." He puts a little over the top of his waffles.

"Now, put the chicken on top." I use my knife and fork and place the chicken.

Carson copies.

"Now eat like this." I cut through the juicy chicken and down into the waffle with the knife. With my fork I pick up the bite, dip the chicken in the honey mustard sauce, and shove the whole thing in my mouth. "Mmmmmm."

Carson laughs but duplicates what I did.

"What do you think?" I ask after a few bites.

He nods. Cuts another bite. "That's amazing." He shoves the food in his mouth and smiles.

"See," I say and do the same.

"I do. While everyone else is eating weird food I can't pronounce, we're eating breakfast and dinner put together." Carson seems beyond happy which makes me happy too.

"Yeah, this is way better." I smile, keeping my mouth closed while I chew.

When he's about halfway done, he says, "You're a senior, right?"

"Yep. My final year," I respond, knowing he's a senior too.

"It's crazy, right?" He shakes his head.

"It so is." I say the words but don't mean them. What to do after high school is a mystery to me. "Are you going to go to college?"

"I want to. I've submitted several college applications but haven't heard back yet."

"What do you want to study?" I take a drink of water. There's still another piece of chicken and two pieces of waffle left, but I'm getting really full. Usually I take the other half home, but that isn't going to work since we're going to the dance afterward.

Carson finishes his bite and takes a drink. “I’m not sure. I want to play soccer wherever I go. And the only way I can go to college is if I get a scholarship. So, we’ll see if a school wants me.” He keeps eating, and I watch, mesmerized by his mouth.

I nod my head. “I’ve seen you play soccer, you’re amazing. No doubt you’ll get multiple offers.”

“Thanks. What about you? You know what you want to major in?”

“Probably business with a minor in accounting. I love theater, but that’s not really a career and I need to be practical.” I sound like my aunties and shrug. It’s weird, whenever I try to think about my life after I turn eighteen and graduate from high school, my mind goes blank. My aunties say it’s because I’m scared, but I get the feeling there’s more to it than that. Something they aren’t telling me. Each time I ask them about it, they brush my questions away like they aren’t important. The more they do that, the more I know they are keeping secrets.

It’s the same with current events. There’s the issue with the discovery of supernaturals. The politicians and local governments passed laws against them. On the news, people protest outside city hall with their signs championing equality for all. Plus, I’ve heard the debates for and against locking up, killing, or sending the supernaturals away. They never mention where they will be sent and that concerns me. People for and against the supernaturals voice their opinions everywhere, including bumper stickers and social media.

As for me, I think as long as the supernaturals want to live and work among us. As long as they agree to follow the laws and uphold them the same as the rest of us. As long as they don’t use their powers against us, then they should be allowed to stay. But my aunties tell me not to worry. That their issues have nothing to do with me. Somehow, I don’t believe that’s true.

“Accounting huh?” he asks, interrupting my thoughts. “That sounds exciting.” He wrinkles his nose. “I would’ve thought with your

looks and your talent, you'd major in theater or move to Hollywood and get an agent." He pauses. "That would be sick."

"Thanks. You're sick."

We laugh and my heart soars. He says I'm pretty and talented. Can't beat that.

OceanofPDF.com

CARSON PARKS his old Mustang in the Hellgate high school parking lot. “Let me get the door for you,” he says when I start to open my side.

“Okay.” He’s a gentleman. My aunties will be pleased to learn that piece of information.

I take his hand after he opens my door and I step out. Walking in four inch heels isn’t easy, but I make it work and lean into Carson when I need to. He opens the front door to the school. Immediately, loud music pummels my ears. A top forty song, I think. Couples roam the halls. They are loud, but it’s awesome they are having fun.

My heart lurches. I want to enjoy myself too, but I’m nervous. Once I see Merida and Tiana, I think I’ll feel better.

Carson gives the girl at the dance entrance our tickets. She stamps our hands. Carson takes mine and pulls me inside. “Come on.”

The music is loud, but the gym is decorated way prettier than I thought was possible. The theme is: *Love Is Sweet*.

Giant lollipops stand on either side of the entrance. There are large, sugared gumdrops along the stage where the DJ works. Lights twirl to the music, changing color and pulsing to the beat. To the right is a refreshments table.

“Did you want a drink?” Carson asks, his eyes searching the gymnasium.

“No, I’m good.”

On the left is a photo booth. Couples are lined up outside and wait for their turn.

Only about twenty couples dance.

“Shall we?” he asks, holding out his hand.

“Sure.” I take it and he spins me.

We make our way toward the center of the floor. The song is slow, so I stand in front of him, nervous. He takes the lead, placing his hands on my hips.

I wrap my arms around his neck. Our bodies brush against each other.

“You’re a lot taller in those heels,” he says, looking down at my feet.

“Four inches can do that to a girl,” I say and then feel like a dork.

Carson smiles and pulls me more tightly against him. “The height just means your lips are closer to mine.” He leans down and pecks me on the lips. “I like it.”

My face gets hot. “Me too.”

“Hey Rory.” Merida and Tiana are next to each other, waving. Merida is in a short white dress. Her flaming red hair is down and is a stark contrast to the white of her dress. Tiana’s dress is short in the front and longer in the back. It’s a deep purple with black lace overlay. They both look gorgeous.

I wave back. “Hi,” I mouth. Then give them both thumbs up.

Carson turns so that he can see them too. “Ladies,” he says when they come closer.

The slow song ends, and a fast song starts. Tiana and Merida come over to us.

“You came,” I say turning toward them.

Carson keeps hold of one of my hands and I melt a little inside. He’s a sweet guy.

Tiana’s mouth tightens. “Give it to me straight, Hayes. Why are you suddenly all over Rory when you haven’t talked to her once in six years?”

I’m horrified, but the question is a good one.

Carson doesn’t get upset though. He just smiles. “I’ve been hanging out with the same crowd for a long time. Years. Some since

Kindergarten. A while ago I realized I couldn't stand most of them. Graduation is in a few months and I decided it was time to make new friends with people I'm actually interested in getting to know." He turns to me. "I've wanted to get to know you for years."

I smile. "Really?"

He nods. "Super really."

"Awwww," Merida says, patting Carson awkwardly on the shoulder.

Tiana crosses her arms. She squints shrewdly. "I think Kelly and some of your other friends plan to do something mean to Rory tonight. What do you know about that?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know anything about it, but no one better mess with my Rory." His features turn fierce.

Tiana's face relaxes. "All right. I guess I believe you."

"Good. Now if you don't mind, Rory and I are going to dance."

Merida takes Tiana by the arm and starts to pull her off the dance floor, but the song ends, and another song comes on. And not just any song either. It's our song. The one Merida, Tiana, and I made up our dance to.

"No way. Did you plan this?" I ask, horrified.

"Maybe," Merida says, winking.

"Shall we?" Tiana asks.

At the thought of dancing in front of so many people, I shake my head.

"Wait, what did I miss?" Carson asks, confusion furrowing his brows.

I shake my head. The idea of dancing with my friends in front of him isn't something I want to do.

Merida and Tiana come forward, each take one of my arms, and pull me toward them.

"No, guys. I'm not doing it. Forget it," I hiss, trying to pull away.

“You know a dance?” Carson’s eyes are alight with excitement. “This I have to see.”

Merida puts me in my spot, then takes hers. Tiana stands in the middle.

“And five, six, seven, eight.” As one, they start dancing.

I just watch, shocked they’re actually going through the steps.

“Don’t you know the moves?” Carson asks, a surprised smile on his lips. “Show me,” he says.

“Oh, she does, better than the two of us,” Tiana says. She kicks, spins and does a squat turn like a pro.

He looks at me with new eyes. “Rory, I have to see you do this dance.”

I blush red hot. “I’m really not that good.” I cross my arms, nervous.

“Liar,” Merida says. “She’s the best of the three of us.”

“Please,” Carson pleads. His smile fills his whole beautiful face.

Several of the couples stop and come over to watch. Merida and Tiana keep going. They’re really good. The moves show off their flexibility, precise and quick movement, and that they have rhythm. I’m in awe of them.

“Rory, serious. You’ve got to finish the dance with us. Get in here,” Tiana says.

I’m about to give in, just as Kelly walks over. She and another girl appear in their gorgeous gowns. There are a few guys with them too. What’s weird is they’ve all got their hands behind their backs.

My smile fades.

Kelly glares at Carson. “We have a present for you, Rory.” Her right arm starts to come around.

Carson jumps into action, flinging himself in front of me just as several containers of something red splatter him. Carson flinches and takes a few steps back, nearly falling into me, but I steady him,

pressing my hands into his back. Then move around to see what's happened.

The red stuff looks like blood.

Kelly's eyes get wide with fear when she realizes what she's done. Then she shrugs. "Maybe it's for the best," she says, turning to her friends. "Look at Carson. What an idiot."

Her friends, that are also supposed to be Carson's friends, laugh and point.

A few teachers rush over.

"What happened here?" the English teacher asks.

"You six come with me," the principle says. Then he looks at Kelly. "I'm disappointed in you." He searches the crowd. "All of you. This is ridiculous."

Some of the kids snicker.

Others whisper not so nice comments I wish I didn't hear.

The driver's ed teacher adds, "I'm calling your parents right this minute." He gets out his phone.

The vice-principle takes the microphone. "Everyone please stand back a few minutes while we get this cleaned up."

The principle points. "My office. Now!" He escorts her and the other five from the room.

"Carson, are you okay?" I ask quietly. He hasn't said a word, and I'm worried about him.

His face is covered in red, but what I can see is a mask of unreadable emotion. "I'm so sorry about them, about all of this," he finally says. "I never realized just how awful those jerks were."

"I don't care about them, just you." I look at him through my lashes, take his hand and lead him toward the door. He needs to get cleaned up. "Merida. Tiana. I'll text you guys later, K."

They each give me a hug.

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN WE PULL up to Carson's house, I don't realize where we are at first. Carson drove down an alleyway and all I see are fenced backyards.

"We're here," he says and puts his car in park.

"Oh." I'm not sure what to say. I'm nervous about seeing his dad again.

Carson gets out, comes around, and opens my door. We walk through his back gate. He unlocks the door and I follow him inside.

"My dad will be gone all night. He's never around on the weekends," Carson says when he sees me search the small house.

He acts like I should know what that means. I don't, but I'm relieved. Glad I won't have to deal with his dad and his creepy, wandering eyes and crude comments. Butch is there, in his dog bed that's nearly the size of a love seat. His ears perk up when he sees me. "Hey boy." His tail and the entire back portion of his body wags with excitement. He pushes his head into my hand, and I scratch between his ears. "That's a good boy. Yes, you are. Such a good, good boy."

Carson chuckles, but glares playfully at the dog. "Who feeds you?"

Butch tilts his head and trots over to Carson, jumping up. The dog's front paws reach Carson's shoulders. "That's what I'm talking about." Carson scratches Butch's back. The dog licks Carson's face a moment before sniffing his shirt. Then he starts to lick that. "Okay, that's gross." He stands and pats Butch on the head. Butch barks and whines. "We'll play later." Carson says before he heads into the bathroom.

I follow, and so does Butch.

"You'd better close that," Carson says.

I do. "Didn't you mention a cat?" I say, helping him get his jacket

off. The bathroom is tiny.

“Yeah, he’s been gone a few days. He does that sometimes. Probably found himself a new girlfriend.”

“Really?” I laugh.

“Hey, my cat’s a player.” He winks.

“Is your tux rented?” I help him get out of his shirt.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m getting my deposit back.” He smirks.

“You’re probably right.” I drop the shirt on top of the jacket in the sink. Turn back and wipe at the red stuff with my fingers. His chest and stomach are covered. Still, there’s no denying he has a great body and that’s when I realize what I’m doing. Touching his taut abs and well defined chest. Holy buckets!

Carson’s eyes darken and I know he enjoys my touch as much as I enjoy touching him. He takes the towel from the rack and wipes off his exposed skin and then throws the towel in the hamper. “Stay here.” He dashes down the hall.

I remain in the bathroom, my fingers still covered in the red. *What is it,* I think, bringing my hand to my nose? The red stuff has a strange smell. It isn’t sticky like syrup. And that’s when I realize it must be real blood. I don’t know what kind, but Kelly and her friends really did try to *Carrie* me. The thought freaks me out and I quickly wash my hands to get it off.

When I’m done with my hands, I check my reflection. My makeup still looks great, but the pinned up curls are starting to fall slightly. I adjust them, but my handiwork doesn’t do any good.

“Aurora. Aurora.”

I hear my name being said and realize it isn’t Carson. The voice is too small, too high to be his. I freeze, my fingers still caught in my hair. “Who’s there?”

“Aurora, his kiss awakened your curse.” Turning, I search for the source. Behind me, next to the door are some shelves and built in

drawers. I step closer, looking for anything that might possibly have spoken. There's a small figurine of a fairy in a golden yellow dress standing on the middle shelf. She has amber hair and gauzy wings flecked with gold.

The figurine is out of place amongst the man shampoo, conditioner, shaving cream, and deodorant. "What are you doing up there?" I reach out to pick it up, and she comes to life. "Aurora, our hidden princess, you've been away from Isluria for too long. It's time you come home." Her wings flutter and she whooshes past me, flying out the door.

I blink several times, rubbing my eyes. *That's impossible,* I think getting ready to follow after her, but also surprised by her words. "What is Isluria?"

Carson comes back in the bathroom. "Hey." Carson's handsome frame blocks the door. He's wearing a gray tee shirt and navy sweatpants. "What's wrong?" He searches my face. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I'm not going to tell him I thought I saw a fairy. That's ridiculous. Not even I believe, and I saw her with my own eyes. Heard her voice. Instead, I focus on the other disturbing thing that happened tonight. "It was real blood," I say, pointing to his shirt and jacket still sitting on the edge of the tub.

"I figured as much." He wraps me in a hug, holding me close. "I'm so sorry, Rory. So sorry." I lean my head against his chest, snuggling against him.

The moment is intimate and I don't want it to end. "I'm not the one who's covered in blood. It's me who should apologize."

He lifts my chin and tenderly kisses me. "Don't even think about it." He runs his nose along my cheek. "Thank you for taking a chance on me." His lips find mine as he speaks.

I smile against them enjoying the feel.

"And thanks for agreeing to practice my scene for the play. I'm the

luckiest guy at Hellgate high, and probably the world." He winks. "Your kisses are amazing."

I wrap my hands around his neck and pull him close. "So are yours," I say and then go back to exploring his mouth.

OceanofPDF.com

I WAIT for a few days after the dance to bring up what I think I saw in Carson's bathroom with my aunties. We all sit down to dinner and as I put more salad onto my plate, I hit them with my question. "Is it possible fairies could be real?" I'm too embarrassed to look at anything except the half-eaten tofu burger on my plate.

Auntie Macey gasps.

"Where did that question come from?" I detect distress in Auntie Fae's voice.

Steeling myself, I meet her gaze, but shrug, trying to play it off as a silly question. "I—I don't know. Just curious." I take a bite of the burger and wish I hadn't. It sticks in my throat, so I sip some juice, which causes me to choke.

My aunties flutter around me in a mish mash of panic and high-pitched chatter.

"Breathe, Rory," Fae says.

"She's choking, you nitwit," Vera retorts. "That's why she coughing."

"Don't call me a nitwit, you beetle bum."

I swear the scent of fresh cut flowers swirls around them as they argue. "I'm fine. Really guys. Chill."

"We're chill," Vera says, adjusting her apron, but her face is red.

"Yes, totally," Macey adds, her eyebrows up practically into her hair.

Once they're calm, Fae looks at me. "I suppose it's time you know the truth."

A wisp of panic winds through my stomach. The truth? It sounds so ominous. "What about?"

"Where you come from, dear." Fae bites into her toast.

“Wha—” I set down my fork and put my hands in my lap. Part of me wants to tease them. Tell them I already know about *the birds and the bees*, but I hold my tongue. I have a feeling about what’s coming, and it isn’t a good one. They intend to tell me about the gigantic elephant in the room. The secret my aunties have kept from me. About my parents and the reason I don’t live with them.

I’m afraid this conversation is going to be worse than *the birds and the bees* talk. Because as much as I want to know what happened to my parents, I also don’t want to know why they gave me up. Something tells me that whatever happened to them, it has to do with fairies. Had I not seen the other supernatural creatures, like vampires and elves on TV, I might be a little more freaked. Mostly, I remain calm. “Are you sure it’s time?”

Auntie Vera clucks her tongue. “Since you went and kissed a *boy*, we really don’t have a choice.”

“Vera.” Fae playfully smacks her sister on the arm, but I notice there’s a blush creeping up her neck and onto her cheeks.

For the first time in my surprisingly selfish life I wonder where they came from and what their lives were like before they met me.

“Pass the peas,” Macey says when they’re calm.

Vera thumps the bowl down in front of her. “I’ll start from the beginning.”

“The beginning?” I pick at the lettuce leaves on my plate.

“Yes, Rory. The time has come.” Fae pats my hand maternally.

I glance at each of them, preparing myself.

Vera steeples her fingers and starts. “Nineteen years ago King Stefan and Queen Danina were married. It was the cheeriest of occasions. The entire realm celebrated their union.”

“Yes, we were all thrilled at the marriage, excluding—”

“Well, right,” Auntie Macey interrupts. “Danina’s sister, Lucretia wasn’t pleased in the least.” Auntie Macey sips her tea.

“It’s true. She wasn’t happy at all.”

“Why not?” I push my plate away. No point pretending to be hungry anymore.

“Well,” Auntie Macey begins, before pausing to take another sip of tea, “Lucretia was originally promised to Stefan.”

“She was?”

“Yes, but on the night of the engagement ball, Stefan met Lucretia’s little sister, Danina and they instantly fell in love.”

My heart clenches for Lucretia and how she must have felt. That would’ve been awful.

“Stefan told his father of his desire to marry Danina, so on the night that was to be Lucretia’s happiest, it became her most humiliating.”

“Eesh, I remember her that night. How angry she became when Stefan called Danina to his side instead of her.” Fae wipes her mouth with her napkin and takes her plate to the sink.

“So who are these people and why are they important?” I follow Fae and rinse off my plate.

Vera scoops more peas out of the bowl. “Well, they’re your parents, of course.” She chews. Swallows. Wipes her mouth. “Lucretia ran away that night and no one saw her again for many years.”

“Until the night of your introduction to the realm, Aurora,” Fae says, carrying in a pie. Steam rises from it, sending the amazing scent of baked apples and cinnamon into the air.

Macey follows her with dessert plates. “That night was to be special. Filled with magic, hope, and love. You, Aurora dear looked adorable. The queen dressed you in a long, light pink gown. The neck and sleeves were covered in tiny blue rosettes the same color as your eyes. Even at a month old we all knew you would be the most beautiful fairy in the realm. Everyone came and all who met you were instantly smitten.”

“Except Lucretia,” Fae finishes.

“Right. She didn’t receive an invitation. But you can’t blame the king and queen, not really. They didn’t know where to find her and having her there would’ve made an event meant to be joyous most uncomfortable.”

“They should have tried harder. Had they made the simple gesture; we might not be in this situation.” Vera laughs harshly, but I can see truth in her words. Perhaps she’s right.

“The party still would’ve been a disaster,” Auntie Fae snaps.

Vera doesn’t respond, but it’s obvious she has a lot more to say on the subject.

“Lucretia showed anyway, and she was filled with self-righteous anger and indignation,” Fae continues.

“And her powers.” Macey shudders and hands me a piece of pie.

“Yes, there wasn’t another at the party strong enough to stop her.” Fae waves away the pie.

“Don’t start that again, Fae. No one would’ve believed Lucretia would stoop so low to become so powerful.” Macey set the pie on the table in front of Fae. “Eat. It’s your favorite.”

“What did she do?” I stab a warm apple and bring it to my lips, then blow on it.

“She killed for it,” Vera says in her matter of fact tone, taking a plate and putting a dainty bite in her mouth.

Someone gasps. It takes a second to realize the sound came from me. “Who did she kill?”

Vera leans forward. Opens her mouth. “T—”

“Hush, Vera,” Macey says. “We will not speak of it.”

Fae nods. “It doesn’t matter.”

“They may be right,” Vera says. “But know this. Lucretia stripped you of your fairy magic and cursed you.”

“Cursed?” I don’t want to believe such a thing exists, but that’s

what the fairy in Carson's bathroom said too. "What's the curse?"

My aunties glance nervously at each other without a word for what feels like an eternity.

Finally Vera sighs. "She touched your wings and said, *By day's end on her eighteenth birthday, she will be stabbed through the heart and die.*"

Her words cause my heart rate to speed up and a line of perspiration forms along my hairline. I'll be eighteen in a few months.

"Then she kissed each of your cheeks and vanished, taking with her your magic and your beautiful wings."

I feel a loss for a part of myself I didn't know I missed, until this moment. "I saw a fairy in Carson's bathroom. How did she find me? What did she want? Am I supposed to be that small too?" I have sixty-five more questions, but I stop with those.

"We have magic, Rory," Vera says. "With the right spell, we can be any size we want to be." She sips her creamed coffee, but it shakes slightly and a little spills onto her white apron. She struggles to keep herself composed, but I notice the way her fingers tighten around the handle. "As for how she found you, I'm guessing that when you kissed *that boy* it created a fissure in the cloaking spell Fae, Macey, and I placed on you as a baby."

The way Vera says *that boy* causes my cheeks to warm.

"That's probably exactly what happened, dear," Fae adds.

"And if she found you so quickly that means Lucretia knows where you are now too." Macey clasps her hands and rubs them together, fretfully.

"But it doesn't matter whether she knows or not. She can't do a blasted thing about it," Vera says.

"What about my parents? Why did they send me away? They are still alive, aren't they?" I set my fork on my plate as a slew of confusion and worry overwhelms me in a way I've never felt before.

"Good grief, girl. You need to slow down." Vera takes her dirty

dishes to the kitchen.

Fae whispers, “The king and queen are still alive. Of course they are. I’m guessing the fairy that found you was a Realm Guard, like we are.”

I sit back in shock. My adorable and flitty aunties are guards. What else don’t I know? Probably a lot. “The three of you are Realm Guards?” I study each of them with new eyes and notice that while they look old, there is strength in the straightness of their posture and conviction in their gazes.

“Yes, dear. For many, many years.” She adjusts her apron, straightening a wrinkle. I realize, not for the first time, how odd it is that they constantly wear their aprons. “And while we believe you’re safe, your curfew will be adjusted as will other rules as we see fit.”

A ball of fear forms in my stomach. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to believe. If I hadn’t seen the fairy the other night, I wouldn’t. “Can you do magic now?” I ask, gazing at each of them, my hands squeezing the life out of each other in my lap.

“Of course.” Macey shakes her head like she can’t believe I even asked.

“But we won’t because doing so will draw attention to us and we don’t want that,” Fae adds.

I really want to see what they can do, but they have a point. “I get it.” The whole night has taken a turn I never expected, and my new reality hits me. I’m cursed to die in a few months, and I don’t even belong here. I’m not human, but a freaking fairy. A supernatural like those mentioned on the news. My life will be normal ever again.

I’m overwhelmed, to say the least. How didn’t I know? I put my face in my hands. The information seems crazy and completely right at the same time.

“It’s okay, Rory. Really. Lucretia may know where you are, but at least she can’t do anything about it. We’re here to protect you. Her powers can’t reach past the fairy realm.” Fae pats my arm.

“At least we hope not,” Macey adds, eyeing her sisters.

That news provides me with little comfort. “Why can’t her powers reach me? What’s to stop her from coming to get me now?”

Macey and Fae give each other a knowing look.

“We found out later that when Lucretia cursed you and took your powers, she also cursed herself.” Fae pulls one of my hands from my face. “There must always be balance. So while Lucretia is powerful, she is also bound to the fairy’s under kingdom for as long as she lives. You’re safe here.”

I see confidence in her expression, but there’s also a hint of fear too. I glance at Macey and see the same look on her face as well as Vera’s.

“At least that’s what we believe. Since she cursed you, she’s remained in the under kingdom,” Vera adds.

A wisp of a premonition flutters through my bones. They knew a lot, but not everything.

“So she’s stuck in Isluria?” It’s weird to say the name. Like learning a foreign language, the word fumbles in my mouth.

“Actually, the under kingdom of Isluria. She’s trapped down there with all the unmentionables.” Vera comes in and sits in her regular spot at the head of the table.

Macey nods. “That’s right.”

I want to ask what the unmentionables are but decide that’s a question for another time. “I guess I have to take your word for it.” I try not to pout as I finish my juice.

“We’re sorry, dear,” Fae says.

I don’t respond but stack the dirty dishes still on the table and take them over to the sink, grab a cloth, get it wet, and wipe down the table while my aunties put away the leftover food. Cleaning soothes my insides. My aunties still whisper words I can’t hear to each other. I catch a term or two, but they don’t make sense. “What about those

who work for Lucretia? Can they use magic? Can they find me?" The question is out before I can filter it.

Macey titters nervously.

"They can try, but the enchantments we placed over you will make their magic useless." Vera sounds so sure; I can't help but feel a little less frightened.

"So when can I see my parents?"

Macey freezes, her soapy hands dripping into the sink. The kitchen has a dishwasher, but my aunties never use it. I do, when it's my turn.

Fae is drying a plate and she stops as well.

"Not until after your eighteenth birthday, dear," Vera begins.

"When the curse is broken." Fae finishes drying the plate and sets it on the counter. "With the way the realm is now and all the hoopla around supernaturals, your parents can't come. And you going there?" Fae shakes her head. "Lucretia might be locked in the under kingdom, but her minions aren't. And from what I hear, they continue to grow. It's not safe for you in Isluria until the day after you turn eighteen. Then your wings and your powers will return, and the minions and Lucretia will know the house of Royal cannot be defeated."

"But I want to see them—to know them." I sound whiny, but my heart aches to meet my Mom and Dad.

"The King and Queen made us promise we would keep you in the human realm until you beat the curse, which is a minute past midnight on the day after your birthday," Macey says.

"Right. If we take you to Isluria before then, your parents will have us killed," Fae adds solemnly.

Vera puts the box of tea bags in the cupboard. "We know this is hard. We are sorry, Rory dear."

"You should be." I sound immature, but it hurts to know I can't see my parents. I don't even know what they look like. Does my dad have blond hair like me? Do I have my mother's nose? These are questions

every child should have the answers to. I've never even seen a picture.

"I'm sorry, Aurora. It must be difficult to process, but please trust me when I say all that your parents have done, all that we've done, is because of our love for you." Fae's eyes get misty as do the other's.

I reach over and hug her. "I know. Thanks, Auntie Fae." Vera and Macey join in and despite everything I've learned, I'm thankful for them.

OceanofPDF.com

ANY DREAM IS attainable with the right people around you. That's Auntie Macey's most recent quotable quote. I like it and the reason is simple. I went after my dream and got it. Or, more specifically, *him*.

Carson Hayes. I think he's a dreamboat. That's right. I know *dreamboat* is a word from the forties, at least according to my aunties, but in the case of Carson, my incredibly hot and sweet boyfriend, the word fits.

It's been a few weeks since my aunties and I had our discussion. I only eighty percent ignore what my aunties told me about my life. It's easy not to think about it when I'm with my friends and especially my boyfriend.

At the moment Carson is sitting next to me in the noisy lunchroom of Hellgate high school caressing my knee. His pungent chicken and mashed potatoes is getting cold. I reach out to wipe an eyelash off his cheek and jump when a piece of crumpled paper hits Carson in the head. He catches it as it bounces off and squishes it tightly in his fist.

I glance around, searching for the culprit, as does Carson. It's one of his friends from the soccer team. His name is Ethan. He waves. "Hey Rory."

"Ethan." I wave back, grateful things mellowed a bit since Kelly and the other girls doused Carson in pig's blood.

Carson chucks the paper back at him. "Dude."

Merida and Tiana sit across the table from Carson and me. Merida giggles. She gawks at Ethan. It's adorable how badly she's crushing on him.

"Hey, I have to work until nine. Want to go to a party after?" Carson brushes some of my hair off my shoulder. His touch sends tingles along my skin.

“There’s a party?” I lean in, pressing my forehead against his.

He kisses the tip of my nose and pulls me into a hug. “Yep. Out at Beaver Lake.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, reveling in the scent of him. Of course I want to go with him to a party. Heck, I’ll go anywhere with him. He’s a good guy and he cares about me. There isn’t an ounce of doubt about that in my body. But since the talk with my aunties, they’ve put me on serious lockdown. Kind of. I can still do what I want, except at night.

My curfew used to be… whenever I wanted as long as I called. Now, it’s ten o’clock! Which is crazy during the week, but especially on the weekends. I try to be understanding. I know they want to protect me, and I want to be safe as well. But it’s been weeks and nothing happened.

I haven’t mentioned my fairy heritage or the fact that my parents are the King and Queen of another realm, and that makes me a princess. How would I bring it up anyway. It all sounds too unreal, even to me.

“Hey, Rory?” Merida pulls me out of my thoughts.

I sit up. “Yeah?” I tear off a slice of orange and pop it in my mouth.

Tiana shakes her head. “You going to the party tonight or not?” She lifts her eyebrows. She and Merida know about the curfew change, even though they don’t know the real reasons behind the change.

I put another slice of orange in my mouth. Chew. Swallow. I need to stall. If I say yes, then I’m going against my aunties. Rebelling is what they’d say. But if I don’t go, well I really want to go. I mean, it’s a party and it’s my senior year. It’s what I’m supposed to do. Right? “Sure. Yes, of course. I’m going.”

“You think your aunts will let you?” Merida doesn’t look convinced.

“I think so.” The five-minute bell rings. “I’ve got to get to class.” Pushing my tray back, I stand, and heft my backpack onto my shoulder.

“Me too.” Carson kisses me softly on the mouth. “I’ll pick you up after work, around nine thirty.”

“Sure,” I say. “Actually, text me the address and I’ll meet you there.”

Carson looks at me, confused. “You sure?”

“Um, yeah.” I feel like an idiot, but I don’t want to explain that I’m going to have to sneak out.

Tiana stands. “It’s my fault. I want her to go with me,” she says, saving me from an awkward conversation.

“Yeah, and me too.” Merida links her arm through Tiana’s. “It’s a girl thing.”

I smile internally, grateful for my friends. “If that’s okay,” I add, batting my lashes.

Carson laughs. “Of course it’s okay.” He takes my hand and kisses my cheek. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Kay, see ya.” I watch him walk away, admiring his very handsome rear view. Inside I freak out. I never disobey my aunties.

“You’ve got it so bad,” Tiana says, patting my arm. “Not that I blame you.” She hoists her backpack onto her shoulder. “See you tonight.”

Merida watches Ethan maneuver his soccer ball from one knee to the other.

Tiana snaps her fingers in front of Merida’s face. “Earth to Mer, come in, Mer.”

“Hey. What?” Her creamy skin reddens. She swats Tiana’s hand away.

“You gonna sneak out of your house tonight, right?” Tiana tugs on one of Merida’s thick red curls though she asks me the question.

“Want us to meet you at your window?” Merida glares at Tiana, a second before turning her attention to me.

I tuck my hands in my pockets. “You two are acting like I sneak out on a regular basis.” I kick the underside of the chair to distract myself from my worry.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything and we want to be there for the momentous event.” Tiana swings her hip into mine, and I fall off balance.

It’s my turn to blush. “Fine. Be at my window at nine thirty.”

Merida claps excitedly. “My baby is growing up.”

I smack her on the arm. “I can’t be tardy. See you crazies tonight.” I blow kisses and run in the direction of my class. It doesn’t help that I’m wearing lacy black heels, but I make it just as the bell rings.

“Take your seat, so we can begin,” Mrs. Crowler says, eyeing my shoes in distain, probably because she wears the same frumpy brown shoes every day. They’re practical. Functional, but not the least bit exciting.

I walk down the aisle toward my chair. Kelly, the girl who tried to *Carrie* me at the dance last month, sneers. She’s been way too quiet since that night and I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t worried.

When I’m seated, I take out my World History book, a pencil, and my notes. During Mrs. Crowler’s lecture I try to listen, but I can’t help thinking about sneaking out tonight. Or more specifically, the reasons I find myself in such a predicament. I close my eyes as I consider my life.

Suddenly, I’m standing on the edge of a rocky cliff. Far below is an angry ocean. The wind whips against my hair, and brings with it the briny scent of the ocean. Against the horizon the sun sets, and I have the distinct desire to spread my wings and fly.

Fly!

I don’t fly. But even as I deny it, there’s an itch between my shoulder

blades and I feel wings burst from my back. They extend. My feet leave the ground, and—

"Rory Louise Carrington, it's time to wake up." I jump at the sound of Mrs. Crowler's voice so close to my ear.

"Oh." I wipe my mouth, and hope I wasn't drooling. I didn't feel any, thank daisies.

"Why don't you have a chat with Mr. Leiberman." She walks back to her desk, sits and scribbles something down.

Everyone is snickering around me.

"Have a nice nap?" Kelly asks as I pick up my books and bag.

"Yep," I snap back, going to the teacher's desk.

Mrs. Crowley holds up a piece of paper. "Take it."

"Sorry," I say, quietly, and leave the room.

As I walk the halls of Hellgate High I think about my dream. Wonder what it would be like to really fly. It doesn't seem possible, but according to my aunties, I am a fairy. Psssh!

Windows line the right side of the hall. I look over and try to imagine myself with wings.

It's been weeks since I found out, and I still can't believe it's true.

When I reach the office, I hand the paper to the receptionist.

Mrs. Neering reads what Mrs. Crowley wrote, looks up at me, and then shakes her head. "Sleeping in class?"

"Yeah, sorry about that." I glance down at the desk with a piece of glass over the top. Mashed between the two are dried flowers.

She picks up the phone. "Rory Carrington is here to see you." She pauses a moment to listen. "I'll let her know." After she hangs up, she indicates a row of chairs outside the principal's office. "Have a seat. He'll be with you in a few."

"Okay." I sit and wait and concentrate on what it would mean to fly.

OceanofPDF.com

FRIDAY NIGHT, I pretend I have a headache. Say goodnight to my aunties at eight-thirty, and go to my room. I've never been to a party at the lake. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to feeling guilty. But I'm also excited.

I decide on dark jeans, brown boots with a low heel, and a long-sleeved top. In my bedroom mirror, I apply some gloss, more mascara, and run a brush through my hair.

At nine-thirty I get a text from Merida saying that she and T are outside. I push open the window, pop out the screen, set it on the floor and climb out. T agreed to drive tonight. So we skulk over to her car and drive away.

Easy peasy.

Tiana and Merida are wearing outfits similar to mine—jeans, shirts, and boots. I'm glad I picked appropriate attire. It's takes twenty minutes to get to the road leading out to the lake and another ten to get there.

Tiana parks her Jeep next to an old white truck. We climb out and head over to the fire. It's huge and the heat is extreme. Wood crackles and sparks singe the night sky.

I immediately search for Carson. It's nearly ten, so he should be here. Music blares from the speakers of a large, black truck. People are on the beach, around the fire, and lined up in front of a picnic table.

Tiana moves her body, getting into the music. "Let's get a drink." She smacks Merida and I.

We follow her and get in line. I recognize nearly everyone. Those I don't must not go to Hellgate High. The rest of us have been going to school together our whole lives. Other than Tiana and Merida and Carson, I'm not close with anyone else. Although since the dance last

month, more people have made a point to talk to me.

I spot Kelly and Ethan dancing extra close and hope Merida doesn't see them. When I glance over at her, I see her eyes are locked on them. Shoot!

"Hey, Mer. How did you do on your Calc test?" I'm positive she nailed it. She gets that stuff, while T and I struggle. But I want her attention somewhere other than on Kelly and Ethan. "Mer?"

It works. She pulls her eyes from them and meets my gaze. "Fine. What about you?" She grits her teeth.

I shrug, glad she's trying, at least, but realize she won't let go of what she saw. "Better than the last one, I think."

"Pretty sure I failed," T chimes in.

Merida wraps an arm around her shoulder and squeezes. "Really? I thought you were finally getting it."

"I was. Up until Mr. Jamison moved on to the next section. Now I'm lost again."

"Want some gum?" I ask, taking the package from my bag. Gum is a treat I always keep in my bag. I find it refreshing and delicious, especially now that Carson and I are doing a lot of kissing.

"Nah, I'm good." T moves forward in the line.

"What about you, Mer?" I hold it out for her.

"You have anything in there that freshens breath? Something besides the spearmint crap." She opens my bag and peers inside even though it's too dark for her to see.

"Nope. I only have the spearmint crap." I toss the package back in my bag.

Someone throws an enormous log onto the bonfire. Girls squeal as flames and ash go everywhere. Kelly and Ethan are no longer dancing. Kelly's moved on and is with Caleb. He's got an arm around her waist. She has her fingers in his hair. I kind of want to gag.

It's our turn to get drinks. There's a keg and several drink coolers. I

tried beer once when I was fourteen. It was the nastiest liquid I ever tasted. So I know I don't want that. "What's in the coolers?" I ask the random guy standing next to them. He's built like a football player—thick neck, biceps, and thighs. He's got ruddy hair and freckled skin. I think his name is Jesse, but I'm not sure.

"Strawberry, grape, and orange," he says tapping his fingers on the top of each lid as he speaks. "Which would you prefer? They'll all get you properly hammered," he says with a wink.

"I'll take the orange," I say, plastering on a smile.

He grabs a cup and fills it up. "Here you go, gorgeous. Enjoy."

"Thanks."

He lifts his plastic cup off the table. "Cheers."

I'm about to clink it when someone runs into me, spilling some of the drink.

"Watch it, dude." The guy I think is Jesse shoves the other guy to the ground.

"Sorry, Rory." When he stands up, I realize its Ethan. He chuckles and straightens out my shirt.

"It's fine."

"Good." Ethan punches Jesse in the arm good-naturedly.

I take the opportunity to glance at Merida. She's no longer gritting her teeth but beaming.

Ethan looks over. "Hey Mer. You look nice." He wraps an arm around her shoulders.

Merida giggles. The mathlete, feminist, brainiac girl I know, and love is gone. It's like she tossed those parts of herself out the window and replaced them with silly, giggly, and senseless. "Thanks," she says, looking away nervously.

"Glad you could make it. Wanna dance?"

"Sure." She hands me her cup, giving T and I her wide eyes of excited nervousness as Ethan pulls her closer to the music.

Tiana laughs. “Come on, let’s get closer to the fire.

It isn’t too chilly, but a cool wind is blowing.

“Have you seen Carson yet?” Tiana asks, sipping her drink.

I shake my head. “Not yet. You?”

She nods to someone she knows. I think she and the girl are in a cooking class together. “Nope. I’m sure he’s around.”

Tiana takes another drink, making a face as she swallows. “You going to drink it or stare at it?”

I sniff the contents. It smells like oranges, but I’m pretty sure it’s spiked with more than flavoring and sugar. No doubt there’s some kind of alcohol mixed in. The thought of drinking makes me ill. It isn’t even my aunties rules that come to mind. My body is physically rejecting the idea. Making a quick decision, I toss the liquid toward the fire. It ignites the flames and I jump back a little. “I’m good. If I get thirsty, I brought some water.”

Tiana shakes her head. “Even when you’re rebelling, you still can’t really do anything wrong, can you?”

I shrug. “I guess not.”

She squeezes my arm.

“See anyone cute?” I ask her, knowing she’s very particular.

“Not yet. Why don’t you help me look?” We scan the crowd for several seconds.

“What type am I looking for?”

“Tall. Dark. And hot.” Tiana winks and I laugh.

“Got it.” There are plenty of guys at the party and many of them are good-looking. But one in particular stands out and I think he’s perfect for Tiana. “What about—” I stop, my eyes flitting toward a guy. It’s Carson. He’s on the beach side of the bonfire talking with some of his friends from the soccer team. One of them hands him a plastic cup. He takes it and chugs whatever is in it down. The guy I picked for Tiana joins Carson’s group.

Tiana sees him too. “Who’s that standing next to Carson?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should go find out.” I link arms with her.

“Let’s go.”

When we’re nearly around the fire, Kelly walks over to Carson. She hands him a fresh cup. He smiles his beautiful smile and drinks the contents all at once. When he’s done, he crushes the cup in his fist, spreads his arms, and lifts his face toward the dark sky and howls. His friends laugh and clap him on the back. Kelly grabs him and kisses him.

“That girl is such a skank.” T pats my arm. “Don’t even let her get to you.”

“I’m not,” I say, but it does get to me.

Carson pushes her away. Kelly laughs. She’s like an octopus, her legs and hands seem to be all over him.

A prickly anger spreads through me, along with sorrow and doubt. I watched the two of them perform in our school performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Their chemistry on stage was easy to see. But Merida and Tiana denied it at the time and they still do. They believe I read too much into their performance. I want to believe them…

Aurora.

I hear my name, but it’s like a whisper made by the wind. I stop, pulling Tiana to a halt.

“What is it?” She releases my arm and faces me. “I’ll go over and rip Kelly a new one if you want.”

“It’s…” I shake my head. It’s probably nothing. I laugh. “Will you?” I say, thinking Tiana must be joking.

Her smiling face turns serious. She tosses her empty cup into the fire. “Wait here.” She stomps over to Kelly and shoves her.

“Crap.” I debate going after her. She yells at Kelly. Even though I can’t hear what she says, I can tell by the way she moves her hands that it’s loud and mean. Merida and I always joke that Tiana talks

with her hands louder than she does with her mouth.

“Aurora. I must speak with you.”

I hear the words clearly this time. It’s a male voice. I glance around, positive whoever spoke is right beside me. But there’s no one there.

The loud music stops. Everyone is focused on Kelly and Tiana, who are fighting about me.

“… You need to keep your slutty lips off Rory’s boyfriend!”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” Kelly crosses her arms.

“Yeah, I can.”

“Meet me in the woods. Hurry.” The male voice speaks urgently, and I’m distracted from the fight.

I search the edge of the forest, along the tree line for the owner of the voice. And that’s when I see… something. It shines in the moonlight and then is gone.

I glance back at Tiana and Kelly, but I can’t see them any longer. They’ve been surrounded by dozens of partygoers. Tiana and Kelly still scream at each other though. I scan the crowd for Merida, Ethan, or Carson, but don’t see them either.

“Aurora.” The voice seems to caress the inside of my mind, and I realize I’m not hearing his words with my ears but feeling them.

Who are you, I think. My feet take off and I reach the edge of the forest before I realize I’ve moved. “Hello?” I whisper.

OceanofPDF.com

"HEY, AURORA." The guy I think is Jesse steps around the large tree trunk closest to me. It's dark this far away from the bonfire, but I can still make out who he is and that his eyes travel over the length of my body.

"Um, hi. Was that you calling me before?" I don't think so. His voice doesn't sound the same.

He regards me with a strange expression on his face. "Sure, if that's what you want to believe." He licks his lips hungrily.

"Okay, well I better get back." I step away, but Jesse's hands come out like the strike of a snake. He pushes me against the trunk of the tree. My head bangs against the hard bark. "Ouch." Tears sting my eyes. "Let me go, Jesse."

He presses his body hard against mine causing the bark to dig into my skin. "I will. After. Now stay quiet."

"After what?" My insides quake with fear, but I force myself to keep my face calm.

"This." He leans down and tries to kiss me.

I push against him, but I might as well be pushing a freight train. At the last second, I turn my head, and his clammy lips land on my cheek.

He growls. "Hold still." He rips the bag from my arm, throws it, then grabs my hands and crosses them in front of me, pressing his body against mine.

"Let go," I shout, struggling against him.

He locks my arms together with one hand and slaps me with the other. Pain shoots through my eye and jaw. I see stars and my head lolls to one side. "The only sounds I want to hear from you are your moans of pleasure." He grips my chin and forces me to look at him.

“You know you want it.”

“No.” I tighten my lips and try to shake out of his grasp. His breath smells strongly of beer. It’s obvious he drank too much. “Let me go. You don’t want to do this.”

“Oh, but I do. If Carson can have you, then so can I.” His body tightens against mine. He kisses my neck, rips my shirt and trails slobbery kisses along my collarbone to my shoulder.

I wiggle, trying to get away. “Help!” Tears stream down my face as his hands roam under my shirt. “Please. Stop!” I close my eyes. *This can’t happen,* I think.

Abruptly the weight of him is gone. I open my eyes in time to see him sailing through the air before landing with a thud. Jesse yelps, gets up, and looks around before stumbling away.

I sink to my knees, letting out a sob of relief. Beyond thankful the drunken jerk is gone.

“Aurora.”

I freeze. It’s the voice I heard before Jesse tried to force himself… I can’t even think the rest, and shudder.

“You’re safe, Aurora.”

I glance up, preparing myself to run if I have to. I will not let what Jesse did to me happen again. A guy stands not more than ten feet away. Dressed from head to toe in black. His face and hands are exposed and seem to glow. I don’t recognize him, yet he knows me. Or, he knows my name, at least.

“Who are you?” I roll onto my knees. Decipher if I hurt anywhere other than my face and back.

“I’m Paxton.” He rushes forward, his hands out to catch me if I fall. “Are you injured?”

I shake my head. “Not really.”

He takes hold of my elbow. At his touch, my chest tightens and the golden fire I feel whenever Carson kisses me seems to expand until I

feel like it'll burst. I begin to tremble.

"Let me help you." He lifts me as though I weigh nothing.

"Thanks." He doesn't seem to notice my internal struggles, and I'm grateful. And as soon as he lets go, the feeling scatters. Dried leaves and pine needles cling to my pants. I take a moment to collect myself as I brush them off. "Are you here for the party?" I look up and notice his dark hair has fallen over one eye. In the dim light his appearance is much more dangerous than Jesse's, and I realize I'm still not completely safe. This guy could be anyone. He looks my age, but he gives off an older vibe.

"No. I'm here for you, Aurora. Will you come with me? I have something to show you." He expression tells me he's serious before he glances toward the forest.

Maybe too serious. "Next you'll offer me candy, right?" I mean it as a joke since he's a stranger and he's asking me to go somewhere with him. Like I would ever be that stupid.

"Candy? Would that help," he asks, a look of perplexed dismay crossing his face. There's something odd about this guy.

"You're funny," I say, edging around him slowly. "I better get back to the party. My friends will be looking for me."

Paxton reaches out. "Please don't go. What I must show you is of the highest importance."

I sense his urgency, but there is no way I'm going anywhere with him. "I can't. Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow." I'm anxious to find Tiana and Merida and go home. My stomach is sick, and I'm nervous Jesse might come back with friends.

Paxton places a fisted hand over his heart. "Until then, Aurora."

"Uh-huh." I wave and jog back toward the party.

OceanofPDF.com

THE PARTY IS in full swing. At least fifty more people have shown. It's crowded, but I push through and search for my friends. I might as well be searching for a needle in a haystack. Discouraged and on the verge of tears, I reach for my bag. My cell phone is inside. Then I remember I don't have it. Jesse threw it.

"Ugh." I climb on top of the picnic table. Several people look up, but I ignore them. I need my friends.

"Our first stripper," someone shouts.

"Take it off!"

Others cheer and send out catcalls.

"Merida! Tiana!" I shout, even though I can't see them and it's highly unlikely anyone can hear me. Plus, the smoke from the bonfire shifts and blows in my face. "Tiana!" I cough. "Mer—" Her name catches in my throat. My eyes sting too, and tears cloud my vision. This is useless. I rub my eyes, hoping to clear my vision so that I can see to get down. But as I step off, someone bumps the table and I feel myself fall. When I land though, it isn't on the ground but in someone's strong arms.

"Rory, what were you doing up there?"

This voice I know. It's Carson. I sag against him, turn my face into his shoulder and let out all the anguish I've been holding in.

"Shhh, it's all right. I've got you." He picks me up and starts walking. "I'll take you home."

"Wait," I say. "I need to get my bag. Will you help me?" I force my eyes open. don't burn quite so much anymore.

"Sure. Where is it?" He carefully sets me on my feet.

I take his hand. "It's over there, beyond the tree line."

"How'd that happen?"

I don't want to give him details, so I shrug. "Do you have your phone? We may need some light."

"Sure." After a few seconds a light appears. Carson cranks it up as bright as it will go and hands it to me. "Lead the way."

Even though I'm sure my makeup is smeared, and my hair is a wreck, I give him a quick kiss. He smells a little like beer and that sends my heart racing. A dull pain reminds me that Jesse slapped me, but I ignore it. "You're awesome."

He gives me a lopsided grin. "You're sweet." He helps me search the forest for the next half hour, but we can't find it. "Hey," he finally says, pulling me to him. I can't see his features very well, but I hear the concern in his voice. "We'll come back and look again when it's light out."

I sigh, frustrated. "My entire life is in that bag."

"Really?" He brushes some hair off of my face and tucks it behind my ear. "I thought I was part of your life and I'm still here."

"True." I hug him, enjoying the light scent of cologne on his long-sleeved gray shirt. After a deep breath, I step out of his arms. "Sorry I pulled you away from the party."

"Anytime." We walk hand in hand back to the party. I see Merida with Ethan. His arm is around her while they talk. Merida laughs, pulling her long red hair over one shoulder and twists it nervously in her hands. I try to get her attention, but she only has eyes for him.

"Have you seen Tiana?" I ask Carson.

Carson shakes his head. "Not since her fight with Kelly. That was intense. Did you see it?"

"Some of it." I weave through the crowd. "She was okay when you saw her though, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Better than okay. The girl is a rock star. She was ready to beat Kelly down, but Kelly backed off and left. After that, a guy named Lance from Loyola High hogged all of her attention and the

last I saw them, they went down to the lake."

I smile. "Sounds like she and Merida are having a great time."

Carson reaches around my waist from behind and hugs me against his chest. "I want you to have a good time too. Are you sure you need to go?"

My brain screams that I should. But I glance up at Carson's gorgeous face and say, "Maybe not just yet."

"Awesome." The song blaring from the speakers is a slow one. Carson nuzzles against my neck. My body conforms into his, and we sway to the beat for a while. It's nice, wrapped in his arms. I allow myself to relax against him. "Hey, what happened to your shirt?" He straightens and tugs on the ripped piece.

The panic I felt before Carson found me comes back in a rush and knocks me in the gut. When I don't answer, he spins me around so that the firelight shines directly in my eyes.

"It's fine. I'm fine." I don't want to explain my foolishness by leaving the party alone at night. I broke cardinal rule number one and am embarrassed to admit it.

He looks like he doesn't believe me as he studies my face closely.

"Really, Carson. It's nothing."

He touches my lip, the side that Jesse slapped. I'm sure it's swollen. "Is that blood?"

I shake my head, figuring it's probably dry by now.

"It is, isn't it?" Anger changes his features and for the briefest moment he reminds me of his dad. "Who did this to you? I swear I'll kill them."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing happened." I take his hands in mine.

"That's bull. Your eye is bruised, and your lip is swollen. Did he? Tell me who did this."

I appreciate that he cares, but there are probably two hundred people here and I don't want to start a scene. Plus, he's been drinking,

and Jesse has a lot of friends. I don't want Carson to get in a fight. He might get hurt. "Please, Carson. Let's talk about it tomorrow. Right now I just want to dance." I rest my hands on his hips, tugging on his belt loops. "Please."

He leans down and gently kisses my sore lips. "Did he—" He pauses, closes his eyes, but not before I see pain shoot through them.

I cup his face in my hands. "No. He tried, but he didn't finish."

"You stopped him?"

I don't know how to answer. Shock and fear were my biggest emotions while it happened. And then it was over. Jesse was thrown off me and through the air. It's possible some of my fairy magic returned. Aunties' Fae and Macey believe it might happen. Auntie Vera disagrees. She's sure Lucretia sealed away all of my magic when she cursed me. Vera believes the only way my magic will return is if I somehow survive the curse. I'm not sure what to believe. I don't know enough about the land I come from or the rules tied to fairy magic.

Then again, it could have been Paxton.

"He was stopped," I finally say.

He eyes me incredulously. "Good," he finally says, hugging me fiercely. "I don't know what I'd do if something bad happened to you."

I smile against his shoulder. "Thanks, Carson."

OceanofPDF.com

MONDAY MORNING COMES TOO QUICKLY. Merida can't stop talking about Ethan and Tiana has a permanent smile on her face since she met Lance. I'm so happy for them. It's like we always planned. Senior year. We all have boyfriends. Heck, we might all get to go to prom.

On Saturday afternoon, I told Carson about Jesse. He wanted to go over to Jesse's right then and there, but I explained that I thought he was drunk and not to bother. I left out the part about Paxton. It seems like the right thing to do. I don't know how to explain him anyway, and I don't want Carson to worry.

We went back to the party site and searched the forest for my purse but didn't find it. I'm beyond sick it's gone. I don't want to tell my aunties because then I'll have to tell them how I lost it and where. It was bad enough trying to explain my bruised eye and swollen lip to them.

They believe I fell out of bed during a bad dream. One little lie is horrible enough, but it's turned into many, and I feel terrible about them. It goes against everything I believe is right. Yet I'm not sure how to fix the situation. At some point I'm going to have to come clean though, like when they realize I don't have my phone any longer.

I pull into a parking spot at Hellgate High, turn off my car, and give my reflection a quick check. "See you girls at lunch?" We get out of the car together.

"Yeah, I can't wait to introduce you guys to Lance." Tiana speaks with dreaminess in her eyes.

Merida and I laugh.

"Doesn't he go to a different school," Merida asks.

"Yes, but I'm sneaking him in. Tell no one." She pouts when I gasp,

but it's only because I'm surprised. My friends are acting crazy and it's all because of high school boys. "You want to meet him, don't you?" she asks, looking worried.

"Definitely," Merida says.

"Of course," I add.

Tiana hugs Mer and I. "See you later."

I wave. Merida does too, but her attention is elsewhere. I follow the direction of her eyes and see Ethan, smiling at her like she hung the sun and the moon. It's sweet, but also creepy. I get an off vibe about that guy, so I push it away. "Awwwww, the two of you are so cute."

Merida blushes. "I need to talk to you about last night."

I swallow, suddenly nervous. Did they do more than kiss? "After school?"

She gives me a quick look. "Maybe. Depends on what Ethan is doing."

I'm about to laugh, thinking my independent and feminist friend is joking, but she takes off in Ethan's direction. She's like a bee with honey. The handsome honey-man puts an arm around Merida's waist and kisses her. And sweetest of all? He takes her books and carries them.

After stopping at my locker, I go to Carson's. It's our morning ritual. But he isn't there. I think about texting him until I remember I don't have my phone. Totally sucks!

I wait for him a few minutes, trying to ignore the worry tightening my chest. What if something happened to him? Or, what if he decided I'm too high maintenance and is avoiding me? When the tardy bell rings I sigh and head to class.

"Aurora."

I jump at the sound of my name spoken in my ear.

Paxton appears out of thin air.

A half-crazy scream bursts from my throat.

He's in the middle of the empty hall wearing a white button up shirt and ripped jeans tucked into untied black boots. His black hair hangs in his face. As my heart calms to a more normal speed, I notice a deep blue sheen to the color. At the lake on Friday it was too dark to see.

"How did you do that," I ask as he strolls toward me.

His hands are behind his back, making his shirt tight against his very well sculpted abs.

"Magic." He grins.

"So, I was right. It was you who got that jerk off me Friday night. Are you a fairy? Do you have magic?"

"Obviously, Aurora." His grin grows. "I am Paxton, son of Dementes, a royal in the court of Airies and Amourity. I have come from Isluria at the request of the king and queen." He glances around before continuing. "They would have me give you a message and show you something. Can you come with me?"

At hearing he's a messenger from my parents, I am immediately excited and equally apprehensive. Why wouldn't my parents give the message to my aunties? They've cared for me since birth. Surely, they would trust my aunties over this guy.

Paxton unexpectedly stands too close, invading my personal space. A delicious aroma fills the air around us. It's like cinnamon or nutmeg or chai tea with a hefty helping of whipped cream on top. The smell is so yummy, my mouth waters. "I have a gift for you," he adds.

"Oh?" I put my hands up as a reaction to his sudden nearness. He leans into my hands and I feel how solid he is. From behind his back he brings my bag. The one I took with me to the party on Friday night.

"You found it?" I take it from him and open it. Everything is still there, including my phone, wallet, and water bottle. Even my spearmint gum and the book I'm reading are still inside. "This is

amazing." Relief washes over me and without thinking, I throw my arms around his neck. "Thank you." Tears sting my eyes, which is probably stupid, but I'm just so happy.

His arms circle my waist and the tightening in my chest returns stronger than ever. This time I'm sure whatever is happening will explode. I can't help wondering what the feeling is but believe it might be my magic trying to break free. That maybe Lucretia didn't take it from me but bound it inside of me. If that's the case, releasing it might be possible.

"It is my pleasure, Aurora." He smiles and I feel my heart melt.

I clear my throat, slightly embarrassed, and move out of his arms. "So, what's the message?"

Paxton glances around the hall again. "I need to take you somewhere and show you."

The hall is empty, but I understand what he means. "Where do you need to take me?" He's so vague. Why can't he just tell me now?

He shakes his head. "I must not say for I fear others might hear and this must be kept secret."

I still think he's much too elusive, but it might be the truth. "I can't right now. In fact I'm already late for class. If my teacher marks me absent my aunties will receive an email and then I'll get in trouble." As I speak, Paxton's features fall with disappointment. "What about after school? Can you come to my house?"

"Perhaps, but there is a strong protection spell around your house. It may be difficult for me to enter."

I pat his arm. "How about using the front door? Just knock when you get there. I'll let you in."

One of his eyebrows rises. "If the fairies protecting you discover I'm from Isluria, there might be chaos."

"Then I guess I'll have to keep you a secret." I put a finger over my lips.

He smiles, giving me a quick nod. “How do you intend to do that?”

“Well, if you must know, my aunties play Bridge with their friends at the community center on Monday’s until late, so we’ll have the house to ourselves.” I’m shocked I told him that. Not even Carson knows about my free night.

“Bridge?”

He’s obviously confused, and I laugh. “It’s a game. Anyway, come by around four.”

“Very well. You can expect me at four o’clock.”

“So formal,” I say, sounding flirty, and wondering what the daisies is wrong with me.

Paxton gives me a quick once over. “By the way, you look much better than you did on Friday night.”

I glance down, trying to remember what I put on today. Since the day my aunties told me about where I came from, Lucretia, and the curse, fashion is less important to me.

But I chose coral skinny jeans today and combined them with a heather gray fitted tee shirt and added matching gray heels. I air dried my hair and put some product in it to give big, natural curls. “Well, in my defense, when you saw me, I was crying, so there’s that.” I make a face.

Paxton’s features become angry. “With one word, I will make the human boy wish he never touched you in such a disrespectful and rough fashion.”

“No, that’s okay.” I pause. “But, what would you do to him?” I’m curious anyway.

His anger subsides slightly. “Any number of things. Cover him in warts. Give him a million ant bites or a tapeworm or both. I could also make it rain only on him, no matter where he goes or send a tornado to his house.” I watch as he speaks and it’s obvious the more he talks, the more he gets into the idea of torturing Jesse. “Or better yet—”

“I get it,” I say, cutting him off. “You could make his life miserable.”

His blue eyes twinkle. “In so many ways, Aurora. By the time I finish with him he won’t know which way is up.”

I force myself not to laugh. “He probably deserves each and every one of those things and then some, but maybe you should hold off.” I thought about the news and the latest prison built not to far from here. It was basically a supermax for supernaturals. The official opening was today. Paxton wants to say something, but I continue quickly. “For now,” I add, clutching my bag. “But I may change my mind.”

“As you command.” He bows slightly.

I can’t help but smile. “See you later, Pax.” I take off running and hope I’m not too late for class.

OceanofPDF.com

AT LUNCH I look for Carson. I also text him and tell him I have my phone, but he doesn't respond. Merida and Tiana bring their guys over to our table and introduce me to them. Both seem nice and very smitten with my friends, which makes me happy, though I still can't shake that something is off about Lance and Ethan. Neither of them eat or drink anything. It's weird. Usually guys wolf down their own food and then any leftovers.

"Where's Carson?" Tiana asks.

"I went by his locker this morning but haven't seen him." I glance at my phone. "Hopefully he's all right." We spent most of Saturday together, but I didn't see him on Sunday.

"I'm sure he's fine," Merida chimes in.

"You're probably right." But I can't stop stressing.

It's that way for the rest of the day. No Carson and he doesn't respond to any of my texts. After school, I drive Merida home. Tiana gets a ride with Lance.

"Did Carson ever show up?" Merida asks.

"No. And he didn't text me back either." I think about going over to his house, but since I told Paxton I'd meet him at four, I don't have time. It's a warm day and we have our windows down. The air smells like snow and I inhale deeply.

"I know you're worried about Carson, but did you want to hear about my weekend with Ethan?" She practically bursts with excitement.

"Definitely." I stop at a light and look over, smiling.

She turns in her seat, so she faces me. "Well I told you about what happened at the party. He said he's liked me for a long time, but didn't have the guts to ask me out, right?"

“Yes,” I say with a nod. Part of me wonders if that’s true. Ethan is a very outgoing guy and he’s always with a girl. I just hope he isn’t using Merida.

“Okay, well Saturday he asked me to go with him on a hike at Trail Head. He packed us a lunch and we stopped at this beautiful spot off the trail.”

Merida pauses and I quickly glance over. “Was it fun?”

Her fingers twist into knots. She’s nervous about whatever happened.

“Mer?”

“He’s incredible.” Her voice is a whisper. “I-I never knew kissing and… stuff could be so… earth shattering.”

All Carson and I have done is kiss. Admittedly it was heated and passionate kissing, but that’s it. So Merida’s use of the word ‘stuff’ has me interested. “What kind of stuff?”

Merida’s freckled face turns bright red. “Let’s just say if the Motion Picture Association reviewed our lunch date, they would give it an R rating.” She giggles.

“Oh my gosh. Are you serious? Merida, you just met him?” I’m floored. Shocked. Completely confused.

“I know. But I’ve never felt this way about a guy.” She looks out the window, her expression far away. Finally, she continues, “I think I love him.”

I want to slam on the breaks and shake some sense into her. I want to ask her how she can possibly love a person she’s known two freaking days? Instead I just smile. “That’s nice.”

She looks over at me, her eyes sharp. “Rory, I’m serious. For the first time in my life I think I understand the way Romeo and Juliet felt. I would die for him.”

I pull into my driveway and put my car in park. Take a deep breath. “Romeo and Juliet aren’t real. The story is fiction.”

Merida is angry. I see it on her face. She pushes open the passenger door. “Maybe that’s true, but their *love* is real. It exists. And it’s how I feel.” She slams the door and walks quickly across the street to her house.

I’m immediately sorry I wasn’t more supportive. I climb out. “Sorry, Merida. Really,” I shout.

She doesn’t turn around, just waves.

“Smooth move.” I take my backpack from the back seat and go inside my house. “Hello?” I shout, on my way to my room.

Vera appears first in a hunter green dress under her white apron. “Hello, dear. How was school?”

I shrug. “Fine. I guess.”

“Hungry?” Fae asks, holding out a plate of cookies.

I am hungry, but the cookies look dry. I take one anyway. “Thank you.”

Macey comes from the living room carrying a book. It’s one I don’t know. The cover is weathered, and the binding is loose at the edges. There’s a seven-point star imprinted on the front. I can only read part of the title, which is *fairy magic*. “Any homework,” she asks, but keeps her eyes focused on the page.

I’m curious about the book, especially because it’s about fairy magic, but not enough to check it out right now. I need to get ready for Paxton. At his name, my stomach does a strange flutter. “Yes, and I’m having a friend over so I can help him out. He’ll be here at four.” I take a bite of the cookie. It’s orange chocolate chip. The recipe is one I created and when I make them, they’re really good. Somehow when Auntie Fae makes them, she seems to add too much flour or not enough sugar, or she adds flower instead of sugar. Like I said before, my aunties are flitty.

The secret to my recipe is to use freshly squeezed orange juice in place of the vanilla, and bittersweet chocolate chips instead of milk chocolate. The combination is… well, magical.

“He?” Auntie Macey asks. “Is it Carson?”

I shake my head while I’m chewing. Quickly swallow and wish I had a drink of juice. “His name is Paxton. He needs help in Geography.” It’s another lie, one I took the time to rehearse in my head. At this point I figure I’ve said so many, one more can’t hurt.

“How nice, dear.” Fae holds the plate out and I take another cookie. There’s a little too much flour and not enough orange, but she did pretty good on this batch. “Will you be working in the dining room? I have my dried flowers spread out everywhere, but I can clean them up quickly if you need the table.”

“Don’t worry about the table. We’ll study in my room.” I give each of them a hug.

Macey pats my back. “Have fun.” She goes back into the living room.

Fae sighs with relief. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Very good. Enjoy yourself and share the cookies.” Fae returns to the kitchen.

“Thanks, Auntie Fae. I will.”

Vera has her hands on her hips. “Studying only, correct?”

I give her my best how-dare-you-accuse-me-of-such-atrocities expression. “Of course.”

“All right. Well you remember we have Bridge today?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

“I trust you will be.” She gives me one of her rare smiles before heading back into the kitchen with Fae.

I go into my room and close the door. There isn’t a lot to do to clean up, but I do need to make my bed and hang up some clothes. That’s what I’m doing when I hear my aunties leave. Relief washes over me. And I still have time before Paxton shows up. For some reason, instead of working on my English paper or my math I go into

my bathroom and brush my teeth, run a brush through my hair, and put on some lip gloss. Then I smell my pits and add an extra layer of deodorant. It surprises me I'm going to all this trouble for a guy I barely know.

But he's a fairy from Isluria.

And that means something to me.

At four o'clock on the dot, there's a knock on my door. I open it, expecting Paxton.

"Carson," I say, more than a little surprised. "What are you doing here?"

He has a bouquet of dahlias in one hand and a box of chocolates in the other. And he looks astonishingly handsome in dark jeans and a black tee shirt. "Thought I'd surprise you. Looks like I succeeded. Can I come in?"

I quickly glance around the yard for Paxton. "Sure." I stand away from the door.

He walks in and looks around. "Where are your aunts?"

"They're out for a little while." I take the flowers and head into the kitchen. "I can't believe you bought me these. They smell so good but must've cost you a fortune."

Carson shrugs, following me. "You're worth it." He also hands me the chocolates.

I place both on the kitchen island. Carson sits on one of the barstools. He seems slightly on edge.

I tear the plastic wrapping off the chocolates and open the box. The most delicious aroma fills my nose. "Mmmmmmm." I take a chocolate and feed it to Carson.

After he's done chewing, he says, "They're all orange cream since those are your favorites."

I put one in my mouth, savoring it. "So where were you today?" I locate the pruning shears, unwrap the flowers and clip off the ends at

a forty-five degree angle, the way my aunties showed me.

"Just had some stuff to do, so I couldn't make it."

I hear the dishonesty in his voice. "Oh? What was that?" I take a large, glass vase from the cupboard under the sink and fill it with tepid water.

"Just stuff," Carson says sharply.

I pick up a dahlia and bring the soft, pink petals to my nose. The scent is amazing. I close my eyes, inhale deeply, and decide what to do. It's obvious he doesn't want to tell me where he was and I decide not to pressure him. Opening my eyes, I say, "Well, I'm glad I get to see you." After I've arranged the flowers, I throw the wrapping and clipped flower stems in the garbage.

He comes around the island and pulls me into a hug. "Your eye is looking better. And your lip is less swollen. Do they still hurt?"

"No." It's another lie, and I recognize I'm getting too good at saying what others want to hear instead of the truth.

"Rory." He presses his mouth softly against mine.

I respond hungrily, despite the slight pain, opening my mouth to him. All thoughts of Paxton and Isluria and fairies and the curse disappear while his lips caress mine. He explores my mouth while his hands find my hips and under my shirt. My skin tingles at his touch.

"When will your aunts be home," he asks between kisses.

"I don't know, why?" Yet another lie. I know why. He wants to take our kisses further, but I'm not ready for that.

At least not with him. I'm surprised by the thought, but it's true. He's amazing and his lips should be illegal they are so naughty, but whenever I think of going further with him, I can't see anything.

He smiles against my lips. "You know why?" His fingers brush the edge of my bra. "I want to be close to you."

I push his hands down. "You *are* close to me, Car," I say searching his eyes to gauge his state of mind.

“Come on, Rory. We’ve been together over a month. Don’t you want to take our relationship to the next level?”

“Carson—” I shake my head. “I love kissing you. It’s better than anything I’ve ever experienced, even better than chocolate, and you know how I feel about chocolate, but I’m not ready for more than that.”

He steps back, his face blank of emotion.

I continue, “I just need more time. That’s all. You can understand that, right, especially after what happened Friday night?”

Carson’s jaw moves in frustration. “You’re seventeen, Rory. A woman. And I’m a man. With needs.” He rubs the back of his neck in frustration.

I straighten, irritated with him, with Jesse, with all guys in general. “Well, I certainly don’t want to keep you from your needs, but I’m telling you, I won’t be going any further than kissing for quite some time so if you can’t handle that, please tell me now, and we can call this quits.”

I watch a myriad of emotions cross Carson’s face until it settles on what appears to be regret. The tension leaves his shoulders and he takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. So sorry, Rory. I don’t know what I was thinking. Of course I can handle it. In fact, I’ll love it. As long as I’m with you, kissing is all I need.” He comes over and buries his face in the crook of my neck.

I sigh contentedly, desperate to believe him, even though there’s an itty, bitty, tiny doubt hanging out in the dark recesses of my brain. When Carson begins to trail kisses along my collarbones, I ignore the doubts. As he trails his hot kisses along my jaw, I shove harder against my uncertainties until there’s only a pinch of disbelief left, which I then completely squash when his lips find mine and he presses my mouth open.

I grab hold of the belt loops on his pants and pull him closer.

Kissing rocks. That is all.

OceanofPDF.com

A BLUE SKY is prettiest when you know it's your last. At least that's what I think as I lay on my back staring up at the ceiling of my bedroom. My glow-in-the-dark stars shine in the darkness. It's nearly midnight and I should be asleep. School is tomorrow and my alarm will go off in six hours. But I'm not tired. In fact I never felt more awake and my mind spins with thoughts I can't seem to let go of. Like this Yiddish Proverb: *A half-truth is a whole lie.* I've lied a lot lately and it's eating me up inside. But I'm not sure how to stop.

My life is like a bad movie. Growing up, I never felt normal and now I know why. I'm not supposed to be. Normal is something humans strive for, like being one of the cool kids, but I'm not human, I'm a fairy. Like Tinker Bell or the freaking tooth fairy or… my aunties Fae, Macey, and Vera.

Knowing that should give me peace. But it doesn't. Because instead of finally fitting in, I realize I would also be an oddball in the fairy world. Fairies have magic so I should have magic. Except I don't. It appears I'm destined to be a dork, at least until I turn eighteen. Then, according to the curse Lucretia placed on me, I'll be dead. Stabbed through the heart. It doesn't sound like a good way to die. Plus, there's the obvious issue. I want to live. Long enough to fall in love. Marry. Have children. I stop myself. Can fairies even have children? I have all the parts a human has. In theory it seems like they can, if they want.

And then there's Paxton. He was supposed to come over, but Carson showed up. I was happy to see my boyfriend. More than happy, really, but after he left, I kept hoping Paxton would stop by. He didn't. That worries me for some reason.

So I'm tallying stars and wondering where he is and what he might be doing. I have so many questions, about him, Isluria, and my mom

and dad. And the more I think about it, the more my questions build until I feel like I might explode if I don't get some answers.

"Aurora? May I come in?" I hear his voice outside my window.

"Paxton?" I sit and pull the covers under my chin even though I know he can't see me because the curtains are closed.

"Can you invite me in? I can't enter without your permission because of the wards protecting the house." His deep voice is soft, but easy to hear.

I don't hesitate. "Hang on." I forget I'm wearing only a spaghetti strap tank and boy short pajama bottoms and rush to the window. Carefully, I move the curtain aside and slide the window open. "Can you help me get the screen off?" Since I snuck out the other night, it's slightly bent and tricky.

He lifts the screen from the track and sets it on the ground behind one of the bushes. "Sorry I'm late." He jumps up and lifts one leg over the opening as I step back. When both feet are inside my room, he pushes off and seems to hover for longer than seems possible before landing with a soft thud on my carpeted floor. Can he fly without wings?

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. "Only by eight hours is all," I say with a tiny bit of scorn.

Pax places a fisted hand over his heart and bows slightly. He's wearing all black. "Highness, you had company. I didn't want to interrupt." He scans the room and I'm suddenly embarrassed by its childishness.

I flip on the lamp beside my bed. "Yeah, Carson stopped by."

His eyes scan my attire before he clears his throat. "Your boyfriend seems to care a great deal about you."

I take a blanket from the end of my bed and wrap myself in it, trying to act like I'm fine and not self-conscious. "You said you had a message from my parents?" I study him, admiring his lips and the shape of his eyes. His lashes are dark and long, enhancing his face. His

square jaw is tanned and rugged as is the rest of him. He doesn't look like what I imagine a fairy should look like. Not at all. He's beyond hot.

"Yes, well…" He pauses. A myriad of emotions cross his ruthlessly beautiful face. For a moment I get a sense of great pain and anguish from him followed by anger.

"What is it?" I step closer. "What's wrong?" The blanket falls from my shoulders, dangling over my arms.

He takes them, his warm fingers heating me even through the blanket. "This is difficult." He pulls me against his chest, hugging me. "I—" His muscles are tense, and I realize whatever it is he has to say isn't good.

"Yes?" He smells like nutmeg with a hint of cinnamon and I breathe him in.

"It's—" Paxton lifts my face so I have to focus on his vivid blue eyes that match the sheen of blue in his black hair.

The strange heat within lights up and burns. Again I wonder if my magic still exists and that Lucretia only bound it.

"Do you smell that?" One side of his lips lifts in a smile at the question.

It's exotic, like dahlias. "Yes, is it your cologne?" It seems a little feminine for a guy, but he is a fairy after all.

"No, it's you," he whispers and his head dips like he intends to kiss me.

"Get your grubby mitts off her!" The whisper-shout comes from the direction of my window and I jump back, my gaze falling on the guy coming through my window.

"How dare you?" I tighten the blanket closer around my body, leaning a little closer to Paxton. "Get out!"

A dagger appears in Paxton's hands. "You have no business here. Do as the princess commands and leave," Paxton seethes. He shifts his

weight, preparing for a fight and I back away from them both, my legs smacking the edge of my bed.

The new guy barely acknowledges me, his golden eyes filled with fury. A piece of blond hair falls into his eyes and he promptly swipes it out of the way. He's taller even than Paxton or Carson and built like a quarterback—lean and muscled. The way he stands, like he's ready to pounce, reminds me of a lion. "See, I can't do that. I've made it my priority to protect her from supernatural jerks like you." He rolls his shoulders back. "Now do as I say and get away from her."

I don't know what to do, whether I should scream out for my aunties or run away. Something tells me the situation is so much bigger than me.

The guy shakes his mane of blond hair and for the briefest moment I think I see his eyes change, like those of a snake or a lizard.

I gasp, falling back on my bed. "*Both* of you need to leave. Right. This. Minute." My voice trembles with fear and I clamp my teeth together to keep from screaming.

Paxton glances down at his hands. His eyes are full of regret. "Aurora—" he begins, shakes his head, and vanishes. Just pops out of my room like he was never there.

"Good riddance," the other guy says, brushing his hands together like he's getting rid of cookie crumbs.

I'm terrified, but angry as well. "You need to get out too," I squish out. Paxton and my aunties said my house was protected by spells, yet this guy came in without a problem.

He seems less confident now that Paxton is gone and crosses his arms. "Look, my father and I are in the business of helping people, especially supernaturals. We recently found out about you and thought you might need some help." He kicks at the dresser beside my window. "Looks like we were right."

"I was fine." I shake my head. "I am fine. Now get out." I sit up, studying the guy. He looks to be my age but seems so much more

mature than most guys in high school and I wonder what he's been through or what he does. He said he and his father protect supernaturals.

"You may be fine now." He pushes back one of my curtains. "But that fairy isn't here to help you. He's here to…" He growls in frustration.

"To what?"

He faces me. "I know about your curse. I know what's supposed to happen on your eighteenth birthday, Aurora. I know—"

I stand, but don't move. "How do you know? Are you a fairy too?" I cross my arms, searching for something on his body that screams fairy. Though Paxton doesn't have any telltale signs either. "Are you?"

"I'm most definitely not a fairy." He drops his arms, rolling his shoulders back.

"Hey, I'm a fairy." I give him my coldest glare, hoping he'll take the hint and go, though I want to know what he knows. And who he is. How he found me. And what he wants.

He sits on the sill. "Look, you know about the fairy realm, but there's so much more to it than that. There are vampires, witches, werewolves, and—"

I snort. "I know. I watch the news. Duh!" It sounds so nerdy. I should be embarrassed, but I don't care. "Look, uh, whatever your name is, I'd appreciate it if you'd get out of my room and leave me alone. If you have something to tell me, do it in the light of day." And in public, I thought.

"My name is Troy." He smirks. "And I'm half dragon."

I gasp and his face lights up with a giant smile.

"Yep, we exist too."

I don't know whether to laugh or freak out. The news never mentioned dragons. "Cool." I cross my arms. "Really?" It seems like such a strange reality I'm living in.

His eyes change. They remind me of liquid gold. And his face changes so that his skin appears almost scaly. “Yep. As I said, my father and I have made it our job to find those supernaturals who need help and…” He pauses and tucks his hands into his back pocket.

“Help them,” I finish for him, raising an eyebrow.

“Exactly.” He grimaces.

“Is this your first time?”

He gives me a bizarre look, one that says I guessed right.

“Helping people, I mean.”

“How did you know?” He turns away, peeking outside my window.

I shrug and laugh. “Several things, but that’s okay.” I pull the blanket further over my shoulders. “So what are you saving me from? What did you think Paxton was going to do to me?” *Besides kiss me,* I think.

He walks over and picks up one of the dozen ceramic fairies on my dresser. It’s funny. My whole life I thought they were beautiful. I dressed up as Tinker Bell for more than one Halloween. Everything about them, the wings, the cute little shoes with the fluffy pom poms, the way she wears her hair, and especially her magic delighted me as a child, and into my tween years. The whole idea of her felt right. It still does. So when my aunties told me who I was, that I was born a fairy, it was like the world made sense for the first time.

“Here’s what I know. That guy, Paxton, he wasn’t sent by your parents. He works for the fairy who cursed you to die.”

“You mean my mother’s sister. Lucretia.” I sit on my bed suddenly exhausted. It made sense, though. That would explain why he didn’t want to see my aunties.

Troy came over. “Do you mind if I sit too?”

“No, of course not. Go ahead.” What little fight I have left wilts like the dead dahlias Carson gave me weeks ago.

At the thought of my boyfriend I instantly stress. A line of

perspiration trickles down my spine. Carson Hayes. Not that many weeks ago he became my world, the only guy I ever had a thing for, the only guy for me. That's what I believed.

If I'm honest with myself, I can admit he was the guy I dreamed of marrying, having children with. Now…

Not any longer.

I still find him handsome, of course. My heart still flutters when I think of him. He's definitely one of the good guys, better than good. Amazing. But since meeting Paxton, since my aunties told me the truth, I've found myself holding back. Because he isn't like me. We aren't the same. Where I grew up believing in the human happily ever after: marrying the man of my dreams, having children of my own, and a job I loved, I now know those dreams are no longer possible. Not for me. I'm not human, not even a little bit. And more than that, I can't see a future past a few months from now. By then it's likely I'll be dead.

"Aurora? You don't need to be scared." Troy's taut shoulder brushes against mine, interrupting my thoughts.

"I'm not." Which is true. Though I have no reason to trust him, there's something about him that immediately makes me feel calm. I don't trust him, but it won't hurt to hear what he has to say. Obviously, he isn't malevolent.

OceanofPDF.com

"YOU KNOW ABOUT LUCRETIA THEN?" He leans back, resting his hands behind him, his eyes focused on me.

It's a little disconcerting, but I fight the feeling. "Some. My aunties told me the story. My mom married the man Lucretia was betrothed to. The betrayal flipped her out. She went crazy, killing fairies for their power until she became a monster. When I was born, she cursed me to die on my eighteenth birthday. Doing that trapped her in the fairy realm's underworld." I turn to him. "Does that sound like what you've heard?"

"Yes, it does." He smiles. "What else do you know?"

I shrug. "I know my magic is gone…" I let the sentence die on my lips because I don't think that's true.

A look of surprise crosses his face. "It's still there, Aurora. I can see it within you, clear as day, but it's been bound," he says, confirming what I already know. He reaches out and touches the spot where my heart thuds erratically. "It's strong too."

How can this guy know more than my aunties? How can he see my magic? "Do you know how to release it?"

Troy turns away. It seems as though he's self-conscious or nervous about the answer.

"Troy?"

"How many fairy tales have you read?" He walks over to my dresser. This time he doesn't touch the fairies but picks up one of the many princess figurines lining the back edge.

"All of them," I say, coming to stand beside him. As a child, I loved them. "Why?" I take the porcelain statue of Aurora from his hand and look at it. She's wearing a pink dress. A beautiful crown adorns her head. My aunties say she looks like me. They aren't wrong.

“Let me tell you a different story.” He smiles then and my heart skips a beat. Not because I’m smitten with him, although admittedly he’s incredibly handsome, but it’s because there’s a look in his eyes that tells me he knows more about me than anyone.

“Okay.” I replace the porcelain figurine.

“Once upon a time a little fairy was born. She was loved immediately by her parents. They named her Aurora because it means morning.”

“How do you know all of this?” I ask, interrupting him. I cross my arms, desperate to know the answers, but afraid too.

He moves over to the window but doesn’t answer my question. Instead he continues. “She was a beautiful child. The most beautiful in the land.”

“I know this part,” I say, moving over to my bed where I sit. “Lucretia is mad and shows up, cursing her… I mean me.”

Troy nods.

I go on. “To protect me, my parents send me into the human realm with three of their most trusted of the Royal Guards.” I smile. “Right?”

“Yep.” He moves so he’s in front of me.

“My question is, how do you know all of this?” I cross one leg over the other, tucking my feet under the bed.

“It doesn’t matter.” He sits beside me. “What does, is that Paxton is a bad guy and you need your magic back.”

“I do? That’s what Paxton says he wants for me too. How is that a bad thing then?” It did matter how he got the information about me. I guessed it was through supernatural means, but I still want to know the details.

“It’s bad if your magic returns from the kiss of an evil person versus the kiss of a person with a pure heart, specifically when it’s true love’s kiss.” He runs a hand through his hair.

I turn so we face each other. “Wrong. If I understand my fairytale

lore, and I believe I do, then true love's kiss can only come from your *true love."* I want to add, *duh*, but keep it to myself.

"If only that were true." He stands, taking the chair from under my desk and rolling it over so he can sit in front of me.

"You're saying there can be more than one true love?" I'm so confused. "Or are you hitting on me?"

"No. Not even. I swear." He rolls away, bumping into the wall where the window is still open as he laughs nervously.

"Okay, so let me see if I got this straight. Paxton came in here tonight to kiss me. He's supposed to be my evil true love so if he kisses me, my magic will return, but it will be evil." Troy opens his mouth to say something, but I hold up a finger to stop him. "So, if I kiss my good guy true love, then my magic will come back and it'll be good?"

He nods. "Pretty much, yeah. That's impressive." He crosses his arms, leaning back.

"It's stupid is what it is." I spit the words out like they taste nasty. "I am who I am. Good or bad, it's the choices I make, not because of magic." I huff out a breath, wishing I could go to sleep, wake up, and have forgotten all of this.

"Not really, not if you think about it. Since we all have good and evil inside us, it makes sense there would be a good and bad true love as well. And our choices lead us toward one or the other." His golden eyes fade into a more hazel color.

"Your eyes are kinda cool. They change color," I say as I ponder his words. There might be truth to it, but it doesn't feel right.

"Yeah, well I'm awesome. That shows everywhere, including my eyes." His confidence is renewed as straightens.

"Okay, Mr. Awesome, does Paxton know this farfetched piece of information. Does he know he's my evil true love?"

"Oh, he knows alright. Except…" Troy leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs.

“What?” I can’t help but angle forward as well.

“He doesn’t believe he’s your evil true love. He thinks he’s your *only* true love,” he says, sitting up once again.

The comment makes me blush as I copy him, returning to an upright position. “But I don’t even know him.” I glance over and notice Troy is smirking. “Besides how do you know all of this?” I ask again.

He looks away. Locks his hands behind his head. “I’ve read your story, Aurora.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “You mean you’ve read it up until now since obviously you can’t know how my story ends. It hasn’t happened yet.”

Troy stands and goes over to the window. “All of it,” he says, his eyes wide with worry.

“Not possible. Because there isn’t a book in existence that can tell any of us how our lives end. What about free will?”

He stands and walks over to the window.

I rush over to him, grabbing hold of his gray shirt. It makes no sense that he would leave now, but I can’t take the chance either. “Troy? Tell me the truth.”

His eyes lock on mine. “Professor, uh my father and I found a book during our travels. Inside are the stories of every life ever created in all the realms.”

“Whoa, that’s got to be an enormous book.”

He laughs, showing me all of his straight, white teeth. “It’s a magical book that is basically endless, but I can’t stop reading it. While searching through one night, I read your story, which is why I’m here. My father and I believe we can change your story. We hope to anyway.”

I shudder at the thought. “You want to save me from dying?”

“Yes, that and more. I want to save you from yourself.” He sits on

the windowsill.

“Who’s my good prince charming?” I ask, watching him.

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” he says, quoting a line from my Auntie Fae’s favorite eighties movie.

I gasp. “You would?”

He jumps down into the bushes along my house and picks up the screen. I help him adjust it back into place. It’s going to rain soon; I can smell it. “No. I’m joking, but I have to go. One of your aunts is awake.”

“Oh?” My heart picks up speed.

He runs out of the bushes. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Aurora.”

“You will?” I stand.

“Oh yeah. You’re looking at the newest student at Hellgate High.”

“Great, then you should know, my name is Rory.”

He laughs, waving before running out of my view.

I quickly jump back into bed just as my door swings open. I hear her come in and close my curtains before leaving and shutting the door behind her.

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN MY ALARM GOES OFF, for the briefest moment I wonder if last night was a dream. Is it possible I didn't almost kiss my supposed evil true love, a fairy named Paxton? But then again, was it possible I met the half dragon named Troy, the guy who believes he's going to save me.

I check my phone. There are a couple of texts from Carson. They're sweet. *Hey,* I start to type, then stop. Read his texts again. The first is just a good morning with a heart and a kissy face emoji. In the second he asks if we can hang out after school. *After school works*, I continue, but stop again. I can't finish. "Ugh." I lock my phone, toss it on the bed, and tell myself I don't have the energy to respond.

At my closet, I quickly dress in jeans, a light pink tee shirt, a matching sweater, and pink ballet flats.

When I sit down to breakfast, my aunties comment on my outfit.

"Don't you look pretty," Auntie Macey says, placing a plate of undercooked pancakes on the table.

Vera hands me a glass of orange juice.

"Thank you." I take a sip, grateful for something edible or in this case, drinkable.

Fae pats my shoulder. "Pink looks so beautiful with your complexion." Her cheery smile fades. "How are you doing?"

I grimace and try to choke down a bite of raw pancake. "I'm, you know, good and I've got to get to school." I kiss her on the cheek.

"You sure?" She's still holding the pan and a spatula in her hands.

I get the feeling she can sense my lie. Am I *good*? "Course."

Auntie Macey takes my plate and Vera opens the front door. "See you later."

Once I'm inside my car, I buckle up and back out of the driveway.

Tiana waves as I drive by her house. She looks adorable in her sky blue pants, white poplin shirt and her black hair styled in loose waves. I wave and watch as she climbs into Lance's Mercedes. Merida was getting a ride with Ethan, which means I'm driving myself to school. Again. I miss my friends. Sure, I'm glad they're happy, but it would be nice to hang out with them. Not that I can tell them anything. They would freak if they knew I'm a fairy.

Hellgate High buzzes with activity. I pull into the parking spot, grab my backpack and get out.

"Hey Mer." I wave as she and Ethan walk past hand in hand.

"Rory. Hi!" Her curly red hair bounces around her like a fiery cotton ball.

Ethan gives me a nod. "What's up?"

"Not much," I lie as I walk inside the school and dash up the stairs. At my locker, I remove my books from my bag, and get what I need for my first class. My phone pings. I have a feeling it's from Carson. Before I can look at it, someone calls my name.

"Aurora."

I shut my locker. It's Paxton. His eyes smolder with irritation. "What did the mongrel want?" He's wearing perfectly faded jeans, his black boots, and a white tee shirt. His black hair is pulled back in a man bun. I can't stand man buns. But on Pax, it somehow makes him sexier.

"Huh?" I raise an eyebrow even though I know he's talking about Troy.

"The dragon boy. What did he want?" Each word is laced with incredible distain. It's obvious he doesn't like Troy.

"Nothing. Just to talk." The lie slips from my lips easily. I start down the hall toward my first class.

Pax grabs my arm. "Don't you want to know what your mom and dad have to say?"

“Oh, sure.” I pause and let the swarm of students pass us by. “Go ahead.” According to Troy, this guy is a liar. Whatever he’s here for, it isn’t because of my parents. At least that’s what the dragon boy said. I’m not sure what to believe.

Paxton clears his throat. “Aurora, I am supposed to…” He steps close. So close, he’s in my space. His gaze falls to my lips.

Kiss me, my mind whispers. I clear my throat. “So you want to kiss me? Right?” I say the words louder than expected and a couple of girls giggle as they pass by.

Paxton doesn’t seem to notice. “I’m supposed to tell you they love you.” He shakes his head, glancing briefly into my eyes.

“Really? Anything else?” I grit my teeth, waiting to hear what else he will lie about.

He moves in closer. “I need to kiss you. Doing so will release your magic. It’s the first step.”

I glare as a need to punch him in the face wells up. Along with my anger comes the pressure from within. I now believe the energy I feel is actually my repressed magic. And I realize it wants to get out, be free, and it should be. For the briefest moment I think about taking Pax up on his offer and just laying one on him. I even rise up on my tiptoes, but falter. “First step in what? Surrendering to the curse? Dying? Is that what you want? Because if it is, why didn’t you just let that guy hurt me the other night? Why be nice to me?” Tears fill my eyes as I meet his stare. He’s shocked. Surprised. He doesn’t want me hurt, I can tell that the moment I say the words.

“Aurora, no.” He takes my arms and pulls me over to the side of the lockers. “I should’ve known that mongrel would lie, would tell you things that aren’t true.”

“So if I kiss you, my magic won’t come back dark? I won’t be evil?” I repeat what Troy told me, and hope Pax will be genuine. I’m so confused.

His hands fall to his sides. “I—It isn’t like that. No at all. You and I

are meant to be together. Our magic, our destinies… I am your true love. My kiss will prove that for it is only true love's kiss that can free your magic. Not good or evil, just full and fulfilled, as you rightfully deserve." It sounds like he's repeating words that have been rehearsed.

I shake my head. "I can't believe anything you say. You're lying about who you work for, too. It isn't my parents, but Lucretia." I say the words with bite. "She cursed me to die. So why would she want me to have my magic then? Why would she want me to have any kind of edge?"

"It's not true. Yes, she cursed you…" he pauses. "But that was a long time ago. Now, it's so much more than that."

"She wants me to suffer, too. Is that it?" I don't wait for an answer but take off running until I hit the stairs. I climb them, until I reach the fifth floor. There's a roof access and I push open the door.

"Aurora, wait," I hear Pax call. He doesn't follow me and I'm equal parts disappointed and grateful.

I don't stop until I'm out in the fresh air. As soon as the door clicks shut, my heart sinks. "Crap!" I locked myself out. It's the cardinal rule when going out on the roof. I've heard other kids talk about it. A roll of duct tape hangs on a large nail sticking out of the brick. Below, on the graveled floor, is a pile of wadded up duct tape. It's to be used to stop the lock from latching. "Crap!" I go to the door and pull on the handle. It doesn't budge. "Ugh." I might be out here a while. Days even, unless a stoner comes out.

"If only you had your magic."

The words sail into my mind as a black mist swirls like a tornado before landing on two feet and becoming the most striking woman I've ever seen. Where my aunties have become soft edges and squishy devotion, this woman is sharp lines and sleek cuts.

"Who are you?" My back presses against the red steel door and my pulse quickens. I take a deep breath, because I know who she is

without having seen her before. “Lucretia,” I say, answering my own question.

“Impressive.” She casually moves toward me. “But more specifically, I’m your aunt Lucretia.”

I swallow, nervous. She isn’t bound to the under kingdom of the fairies after all. There are a dozen questions I can ask, but the most emotional comes out. “Why did you curse me? I was a baby. I did nothing to you.”

“Oh, sweet thing. Not yet. But you are the child of my betrayer and my sister. It’s inevitable you will do a lot to me.” Her lips lift into a smile and keep going. It’s eerie. She’s eerie. Almost like she isn’t all here, but a phantom or a ghost.

“So you’re a cup half full kind of fairy,” I say sarcastically.

She cackles. “You have your mother’s sharp wit. It’s one of her best traits. Well that, and her beautiful eyes.”

I know I shouldn’t be excited to learn about my mom, not from Lucretia, but I am. Plus, there’s no way down. At least not right now. I drop my bag, my notebook, and books, and move closer. “Do you still love your sister?”

Her dress is blood red. There’s a strange sheen, like a wetsuit look to the fabric. The neckline comes down into a low V. It stops at her waist where a thin belt encircles her slim waist. Sleek black hair is wrapped up in a braided bun at the nape of her neck. Her skin is creamy white, which makes her ruby red eyes stand out. From her back protrudes a glittering set of enormous red wings. They are magnificent. In her left hand is a long staff. At the top sits a red orb.

“Love is such a misunderstood emotion, but to answer your question, of course I love her.” She waves her hand and a throne appears. It’s deep red and lined with dozens of sparkling rubies. Her wings disappear as she sits, propping her staff across her legs. “My sister is family, after all. How could I not? But that doesn’t change the fact that she betrayed me, as did Stefan, and you are the product of

their treachery."

I can see Lucretia's point. She's like a wounded dog, grizzly and striking, and furious. If she hadn't cursed me, I might feel sorry for her, even take her side. But she did curse me and because of that I'm supposed to die in a few months. Not an easy death either. Stabbed through the heart. That's what the curse says. "So why are you here? Did you come to kill me early?" There's nothing to stop her. I have no power.

"Don't be silly. Of course not. Your death is scheduled for your birthday. Right now, I only wish to talk." She speaks like I'm ridiculous.

"Oh goodie," I say, but a bizarre feeling overtakes me. Why wouldn't she just kill me now? If I'm the product of their duplicity, why not end me? Unless she can't. Unless she isn't really on the rooftop with me but is in fact still in the under kingdom. That would explain her wish to talk. She's only a shade and has no real power here. I decide to rattle her. "The evil fairy wants to chat." I lay the sarcasm on thick, but the truth is I do want to talk to her. I'm interested in learning what she has to say. As she said, we are family. "I wonder why?" Determined to know if I'm right, I rush her, and swipe a hand through her head. It's as I suspected. She's only a mirage.

She doesn't seem fazed. "See, you have no reason to fear. Ask your questions. I'll answer them truthfully." She gives me a sweet smile laced with a tendril of malice. A chair exactly like hers appears behind me. I glance at it and then at her. "Go on. Have a seat."

The bell rings, which means I'm late for class. The school will send my aunties an email for every class I miss. That'll send them into a flurry of stress. I almost feel bad about how upset they'll be. I've seen it before. At the time I believed them to be way overprotective. Now I understand why. They were afraid for me.

If they knew why I missed class, they might die of a heart attack…

if fairies could have heart attacks. The questions pour out of my mouth before I have the chance to filter them. “What do fairies do all day? Do they sleep? Do they dream? Grow old? What about their jobs? I know my aunties were Royal Guards before they brought me into the human realm so does that mean there are other types of jobs, like gardeners? Or fairy doctors? Or maybe fairies don’t ever get sick.”

“Wow, you really know nothing about who you are, do you?” She rests her head against the back of the chair. “But those are stupid questions, Aurora. Fairies do what people do. They live their lives. Is that all you’re interested in?” The disappointment is evident in her features.

I swallow, but don’t care what she thinks. “This is all new to me,” I admit.

“Such triviality. I know you’ve been in hiding, but I thought the Royal Guards would share some of their secrets. I know they have one of Isluria’s twelve books of magic.” She glances up at the sky as though she senses something I can’t. Lucretia places her staff on the ground and uses it to stand. Her wings reappear like the opening of a sail. In the same moment, the chair is gone. “Perhaps it’s better if you never learn anything about what you could’ve been, especially since you won’t live long enough to really enjoy it anyway.” She shakes her head and her wings flutter like a butterfly’s behind her.

That makes my heart hurt. “Can’t you remove—?”

A gust of wind fills the air, blowing back my hair, followed by a rush of heat. It’s odd in the midst of the cold January morning.

“I cannot eliminate the curse, but I’m a reasonable woman. If you…” She pauses, looking around. It’s apparent something has her spooked. “Bother. A dirty *mongrel* is coming.”

Before I can comment my chair vanishes and I’m on the ground. “Ouch.” I quickly stand, forcing down the pain in my butt and my heart. “What do you mean, you’re reasonable?”

“Sadly, we cannot talk more, at least not now.” She tilts her head

and studies me.

“Tell me what you were going to say,” I plead, unable to see what has her ready to bolt.

She pauses, her red eyes sparkle with miserable mischief. “You like the boy.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“Paxton?” I ask to clarify. Then continue. “Not even. I just owe him.”

“Oooooh, even better.” She walks to the edge of the roof. “You know Montana is a beautiful state, almost as lovely as Isluria. If I had to compare our realm to this one, I would use this lovely state.”

“Wait,” I shout before I can stop myself. My heart is beating fast, so fast it feels like it’ll come out of my chest. A strange smell, like rotten eggs fills the air. Something is coming. “Tell me!”

Lucretia gives me a once over and steps off the roof so that she’s floating, her wings beating behind her. “Very well,” she laughs. “If you leave the human realm behind and attend the Fairy Academy in my under kingdom for the next few months, maybe I’ll remove your curse.”

A glimmer of hope charges through my chest. “Fairy Academy?”

“That’s right. You’ll be given the opportunity to learn about your heritage. Best of all, you’ll no longer have to be stuck in this awful human existence.” She breathes in, making a face. “Disgusting.”

I get the feeling there is more to her offer. What Troy said about good and evil, about what can happen with my magic comes to mind. And a school for fairies in the under kingdom? The notion sounds sketchy, and I know without doubt there’s a catch. But what if she did allow me to live? If she removed the curse? Those thoughts make me want to take her up on her offer. Say yes! “I can’t leave. I don’t have magic. I don’t have wings.” I think of abandoning my aunties and Carson as well as my best friends, Merida and Tiana.

She smiles. “I can give it all back.” Her wings close onto her back and she drops from view.

I suck in my breath, even though I know she didn't fall. She's a fairy for goodness sake. Still, I peek over the edge. Of course she's gone just as I knew she would be. "Magic," I whisper.

In that moment, I know what I want to do. My heart cries out that I should attend the Academy. But what about Carson? And Tiana and Merida? I'm worried about them both. Plus, my aunties. They will be saddened by my choice. Not to mention Troy. I don't know him, but I sense his urgency to do the right thing. And then there's my parents. What will they think if I take Lucretia up on her offer? I'm sure the answer is they wouldn't approve, but none of that matters. They can't reverse the curse. True love's kiss is ridiculous. I want to live, and my best chance is by attending the Fairy Academy.

As I stare out at the city, the memory of play practice fills my mind. Carson gave me my first kiss that night. It was sweet, but the whole idea of loving someone so much you would die for them the way Romeo and Juliet did seems silly. And I know I don't love Carson. He's a great guy, but if there is such a thing as a true love, he isn't the one.

OceanofPDF.com

BROKEN CURSE

OceanofPDF.com

IT ISN'T every day I get invited to attend a fairy academy and decide my boyfriend isn't the one for me. In fact, before a few weeks ago, I never had a boyfriend. Lucretia's summons is weird too. And also terrifying. I want to talk to Merida and Tiana about what happened. Ask their opinions. But if I do, then I have to tell them what I am… and I'm not sure they can handle my truth. Especially since I barely can.

Lucretia is gone, but her words echo through my mind as I stare out at the city beyond the roof of Hellgate High. It doesn't matter that I'm trapped up here. I can't stop thinking about what she said. *Leave the human realm behind and attend the Fairy Academy in the under kingdom and maybe I'll remove your curse.*

Why maybe? I should've asked her to clarify. Will she let me live? What exactly does she mean when she says she'll remove my curse? I think about shouting her name in the hopes she'll return so we can talk more, but the wind picks up and a sulfurous odor fills the air. "Gross." I wrinkle my nose and step back. An enormous bronze and gold dragon comes into view, blocking out the sun.

A strangled noise escapes my throat as I turn to run, but I slip on the gravel and fall. Rocks dig into my hands and pain radiates through my arms. The moisture dissipates from the air as the beast gets closer and I struggle to breathe. "Leave me alone." I cough as I roll onto my knees but in my urgency, I slip again, collapsing on my elbows. More pain. Probably blood too, but I don't have time to worry. I need to escape.

A part of my mind knows who the dragon is. Sure, he's enormous, but he lands with hardly a noise. I watch in awe, hopeful I'm right and this is Troy, the boy I spoke to the night before. I call his name, but he doesn't respond. Just beats his wings several times before folding

them onto his back. They remind me of a bat's.

I get to my feet. Brush off my hands and elbows and decide what to do. The door is locked. I'm trapped up here with no way out.

"Aurora. Wait. It's me."

At the sound of his voice, I take a deep breath and calm my nerves. "Troy?"

"That's right."

"Are you decent?" I ask, my back still to him.

"Decent?" There's laughter in the word.

"Yeah, do you look like you instead of a dragon?" My hand is on the doorknob and I shake it, wishing it would open.

In response, he laughs. "I'm still in my dragon form. But there's no need to be afraid. I won't eat you." He pauses. "Fairies are tasteless."

"Rude." I slowly turn. He's sitting on his hind legs, like a dog waiting for a treat, his long tail curled around him. "Aren't you worried you'll be seen? The government has spies, you know. People on the lookout for supernaturals."

"That's why I've come for you." He shakes his head, like he's trying to get his hair out of his face. In dragon form, it looks funny. "But to alleviate your fears, my magic cloaks me from everyone except those I want to see me." There's a rumble in his throat like a raging fire.

I shudder. "Got it. And my name is Rory not Aurora."

He crouches down so his head is nearly parallel with mine. "Fine. Rory." He clears his throat, sending smoke from his mouth. "Do you know who that was you were talking to moments ago?" His voice quivers with emotion.

I nod. "Lucretia, the fairy who cursed me."

He snorts. Shakes his body and morphs from his impressive dragon form into his human self.

As I watch an image of a dragon mating with a human comes to mind. Yuck. Troy said he was half dragon. By the look of him, he's all

dragon. It doesn't seem possible that a dragon and human could be together in a romantic way, but what do I know. Until a few weeks ago, I wasn't a fairy either.

"I don't even want to know where your mind went just now," he says, only slightly sarcastic.

I chuckle and look down at my shoes. They have gravel dust on them. "No, you don't." My phone pings before I can be too embarrassed. It's a text from Carson.

You okay? I waited by your locker but didn't see you.

"Boyfriend?" Troy asks, knowingly.

"Yes."

"Which one?" He winks.

"Ha-ha. I only have one," I say, trying to figure the dragon-guy out. He acts like he wants to be my friend, but I don't get why.

"So it's the human, then?" He steps close and I swear I can feel heat rolling off him.

"Carson," I say as I step back.

Troy rolls his eyes. "Popular guy." He pauses. "By the way, you look really nice," he says, appraising me. "I like your skirt."

I didn't expect a compliment and it startles me. "Thank you?" I clear my throat. "You look like you just finished basic training." He's wearing camo pants, dark boots, and a black shirt. His dirty blond hair is long, though not as long as Pax's. It looks good on him.

"Yeah, well I did." He runs his hands through his hair and laughs. "What did Lucretia want?" He crosses his arms, leaning back on his heels.

"First, what did you mean when you said you came for me?" If he wants me to answer questions, he needs to answer mine first.

"Touché." He tucks his hands in his pockets. "You want the long story or the short one?"

"Short, I guess." It's chilly out here. I want to go inside and get

warm, though thankfully dragon-boy radiates heat. I shift closer.

He grunts. “Eleven years ago, the vampire queen was defeated and a new one took her place. When that happened, she freed all supernaturals trapped in Sharra. Many came to the human realm and that’s when the problems started.” He pauses. “You remember that time?”

I shake my head. “I do, but only slightly. My aunties didn’t let me watch much news.”

“Yes, well, once the governments banned all magical creatures from this realm, several supernaturals, including Pops—I mean my father, took it upon themselves to search for those still here and help them, if possible.” He moves a little closer. “You are a supernatural, Rory.”

I let the truth of his statement sink in. “Holy daisies, you’re right.” I turn away as the full weight of what I am fills me. The light within my chest pushes against my ribs, as though desperate to escape, but I push back. My aunties are supernaturals as well. We are in danger. When they brought me here, they weren’t breaking any laws, but now we all are. “How can you help me?”

Troy studies me intently a moment. “I liked what you said about no one knowing how our story ends.” A shadow crosses his face and I wonder if he’s read his story too. “I talked to my dad about it and he suggested we invite you to attend the Seven Magics Academy.” He pauses. “It’s a school for all supernatural students.”

“Another academy?” I shake my head.

“What do you mean?” He is so close I can smell his cologne, like clean laundry and a hint of vanilla.

“Lucretia said she would lift my curse if I attend an academy in the under kingdom.” I pause and glance up at him.

He’s shaking his head, suddenly furious. “You can’t,” he growls. “Attend the Seven Magics Academy instead. At least there you won’t be taught dark magic.”

“I didn’t say yes.” I don’t add that I want to. Instead I squeeze my hands into fists. “But even if I did, the whole dark and light, good and bad.” I shake my head. “It’s ridiculous. My choices determine what I am, not my magic.” I don’t know a thing about magic, yet I speak like I’m a pro.

“I appreciate your point of view, but with respect, how do you know?” He rolls his shoulders like he’s waiting for a fight.

“It’s just… I feel it in my bones.” I throw my hands in the air, frustrated.

“If only I could help you find your good true love.” He crosses his arms, his biceps bulging beneath his shirt.

“Are you saying that’s you?” I chuckle. “Because I get the feeling dragons and fairies don’t usually get along.”

He snorts. “We get along fine, when we need to.”

“But you aren’t friends with any fairies?” I walk over to the door and pull on the handle again. It still doesn’t budge.

“We’re friends. Doesn’t that count?” He stands beside me.

I laugh and glance at my phone. “I hardly know you.”

“True, but we’re going to change that.” He tries to look at my phone. “You going to text him? He could come unlock the door for you.” Quicker than I think a person can move, he grabs my phone and pretends to type. “Dear Carson. Please come and rescue me from the tall tower and the scary fire-breathing dragon.” His voice is high and pretend girly.

I stomp my foot and reach out to grab my phone, but he lifts it above his head. “Give me back my phone.”

“Sure. Or, I could just fly you down.”

I feel my eyes get big. “Really?” The idea terrifies and excites me.

“Sure.” He touches his nose and clears his throat. “But it might be hard to explain, especially if someone sees you floating off the roof like Dumbo holding a feather.”

“Is that a crack?” He better not be commenting on my weight. That’s just not cool.

Understanding dawns on him. “No, sorry. It’s just Dumbo can’t fly without help, and neither can you. Bad comparison.” He shakes his head.

“Ouch,” I say, adjusting my shirt.

He hands me back my phone. “Text Carson. Have him come and get you.”

I take it and pull up Carson’s name but can’t find the words. I shake my head. “I… it’s… Ugh, I don’t know how to talk to him anymore.”

“Fine.” A smile lights up Troy’s face. “I’ll just let you in then.” He yanks on the handle. It breaks and he pulls the door open.

“How’d you do that?” I step inside, grateful for the warmth, and blink my eyes to help them adjust to the sudden gloom. There are lights in the stairwell, but they aren’t very bright.

“Big, strong muscles,” Troy says, flexing like a body builder in a competition.

“Funny.” I raise my eyebrows, waiting for him to continue.

“Hello? I’m a dragon.” He lightly tickles my side and I laugh as the door slams behind us.

“Right.” I decide to change the subject. “Is it official? Did you sign up for classes?” Last night, he said he had.

He shrugs, following me down the steps. “More or less.”

“How many times have you infiltrated a school to help—” The word supernatural comes to mind, but I can’t say it. “People like me.”

“Once or twice.” He is on the step beside me.

“It’s too dark,” I whisper, searching for the flashlight app on my phone. But before I can click on it, a ball of yellow light appears on Troy’s palm.

“Dude, you are kind of a showoff, aren’t you?” I can’t help but

smile, especially at the look on his face.

“What? No,” he says casually. The light continues until we get closer to the bottom and he extinguishes his magic. Then he pulls a paper from his pocket. It’s his class schedule. “You think you can help me get to the office? I’ll tell them I got lost and you were helping me out.”

“Since you rescued me from being stranded for hours on the roof in the cold, why not?”

OceanofPDF.com

“THAT’S two dollars and fifteen cents,” the elderly lunch lady says.

I hand her my money and head over to our usual table. Merida and Ethan are there as is Carson.

When he sees me, he waves. Stands. Walks over and takes my tray. “Let me get that.”

Guilt punches me in the stomach. Carson really is a good guy. How can I be over him? I’m stupid. A stupid fairy. “Thanks,” I say, following behind him.

Once he places the tray on the table, he turns to me. “Are you alright?” His eyes flick over my outfit and he nods approvingly.

“Fine. Why?” I take a seat, pushing some hair behind my ear and pick up a fry.

“Hey,” Merida says, glancing at Carson, who sits beside me.

“Hi.” I feel bad we haven’t talked in a while.

Ethan nods a hello and I nod back. Guilt nips at me. I still need to talk to Merida about Ethan.

“Can you do something after school? I was thinking we could see a movie, maybe get some ice cream.” Carson’s face is hopeful.

“Oh, um, I…” I smile, my guts twisting.

“What?” His features fall, like he can sense the change in me. “Hey, can I talk to you?” He glances at Merida and Ethan. “Alone.”

“Sure.” I stand and collect my things.

Carson takes my hand. “Come on.” He leads me down the hall and over to the stairwell that goes up to the roof.

Not again. The door is still busted, and he pushes it open before making his way over to the edge of the roof. There’s a dozen kids out here with us this time. A group of them are smoking and they aren’t

cigarettes. Kelly is with them. I watch as she breathes in the smoke, holds it, and then lets it out before passing the butt on to the next person in the circle.

"You brought me up here to get high?" I tease, not ready for the conversation we're about to have. I know it has to happen though. The sooner the better.

He turns up his nose at the group and walks us to the opposite side of the roof. "No, I really just want to talk."

My shoes crunch under the gravel. It's a lot warmer now than it was this morning. "About what?"

He sighs heavily. "What's the matter? With us." He shakes his head. "It feels like something's off between us, but what I can't understand is why. Have I done something? I was a little pushy yesterday…" He pauses. "But I can wait. I will wait as long as you want to."

He was more than pushy. Carson has a little of his father in him, but he's fighting it, which makes him a good guy. Just not my guy. "I appreciate that." I take his face in my hands. "I really do. You're the most amazing person." I stand on my tiptoes and press my lips softly to his.

"Then what is it? I just don't understand." He wraps his arms around my waist, holding me close.

"It's crazy and convoluted." How do I explain all that's going on with me lately without really explaining? "But—"

"If you give me the 'it's not you, it's me' speech, I might lose it." He pushes me away, a glimmer of anger in his eyes and rolls his shoulders. His hands are balled into fists as though he's bracing himself for what's coming.

"Carson, please understand, there's a lot going on with me. It has to do with my aunties and my birthday and…" I feel terrible for hurting him, but I don't want to give him false hope or say something that isn't true. I've been doing too much lying lately. "It is me. Believe

me when I say it." In that moment, I think about telling him all of it. The whole truth. That I'm a fairy and that I'm cursed to die. "If you want—"

His eyes narrow and his face turns red. "We are so over. I don't have time for your drama." His jaw clenches. "It's bad enough you won't put out, but now this whiny crap." He shakes his head. "I don't know what I even saw in you." He's yelling and several of the stoner group, including Kelly, glances over. She smiles like the cat that just ate the whole canary.

I can't speak. His words have slashed at my heart. It's for the best, but it hurts so much. All I can do is nod.

Carson blows out a breath and I get the sense he didn't mean the words—that he's lashing out because I've hurt him. "What a waste." With a final glare, he stomps over to the exit.

"Carson." It's Kelly. She's extricated herself from the others and is standing to the side.

"Not now, Kelly." He whips open the door and disappears behind it.

Kelly looks over at me and sneers. "I knew it wouldn't last between you two." She follows after Carson. "Wait," she calls as the door slams behind her.

Part of me is devastated I hurt Carson and that we just broke up, but a bigger part is relieved. Strangely comforted, even. Now he can move on, so if I do die, then it won't hurt him so much. "Sorry," I whisper, feeling dejected as I yank open the door. I spot Troy on the stairs, coming up. "What do you want?" I snap, not in the mood to talk to him.

He holds out a pack of gum. "Thought you might need something to chew on." He raises an eyebrow, making a face.

I glance at him and at his hand holding the gum. Even in the low light I can see it's spearmint flavored. My favorite. "You're the strangest— What the heck is—" I take a piece. Open the wrapper, put

the gum in my mouth, and force myself not to sigh. The gum is yummy. Small victories, right? “Thanks.” I move past him.

He follows me down, his steps bouncing lightly beside me. “It’s better this way.”

When we reach the bottom, Carson in there. And he’s kissing Kelly. Okay, not just kissing. Making out. I know it’s for my benefit. Meant to hurt me. It’s working.

“That’s cold, bro,” Troy says, shoving his shoulder into Carson’s.

Carson pulls out of Kelly’s arms and walks away without looking at me or Troy.

I don’t want to cry, but the tears come anyway.

“Sorry, Rory,” Troy whispers, putting an arm around my shoulders. “But at least now you can totally focus on what’s important.”

“Oh, and what’s that?” I snap, using anger to mask my pain.

“Finding your true love—the one with the pure heart. Stopping Lucretia from killing you. Any of this ringing a bell?” He pulls me into his side, a large genuine smile lighting up his face. “Or we can leave now, and you can go to school at the Seven Magics Academy. You’ll like it there, I promise. That’s where I go when I’m not in the human realm.” He glances at a group of giggling girls. “This place isn’t for me and it definitely isn’t for you either.”

Despite my hurting heart, I consider his words. “You like it there?” I don’t know where “there” is, but based on how he said it, I’m guessing its outside the human realm.

“The Academy? Yeah, it’s seriously so much better than regular school.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER MY LAST CLASS, I head to my car, feeling like six hundred-pound weights are strapped to my back. It's hard to move, even harder to breathe. My brain knows I did the right thing with Carson, but the rest of my body struggles to catch up.

"Rory, wait," Merida shouts, running to toward me. Her red hair floats behind her like a beautiful fire.

I unlock my door and wait for her to catch up. By the sad puppy-dog look on her face she heard about my breakup. And I don't want to talk about it. When she's within earshot, I take a deep breath. "Merida, I need to go. I've got a bunch of homework." It's not a total lie. I do have calculus.

"Yeah, but you can wait a sec." She comes around the car and throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tight. The way only a best friend can hug. "Carson isn't worth it," she says and I hear the emotion in her voice.

I gently extricate myself from her grasp. "He's a good guy." I pause to get control of my emotions. "I hurt him. It's my fault." As I talk, Carson and Kelly walk out of the school, hand in hand. Was it only earlier today he held my hand like that?

"Still think he's a good guy?" she asks, glaring in their direction.

I quickly get in my car and start the engine. "Call you later, 'kay." I pull my door closed and back out, barely watching where I'm going.

As I drive, I don't think. I turn up the radio until it's so loud nothing else has a chance of getting in. When I reach my neighborhood, I relax and turn the music down. This is my home with its well-kept lawns, white picket fences, and stark trees. They become a blurry painting as tears distort my vision. Even though it's my fault and I have no reason to be upset, I can't stop. The pain is real. It's like saying good-bye to a dream. I touched it, tasted it briefly, and then it

was snatched away. And it's all Lucretia's fault. If she hadn't cursed me, I never would've come to this realm. Then I never would have met Carson.

"Stupid fairy." I pull into my driveway, turn off the car, grab my bag, and slam the door before locking it.

"Dang, girl. Be nice to your car." Tiana is standing in the center of my lawn, her arms crossed. When I pulled in, she wasn't there. Or I totally missed her.

"I am being nice, Tiana," I grumble, throwing my bag strap onto my shoulder.

She puts her hands on her hips. "I'd hate to see you pissed, then."

"It's just…" I drop my bag and fall onto the grass. Going any farther seems like too much trouble.

Tiana waves at Lance as he drives away, and sinks down in the grass beside me. "Carson can't handle a girl like you." She crosses her arms behind her head, staring up at the clear blue sky.

"I guess." I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It's too cold to be out here, but I'm not ready to go inside. "Tell me about Lance," I say, desperate to take my mind off my problems.

"Well, you've seen him. He's hot. His dark skin and light brown eyes. I swear I get lost in them," she begins.

"He is hot," I agree, nodding.

"And he's so sweet too. Plus," she pauses and I look over at her.

"Yeah?" My senses kick into high gear. What is it about him that has her so over-the-top gaga.

She rolls onto her stomach, bumping her shoulder into mine. "I need to tell you something." There's a hint of worry in her soft voice.

"Okay." I study her intently, my nerve endings buzzing.

"He's a vampire," she whispers, glancing around as though someone might hear her.

I knew something was off about him, but the confession doesn't

surprise me. In fact, it makes complete sense. What is it about her and Merida getting into trouble? Not that I'm any better off. I sigh. "Vampires aren't supposed to be in the human realm," I say quietly.

"It's an uptight law based in fear." She huffs and rests her chin on her hands. "Besides, when he drinks my blood…" Her voice trails off a moment. "It's like the best feeling ever. I can't get enough." She pushes down her collar, revealing twin marks in her neck. Puncture holes from his teeth. My heart stops. This isn't pretend. My best friend is seriously letting a vampire drink her freaking blood. "Better than a hickey, right?" She smiles until she sees my face. "What?"

There are so many things I want to say, but I don't want to upset her like I did Merida. "If the police find out about him, they'll arrest him and probably have him killed."

"If they find out," she says, eyeing me nervously. "You won't tell, will you?"

"No, Tiana. No. I promise I'll keep your secret, if you can keep mine." I push myself onto my knees and sit on my butt, crossing my legs in front of me.

"Swear you won't tell," she says leaning in close.

"T, I swear." There's so much more I want to say.

She's immediately relieved. "I want him to turn me," she continues, and her face lights up with excitement.

"No!" I shout.

Mr. Beazley is walking his little chihuahua and scowls as he hurries past us.

"Why would you do that?" I ask, taking her hand.

"I want to be like him. I love him and want to live forever with him." Her eyes get dreamy. "Eternal love is possible," she says.

"But what about your parents? And your little brother?" I'm flailing inside. "You'll have to leave the human realm."

"No we won't. We just have to be careful." She leans in close.

“There are still a lot of supernaturals in this realm. If they wanted to, they could take over and imprison the humans. Supernaturals are much more powerful than humans anyway.” Her face gets hard. “It isn’t right what’s happening to the supernaturals.”

“But T? You’ll have to drink blood. No more real food. And don’t forget the chayot. Those angel beings. You’ve seen them. They are terrifying.” I try to think of anything I can to talk her out of this, but I can see she’s already decided. Whatever I say won’t make a difference.

“They’re disgusting is what they are. The chayot should be on the side of the supernaturals. That’s what they are, after all.” She stands and begins pacing. “Rory, I get it’s hard for you to understand because you haven’t met your true love, but when it’s real, you’ll do anything to be with that person.” She sticks out her hand and pulls me up with her, giving me a hug. “After I graduate, I’m going away with him. There’s a big group of vampires living in New York.”

“I don’t want you to go.” All the change happening to me and around me is making me sick.

“Come with us. I’m sure Lance would turn you too, if you want.” She lifts a brow. “You know I adore you. We really could be friends forever.” She gives me a big smile.

“I appreciate the offer. Thanks.” I pick up my bag and decide it’s better if I don’t tell her what I really am. “I need to get on my homework. Calculus is still kicking my butt.”

“Mine too. But hey, what secret were you going to tell me?” She already has her phone out and is checking it. Probably a text from Lance.

“Just that I’m not that sad Carson and I broke up.” It’s a truth, even though it isn’t what I was going to tell her.

She runs back over and hugs me again. “You’ll find your true love. Believe it.” She winks. “Bye.”

I wave as I watch her jog across our lawns. Sadness like I’ve never felt overwhelms me and I sink to my knees because I might not ever

see her again. My eyes shut and I'm suddenly swept away.

Dark clouds roll in. The wind picks up, and heavy droplets of rain fall against my skin. I open my eyes. "Tiana, I—" I glance around as I speak, but nothing is where it's supposed to be. The land is stark, with sparse weeds among rocky dirt. The scent of brine fills the air. I work to stand, trying not to blow away in the wind. In the distance is a ruby castle. It glitters like a million gemstones in the light. "Tiana!" I call out. But the sound smacks me in the face. I place my arm across my forehead and make my way forward.

It's difficult to walk, especially with the wind and the rain. I'm instantly drenched and start to shiver. My pink ballet flats squish with every step and my teeth chatter.

"So. Cold."

"Use your magic, Aurora."

The voice feels like it's inside my head. "I don't have it," I say, choking.

A loud cackle skims across the landscape. "Join the Fairy Academy. It's the only way."

"Will I still die? Will I get my magic back? My wings?"

"You'll get it all back and more. You know what to do. Just say yes!"

I gasp and jerk awake, sitting up.

"Rory?" Merida stands on the sidewalk, a strange look on her face. "You all right? You were talking to yourself."

"I was?" I laugh nervously, unsure how I ended up back on the ground. Legs shaky, I manage to stand. "I guess I fell asleep and had a bad dream." I pick up my bag. "What did I say?"

"You said, 'yes.'" She tilts her head as though she wants to figure out what I meant.

"I did?" Cold leeches all warmth from my skin. Did I agree to attend the academy? Did Lucretia trick me? "Hey, Mer. Are you okay?" It's like I really see her for the first time in a while. Her face is pale, and her clothes look too big.

“Fine,” she says, but it’s a lie. I’ve done a lot of lying myself lately, so it’s easy to spot. “Get some rest. Everything will work out. Promise,” she says, but I hear sadness in her words.

How did we get to this place? I want to weep at our separation. “You can talk to me about anything,” I say, my voice hoarse with emotion.

“Thanks.” She lowers her eyes before turning away. Without a backward glance, she crosses the street and disappears inside her house.

A sob hitches from my throat and I cover my mouth with the back of my hand, wondering when I lost all control over my life.

OceanofPDF.com

I DROP my bag in the entry. “Aunties?”

“In the kitchen, dear,” Fae calls out.

I glance at my reflection in the mirror. The girl staring back looks tired, yet there’s a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “I need to ask you about a book I saw the other day. I’m told it’s one of twelve books of magic. It looked old and there was a weird star on the front.”

When I enter the kitchen, I see all three of my aunties are frozen in various stages of shock.

“Who told you about the book?” Auntie Vera asks, placing the kitchen towel on the counter.

“Lucretia,” I answer, too tired to come up with a subtle answer. “She told me about it and said it contains information about my fairy heritage.” If I’m going to the Fairy Academy, I better learn what I can about myself.

Usually it’s Vera who states the hard facts, but this time Fae comes forward. “You saw her?” she asks, her face lined with fear. So are Vera and Macey’s. “When? Where? Are you okay?” She looks me over. They all do.

“I’m fine. It was only a projection of herself that found me. I think physically she is still in the under kingdom.” I open the refrigerator to get some orange juice.

“Well, that’s something, I guess,” Fae says, and pulls a wand from one of the pockets in her apron. She swirls it around a few times like it’s been a while since she used it.

I stop and watch a moment. They really are from another realm. “Do you all have wings?” I pour juice into a glass and take a drink.

“We do.” Macey looks like she wants to reveal them, but Vera puts a hand on her arm and shakes her head. Macey sighs. “Of course we

do. We're fairies, dear. Same as you." She shakes her head. "Well, not exactly the same as you. We aren't royalty, but you get the idea."

I smile at her, beyond thankful for these sweet women. Leaving them will be hard, but my decision is made. Soon, I'm going to the Fairy Academy.

"What did Lucretia want to talk about?" Vera asks, pulling me from my thoughts. She takes some chocolate chips from the pantry.

I debate what to tell them. They won't want me to go to the fairy realm. They already said so. If I tell them about my decision to attend the academy in the under kingdom, they will flip. They might even risk using their magic.

But that's another reason I should go. Without me here, Fae, Macey, and Vera will have no reason to stay in the human realm. They shouldn't be here anyway. It's against the law.

I gulp down the rest of the juice. "She was there to gloat. Said she was excited to watch me die." I take the glass to the sink and rinse it out.

"Well isn't that great," Fae says, angry, as she swings the wand around again. This time a bit of sparkling light flicks from the tip. She pulls at each end of her wand, shaping it into a rectangle. As she continues, it grows to the size and shape of a door.

"What are you doing?"

Macey rests a hand on Fae's shoulder. Pats it warmly. "Most of our magic is hidden away."

"Yes," Vera says, moving to stand on the other side of Fae. "It's on the other side of this door." A knob appears as she speaks.

I watch in awe, surprised. "Oh." I move to stand beside Fae.

Vera turns the handle and the door is abruptly solid and brown, the same color as the wand. She pulls it open. A rush of wind blows back my hair. Swirls of light cling to the air around us.

"We'll be gone an hour, maybe two, but no more," Macey says,

stepping through the door.

“Wait.” They can’t leave me.

“Please stay in the house. Don’t go anywhere until we get back,” Fae adds, patting me on the back.

“And for the love of Winter, don’t do anything… rash,” Vera says, smiling lightly.

I nod. “Can’t I come with you?” I don’t want them to go. There are still so many questions that need answers.

“No.” Vera shakes her head before going to the door and stepping through. “The place we are going was created to only allow the three of us.”

“Okay.” That makes me sad. I’ll miss them when I go to the academy, but it’s what I need to do. “Hurry back,” I say, thinking maybe I can see them one last time before I leave.

“We will, dear.” Vera kisses my cheek. “See you in a bit.”

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN THEY'RE ALL INSIDE, the door automatically closes behind them. They said not to follow, but I can't help trying to open it. The knob shocks me and I jump back, rubbing my hand. "Sheesh. Fine. Goodbye, aunties." I grab my bag and head to my room, looking around as a well of nostalgia and sadness rolls over me. As I remove all my books and papers from my bag, I wonder what I should take with me to the Fairy Academy. Pencils? Paper? Clothes, at least.

I open my drawers and pull out underthings and socks.

"What are you doing?" Paxton appears in my room.

"What the— Get out!" My heart thumps in my throat. "How did you get in here? I thought the house was warded against evil." I say the words half-heartedly because I don't mean them. Not really. He did save me from Jesse and he's done nothing to convince me he's malicious.

"I'm not evil, Aurora. You have to feel that." He tucks his hands behind his back. Dressed in a black tee shirt and dark jeans, he looks like a hot rebel ninja. All the black makes his eyes pop. They study me, begging me to see the truth. Which is that he isn't all bad.

"Maybe, but that doesn't change the fact that you lied to me. You work for Lucretia and she *is* evil." I toss some socks into my bag as it occurs to me that while Lucretia is willing to bargain, Paxton didn't. I watch him a moment. "What do you want from me?"

"Aurora." There's pain in his features and he raises his hands toward me.

I have a choice. I can listen to his lies or do what I think I should. "A half-truth is a whole lie, Pax." I say the words softly, listening to my heart. Remembering what Troy told me. Paxton thinks he's my only true love. Along with that, there's more. I sense it. "Tell me why you're here."

He shakes his head and tears fill his eyes. “You are my true love,” he blurts.

I roll my eyes. “How do you know that?”

“I was told—”

“By who? Lucretia? Because I’m pretty sure she’s well versed in the art of lying.”

He nods. “It’s more than that. If I don’t convince you to come to the Fairy Academy—if I don’t kiss you, she will kill my sister.” He punches the wall, putting his fist right through it, causing the window to rattle.

I swallow, debating what I should say to him. “Kiss me, Pax.”

Surprise replaces his anguish. “Are you sure?”

“Without a doubt,” I say, moving to him and standing up my tiptoes.

He pulls me into his arms, locking them behind my waist. Immediately the scent of cinnamon fills the air between us. “Why now?” he asks, his eyes searching mine.

Instead of answering, I touch my lips to his. The cinnamon and vanilla scent increases and seems to cocoon us as he kisses me back, his warm lips pressing my mouth open. Kissing him isn’t like anything I’ve experienced. It’s heady and wonderful. Colors swim behind my eyes and a shiver of need courses through my body. I feel my magic stir beneath my chest and swirl and mix with my hunger for him.

I press into him and run my fingers through his thick hair as his hands gently caress my back and shoulders before cupping my face.

He pauses and searches my eyes. “Are you feeling what I’m feeling?” He kisses each of my cheeks, his warm breath causing my skin to tingle. “I knew we were meant to be together, but I didn’t know our connection would be this potent.” He is as surprised as I am and that makes me happy.

“I don’t want to stop,” I say, tugging his head down so he will kiss

me again. His lips crash into mine, and it's all hunger and desire. I yearn for him in a way I never craved Carson. Images of Pax and me together fill my mind. Along with those images are colors coursing along my veins, bringing with them my magic. The power bursts from my chest and zings voraciously until every nerve is buzzing. It's amazing. For the first time I'm grateful for my heritage. Kissing Carson was fine. It was even wonderful, but that was before I got to experience kissing Pax.

When we break apart, we are both breathing heavily. Not only that, but we're in the air. Hovering a couple of feet off the floor. I gasp. "Put me down," I say, as terror fills my chest.

"Course. Sorry." The words come out gravelly and full of emotion.

"It's okay," I say when my feet are firmly planted on the ground once again. His wings are out. Though I'm petrified, I peek around him to study them. They are black like the night and matte, with a sheen of blue, the same as his hair. They remind me of shadows. Masculine and severe, the tops run horizontal at his shoulder blades and almost look like an extension of his hair. "May I touch them?" His eyes are hooded, but he nods once and tucks them against his back. Tentative, determined not to be afraid, I stroke the top of one.

They are different than Troy's, which are gold and shaped like a bat's wings. Pax's are velvety in texture. At the thought, the fear I keep down, travels up to my throat. When I release his wing, I check my fingers to see if there's dust on them, the way it happens with a moth or a butterfly. There isn't. "Did that hurt?" I ask, searching his face for the truth.

He pulls me into a hug, his face buried in the crook of my neck as he kisses it softly. "Do it again," he says.

My body shakes with worry, but also with desire. "Okay." I reach back with both hands and stroke them as he trails kisses up my neck and along my jaw to my lips. This time there is no softness as he growls low in his throat and presses my mouth open, kissing me in a

way I've only ever imagined or read about.

When we separate, my lips are bruised, but in a good way. "Your wings will return soon," he says, his eyes full of lust. "I can't wait to show you what that feels like."

I swallow as my worries bubble over. "I don't want them," I say.

"What?" A smirk dances on his lips, as if he doesn't believe me. "Everyone wants wings or at least to fly."

"Not me." I turn away, crossing my arms. My fear of winged creatures started when I was ten. There are many reasons, but it all started after a small, yellow butterfly landed on my hand while I was playing in the sandbox in my backyard. Its beautiful wings brushed against my skin with the weirdest sensation, one I didn't understand, or like.

After that, my fears increased, probably because my interactions with butterflies did as well. If my aunties took me to the park, groups of the flying bugs would flutter around me like I was sugar water. It's mostly the wings that freak me out. They seem to be made of powder and paper. Yet they fly with such beauty and abandon, as though they have nothing to fear. My auntie Macey says they fly like that because they love it so much.

Pax wraps his arms around me, his body tucked against mine. "What's going on?"

I share my irrational fears. He turns me to face him. "They were drawn to your power. Though you didn't know what you were, those butterflies did. I have a feeling your fears will vanish once the curse is lifted." He speaks with such confidence.

I don't know if I believe him. "I hope so," I say, though I'm not convinced. "What about your sister? Is she alright?"

At my change in conversation, his brows furrow. "She is alive but imprisoned. Lucretia swore to release her once you are in the under kingdom."

"I'm sorry Lucretia is making you do this." I touch my lips,

thinking I'm not really sorry. Not if all of our kisses will feel like that.

"Don't be. I agreed to come for you." He grits his teeth. "She took my sister as insurance. Worried I would back out." He laughs but there is no joy in it. "She wasn't wrong."

"I don't understand." I start to feel self-conscious. Did he change his mind about me?

A noise comes from the kitchen. It sounds like my aunties are back. Pax hears them too.

"I should go," he says, but presses a warm kiss to my lips. I'm immediately on fire. He feels it too and cups my face in his hands.

"Rory," Fae calls.

"I'll be back to get you soon." He pauses and tilts his head. "Are you sure you want to go?"

"To the Fairy Academy?" I whisper. "Yes."

Pax presses his lips to my fingers one moment and is gone the next.

Fae knocks once and opens the door. She's smiling, but it vanishes when she sees me. "Anything the matter, dear?" She goes to the window and looks out. After several moments, she closes my curtains and turns.

"Nope," I lie, crossing my arms and sitting on the edge of my bed. "How was your trip? Did you get your magic back?"

She sniffs the air. "We sure did, and it feels so good."

I had to agree. My magic hummed through me like a car on a racetrack. I keep thinking she'll notice, but she doesn't. "Come into the kitchen. We need to talk."

OceanofPDF.com

I'm riding on the back of a unicorn. His coat is sleek and black as are his mane and tail. They glisten in the light coming from the large round moon that hangs overhead. His horn is large and white. His name is Hex.

The two of us are deep within in a thick forest following along a barely distinguishable path. Leaves from the low-hanging branches of giant trees tangle in my hair. The sounds of night birds and crickets fill the air as does the scent of roses.

Hex nickers softly and comes to a stop.

"What is it?"

He stomps a hoof onto the damp ground as a set of red eyes appear on the path in front of us.

"Is that a—" I don't get to finish because whatever it is let's out a wail that isn't like any animal I've heard before.

Hex rears and whinnies.

I cling to his mane and squeeze my thighs around his body so I won't fall off.

He turns and runs like the devil is chasing us back the way we came.

It's then, as the humid wind whips against my face I realize I have no idea why I'm here with Hex or even how I know the unicorn's name. I turn back, trying to see what it is chasing us.

It isn't one, but three enormous creatures, their mouths filled with sharp teeth and frothing at the mouth, running madly. And they're gaining.

"What do they want?" Even though I shout, my words are sucked away and I doubt Hex heard me.

You. *The answer flies on the wind alongside the unicorn and me.*

Hex runs and it almost feels like we're flying. If I wasn't terrified of falling off, I'd scream. Instead I lean over so my head rests against his neck.

“Why?” The question comes out before I realize I’ve said it.

It’s your magic, Aurora. The demon hounds hunger for the goodness within you. If they catch us, they’ll extract from you all that is pure and leave only the evil.

“But I don’t want to be evil.” I press my thighs more tightly against the unicorn’s body. “Faster.” I use my legs to urge him on.

I feel him pick up speed, but I also smell the overwhelming stench of rotting flesh coming from behind. It won’t be long until they catch us. Catch me.

Then I’ll be evil, like Lucretia. The thought shocks me. I glance back as a hound leaps forward, its claws digging into Hex’s flank. The unicorn rears, whining in pain.

Another jumps and as he lands, his jaws sink into the flesh on my shoulder. Pain radiates through my body as the third hound’s teeth find my arm and I feel my flesh split and tear away.

Hex goes down, his shrill cries of agony filling my ears. “No! No! No! No! No!” I scream the words over and over but sense it’s too late.

The unicorn looks back, his bright violet eyes wild. I reach out to him, but more hounds tear at us. I can no longer see Hex, nor can I make out the night sky. Complete darkness surrounds us. The coppery scent of blood reaches my nose as the gruesome sound of flesh tearing from bone fills my ears.

And then she appears. Dressed in deep red, like the blood oozing from my body. “Lucretia.”

The demon hounds vanish, but I’m not sure this new development is any better.

“It’s time to die, young princess. Your magic will be mine.” A blade appears in her hand. It’s long and has a menacing shape. Thick in the center it slopes to a long, pointed tip.

“Don’t kill me.”

Lucretia laughs. It’s high and maniacal. “I’m not going to kill you. I’m

going to let him do it."

Paxton appears at Lucretia's side. His hands are crossed over his chest and a sly smile sits on his face.

"Pax? Paxton? You wouldn't!" I'm in shock. We'd kissed earlier that night. He helped my magic return. How could he choose her over me?

"It isn't personal, Aurora." He takes the knife from Lucretia. "Well, I guess it is." His smile grows big.

"Go on, Paxton. Make her suffer."

He grabs me by the hair and yanks my head back, exposing my neck. "I'm going to enjoy this." He angles the knife and slices down…

"Aurora, wake up. Aurora!"

The words cut through my dream. I open my eyes. Pax is leaning over me, smiling. Without thinking, my terror takes over, and I put my hands out to shove him away. Instead of moving, Paxton's shirt catches fire and my handprints are blackened silhouettes against his chest. He cries out in pain as he falls back, ripping off his shirt before snuffing out the fire.

"Oh, crap. Sorry." I flick on the bedside light and look at my hands, trying to figure out what happened. It's obvious the power came from my magic. "I can't believe I did that." I jump out of bed and run over to him. "Are you okay?"

Pax holds out his hands. "Stay back," he growls. Taking the glass of water from my nightstand, he pours it over his burning flesh and says some words. The water sizzles and turns bright blue before disappearing into his skin. "Better." He takes a deep breath and sighs with relief.

I wait a moment, afraid of what I did and terrified by what I saw in my dream. As I watch him, I try to wrap my head around it all. Was the dream from a moment ago a vision given to me by my magic? I didn't want to believe it. Pax and I shared a very sensual and enjoyable moment when we kissed. I want to believe that was real and pure and not just him playing me for his own selfish purposes. I want

to believe he cares.

But does he? My heart says one thing and my head says another. I cross my arms and swallow down my fear. “Are you okay?” The black marks have mellowed to an ashen color.

“I’m fine.” He grinds his teeth together, but his shoulders relax. “Remind me never to startle you again.”

“What are you doing here?” I turn, taking a deep breath and try to calm my frayed nerves.

“You gave me your consent.”

I look at him, confused.

“You said I could enter your room.” His features turn worried. “It was your magic that called to me. Shouted, actually. As soon as I heard it, I came over.”

“It did?” I sit on my bed, tugging a pillow onto my lap. “I didn’t know.” Images of the dream fill my mind and I shudder. I still can’t believe my magic is back and I am shocked by what it showed me. Would my magic call for my supposed killer?

“It was more a loud feeling, not like your magic said any words, but I sensed your distress.” He moves close and helps me stand. “I couldn’t stop thinking about earlier tonight, either.” His arms encircle me.

At his touch, I’m immediately warm. My face gets hot. “I wasn’t thinking about our kiss.” I push against his stomach, unable to help but feel his taut abs. “I was having a nightmare.”

“Want to talk about it?” His eyes flick back and forth in earnest. It’s obvious he’s concerned.

In my mind I see the way he looked at me just before the knife in his hand came down. “It doesn’t matter,” I whisper, shaking my head. I want those images to go away.

“Of course it does. I can sense it.” He sits on the bed, pulling me with him, and wraps a blanket around my shoulders. “Tell me. It’s

obvious you're shaken."

"It's…" I pause and check my gut. He doesn't seem anything like the Paxton I saw in my dream. "You were going to kill me," I blurt, staring at my hands as they cling to the edges of the blanket.

"That's terrible." I sense the tension growing in him.

I swallow as I debate how to continue. "Troy told me you're my evil true love." It's embarrassing saying the words aloud, but I figure I don't have anything to lose. Might as well be open with him.

He seems taken aback, but not because I said he was my true love. "I'm not evil, Aurora."

I want to believe that. He may be working for Lucretia, but only because she has his sister. He believes he doesn't have a choice. "Okay." I nod but can't look at him.

From the corner of my eye, I notice him smile. "What else happened in the nightmare?"

I tell him about the demon hounds, Lucretia, and Hex. When I finish it's obvious he's as stunned as I am. "That was quite the dream." He takes my hand. "I'm so sorry you had to experience something so horrible."

"Thanks," I say, but pull my hand from his. Speaking the words aloud make them feel even more real and I don't want to trust Pax.

"I swear on my life I will never hurt you, let alone kill you." Pax speaks with pleading in his voice.

"I believe you," I say, even though it isn't his life he should be swearing on, but that of his sister. Surely, he'll go to any length to protect her. "I'd better get some sleep. I have school tomorrow." It's a lame excuse, but I need him gone. After the dream, I'm not ready to go to the under kingdom, though that's why he's come. "Can you give me a little more time?"

"Right." He walks over to the window and opens it even though he doesn't need to go through it. Because he can just pop in and out of

wherever he wants without the need of a window. I'm guessing he's doing it as a courtesy for me.

After he gets one leg over the sill, he stops. "But you know, Hellgate High School is for humans and you aren't a human. You're a fairy."

What was he getting at? "Okay."

"Now that you know who and what you really are, you shouldn't put off the inevitable." He pauses, eyeing me with irritation. "You belong at the Fairy Academy. The sooner you let me take you there, the sooner Lucretia will remove your curse and you can learn what being a fairy really means."

"I guess," I acquiesce. The words Troy said the last time we spoke haunt me. What will I be learning exactly? How to be evil? It sounds silly, but I will be going to school in the under kingdom. "But I need a little more time."

He shakes his head in disappointment.

"Look, it wasn't long ago that I had plans to graduate high school and get a summer job before heading off to college with T and Mer." I clear my throat. "That's changed, but…" I shake my head. "It's a lot to give up. All I've ever known." That sounds dramatic, but it's true. Especially since T already told me she's going with Lance. Once I leave with Pax, I don't know when or if I'll be back.

He sits on the windowsill, propping one leg up so he can rest his elbow on his thigh. "Aurora?"

"You must understand. Surely, if the roles were reversed you would ask for time as well?"

He shrugs, giving me a look that says he wants to kiss me, but I can't, not with my dream of him still hovering on the fringes of my mind. "I'll be back tomorrow." With a light pop, he vanishes.

I sigh as I climb back into bed. Without him near, I don't feel whole, but when he's around, I'm a jittery, nervous mess.

OceanofPDF.com

MY ALARM GOES off and I snap awake, remembering last night's nightmare and my conversation with Pax. I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom where I shower and get ready.

I dress in jeans, a white shirt with navy horizontal stripes, and tan wedge heels, leaving my long hair down. After applying mascara and pink gloss, I grab my bag and head into the kitchen. Usually my aunties are in there making me some kind of amazingly sweet although gross breakfast, but today they aren't anywhere in sight.

"Auntie Vera?" I leave the kitchen and head toward their bedrooms. "Auntie Macey?" I knock on her door and wait. But there's no answer. I go to Fae's room and knock. "Hello? Auntie Fae?"

When there's no response there either, I start to panic. I should've known something was up when I let out that blood-curdling scream after my nightmare. Had they been home, they would've come running. They didn't.

The last time I saw the three of them, they explained what they did to retrieve their magic and shared that they wanted to perform a stronger protection spell. Fae mentioned they needed ingredients, but I didn't think they would go during the night, while I slept. That seemed counterproductive, especially since they were so bent on shielding me.

Several times last night I thought of telling them my plan to attend the Fairy Academy, but the timing never felt right. Or I was a coward.

I make my way back to the kitchen as a horrible feeling comes over me. Something is wrong. My aunties wouldn't leave without telling me. If nothing else, they would leave a note. "Aunties." I study the area where Fae created the door the day before. "Aunties!"

"They're gone."

I whirl around at the sound of Troy's voice, and clutch one hand to my chest. It bothers me he just appears inside my house, but it seems he has answers, so I let the infraction slide. "How do you know? Where are they?" I cross my arms over my chest, trying to hold myself together, but tears fill my eyes.

"Lucretia must've known they went for their magic and trapped them somewhere, probably in the fairy realm." He growls, irritated. "I'm sorry this happened. We need to get you out of here. Come with me to Sharra." When I raise my eyebrows in question, he clarifies. "It's the realm where the Seven Magics Academy resides."

"I need to go after my aunties," I say. "I know a way to save them."

His eyes become twin slits. "What do you mean?"

I tell him what I intend to do.

He rests his hands on his hips, frustrated, and I swear a puff of smoke exits his nose. "You've made up your mind, then? You're going to the school in the under kingdom?"

"More or less." Now that my aunties are gone, I need to get down there so Lucretia can set them free.

He tilts his head and takes a deep breath. "Your magic has been unleashed." His face turns pale. "I can smell it." He makes a face. "You kissed him? That filthy, no good—"

"Stop!" I don't know how he knows, whether it's a dragon thing or what, but I don't care. He can't talk about Paxton that way in front of me.

"I told you what would happen if you kissed him." His voice is low and irritated. Troy shakes his head. "I can't believe you." He's disappointed in me. It seems everyone is.

"So what. You don't even know me." I grab a dishtowel and cover my face with it. I have no idea why.

Troy starts laughing, the tension in the room easing. "What are you

doing?"

"What are you doing?" I repeat, flustered, wadding the towel into a ball.

"There's darkness in you now. It's smoldering and growing because you kissed him first. Dark magic will be what's most prevalent. You'll have to fight hard to keep it at bay." He pauses. "Unless you don't care."

My heart rate speeds up. "I'm not evil. Paxton isn't evil. He's only doing what he has to because Lucretia has his sister. He has no choice. And of course I care!" My breathing turns heavy. Pain. Anxiety. Fear. It's all on the surface. "What would you do? If someone took the one person you cared for most in the world."

He eyes me warily. "Rory, it's okay. Calm down."

But I don't want to calm down. I can't. Inside I am in turmoil. I've lost my aunties. There are all these changes happening between my friends and me. Plus I still need to find out what I am and what I need to do. It just keeps building. More and more is piled on. My breath is coming in ragged gasps and I grab at my chest. It hurts and I wonder if I'm having a heart attack. "I— Can't— Breathe—."

Troy backs up. Is that fear I see in his eyes? "Let me get you a drink," he says, going to the fridge and getting me a bottle of water.

I bend over, resting my hands on my knees as stars shine in front of my eyes. There's a halo around the edges of my vision. I feel like I'm going to pass out.

Troy hands me the water, but I bat it away, sending it flying across the kitchen, where it rolls under the table. An uncontrollable fire is raging inside of me and I wonder if it is going to consume me.

"Have I told you about Cole?" he asks so quietly I wonder if I really heard him.

I shake my head and work to calm myself.

A stool scrapes across the tile floor and he sits. "Even though we

aren't related by blood, Cole is like a brother to me." He snorts. "We did everything together, including tracking and helping supernaturals with our father." He pauses and I hold my breath. The fury in my chest calms as I wait for him to go on. "A few years ago," he continues. "Cole was with me on a job. Before I could save him, he was sucked into a vortex and I have no idea where he is or even if he's still alive." He stops and I look up. His eyes are on me. "Every day he's gone, I die a little more. I would do anything to get him back." He sits up straight. "Except go evil. I won't do that, because Cole would never forgive me."

I swallow back the bile in my throat and cross my arms. "I guess you're better than me."

"No. It isn't too late. Let's go after your Au—"

"Dragon mutt, you shouldn't be here." Pax appears in the kitchen beside me.

Troy stands. His skin ripples, flashing his scales. "Paxton, you don't want to mess with me right now. Not after what you've done."

Paxton's skin shudders and his wings appear.

"You sure you want to do this?" Half of Troy's body is now covered in gold and bronze scales.

The tension in the room is so thick I can feel it. "Both of you need to settle down." I do something stupid and place myself between them, slapping a hand on each of their chests. Like I can do anything to stop a fight if that's what they want.

Paxton breaks away first, heading toward the living room.

"Pax?" I follow him, as does Troy.

"Did he tell you who his parents are?" Troy asks, all of his calm gone.

Paxton spins and moves faster than I believe possible, striking Troy in the face with the bottom of his booted foot. Troy doesn't move. "I kill demons on a regular basis. What makes you think you have any

chance of hurting me, fairy boy?"

Paxton's face becomes furious. I step between them again, putting my hands up. This time I feel a surge of magical energy pulse through my arms and extend outward. Troy and Paxton fly backward in opposite directions.

"Sorry, but the two of you need to chill." I'm surprised my voice sounds so calm and confident. Inside I'm a frightened wreck. I help Paxton to his feet first. "Troy is a good guy," I whisper. "He can stay. If you aren't okay with that, then you shouldn't be here. I'm still not ready."

"Fine, but if he stays, then so will I." Pax flops on the couch, propping his elbows on his knees.

When I reach Troy he's already standing. "I'll try to remain calm, but Paxton needs to tell you the whole truth and we need to find your aunts." He glares at Paxton. "I have a feeling fairy boy knows where they are."

I sigh and drop onto the wood coffee table between the guys. "Is this true, Pax? Do you know where my aunties are?"

"Yes, but only just. That's why I came back. I wanted to tell you and help you save them." He crosses his arms, leaning back.

Troy snorts like he doesn't believe him.

It's hard to know what to do or who to trust, but I do want to know who Pax's parents are. Obviously, that's important. At least Troy thinks so. "Why don't you tell me who your parents are?" I clasp my hands together, steeling myself for whatever he's going to share.

Pax shakes his head. "Don't you want to get your aunts first?"

At his question, my heart lurches with panic. I do want to save them, but I need to hear whatever it is about his parents. Especially since it's obvious he doesn't want to tell me. "I want to save my aunties, but talk first."

"As you wish," he concedes darkly. "My father is an air fairy and

my mom is a fire fairy." He claps his hands together. "There, now let's rescue your aunts."

I glance at Troy, trying to figure out why that's a big deal. Troy rolls his eyes. "Uh-huh. Now tell her the rest."

"This is stupid. Who they are doesn't matter," Pax growls.

"Oh, but it does matter, at least according to the fairy laws that have been around since the dawn of freaking time." Troy glares and I can practically feel the hate rolling off him.

"Will you two please tell me what is going on?" The ball of yuck is building in my chest again and I don't want it to. Distraction worked the first time. I need it to work again.

"It's a stupid rule, and it shouldn't be an issue. Love is love, regardless of the magic you were born into."

My frustration with the situation is close to bubbling over. If I don't get answers soon, I'm going to explode.

Troy's face turns almost sympathetic. Almost. "Hey, man. I hear you. My pedigree isn't pretty either. Still, that doesn't change the fact that she's the princess of Isluria, born to rule the realm. Ending up with the likes of you isn't how her story should end. You know that and she needs to know too." Troy's words cut through the air along with a puff of smoke.

OceanofPDF.com

"SHUT UP!" My words rattle the 1950's lamps sitting on the end tables on either side of the couch. "Paxton, just tell me whatever it is Troy thinks I need to hear so we can get a move on." I glare at Troy, unexpectedly ticked at him and his nagging interference. His words about killing demons pester at my heart too. Could he slay the demon hounds? Something tells me he could.

"All right. I'll tell you, but first you need a history lesson." Pax leans forward and our eyes lock.

"Oh, please. Let's do that. It isn't like we have someplace else to be," Troy snaps, rolling his eyes.

"Troy." I give him a warning look. "Pax, continue," I say, facing him.

"Thank you." He clears his throat. "There are five kingdoms in the fairy realm of Isluria: Earthies. They are the lowest of the kingdoms since they have earth magic. Airies have air magic. Wateries have—"

"With water magic and the Fireies are born with fire magic," Troy interrupts with the snap of his jaws. "We get it."

"Dude," I crack, annoyed, though it does seem like Pax is stalling.

Troy lets out a ragged breath. "This is killing me," he mutters, standing. He shoves his hands in his pockets and starts to pace.

I ignore him. "What's the fifth?" I ask Pax.

"They're the Hierarch fairies." He glances at Troy as though waiting for him to interrupt again. When the half dragon stays quiet, he continues, "This court is the highest of all fairies because they possess more than one magic."

"Okay." I give him a tentative smile. "How many magics do you have?" I straighten up, wondering if I have more than one magic too.

"Yes, Paxy, do tell." Troy has a book in his hands and flips the

pages loudly.

“Two,” he says, then sighs. “I have two magics. Air and earth.”

“Which makes you a Hierarch?” I ask, thinking I understand the basics.

“No, I’m not welcome there because as Troy is alluding to, my parents broke the rules by having me.” He shakes his head.

I’m totally confused again.

Pax goes on. “My father is an air fairy and my mother is a fire fairy. Fairies from different magics aren’t supposed to… um, procreate. Doing so is against the law. Those who break the law are cast out. And in some cases, their disloyalty results in their deaths.”

“My… parents created this law?” I don’t understand what the big deal is. So what if they have different magics. They’re all still fairies. Not like Troy’s parentage. He’s the product of two entirely different species. Half dragon and half human. I shudder at the thought.

Troy rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I know. My ancestry isn’t any better than his, but I’m not after the fairy throne either.” He shakes his head. “Nor am I pretending to be your true love.”

He’s worried about the power struggle of my people. I don’t think it matters. Plus, beyond his willingness to help supernaturals, why does he care so much about the fairy realm? “My parents might think intermagic coupling is serious, but I don’t.” I huff, eying Troy with irritation.

“Great. Super,” Troy says sarcastically. “Neither do I, but your people do. They have for thousands of years. And you can imagine how they will treat a princess who comes in and changes everything.” He raises a brow. “I can promise you, it won’t go over well.”

“Fine.” It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “How are some fairies born with more than one magic, then, if not for intercoupling?” I pause and try to clarify. “How do fairies become Hierarchs?”

“It’s an anomaly. When it happens, those fairies are considered

very special, which is why the class became relevant." Pax clears his throat like he wants to say more, but Troy interrupts.

"In the fairy realm, it's imperative you marry one of your own kind." He sets the book back on the shelf with finality.

I blow out my breath. "Surely, you can hear how stupid that sounds."

"It isn't my law." Troy raises his hands in front of him and shakes them. "I'm all for inter-whatever as long as its consensual." He comes over to me and leans in. "By the way, my father wasn't in his dragon form when he and my mom created me. He was in the same form as her." He snorts and steps back. "Just thought I'd clear that up now, before you let your imagination run wild."

"Good to know." My irritation vanishes and I smile at him. Dragon magic must be very powerful.

Troy leans against a wall and winks. "Anyway, that's why I'm so irritated with this guy." He points at Paxton. "Fairy boy knows the laws and he knows that if the two of you are together, you will be cast out or killed." I sense the frustration building in him again. "He can't want that." He looks at Pax. "Please tell me you don't want that."

"I don't. I swear. It isn't like I planned this." Paxton looks away. "I was with someone else—someone who actually loved me as much as I loved her. But Lucretia showed me the truth. I *feel* it, too." He looks at me. "Don't you?"

I don't know what I feel. Our kisses flash across my mind, heating up my cheeks.

"And now he's kissed you, which between fairies is powerful magic. You're connected on a physical and emotional level." Troy blows out his breath, sending a smoke ring into the air. He kneels in front of me and takes my hands. "It may not seem like a big deal right now, but the truth is the fate of your realm lies in the next several choices you will make."

I'm surprised by his close proximity and the intensity of his words.

I can't deny the strength of emotions between Pax and me. "But I still don't get why you're freaking out. I haven't agreed to be with Paxton. We kissed." I look at Paxton. "I do feel something, but it isn't true love," I say softly.

Troy leans back on his heels, about to say more, but I stop him. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but you don't know anything about me. I'm not frivolous and while I don't agree with the laws of my realm, I'm not going to break them." At least not until I change them.

Troy growls and stands. "I know more about you than you do!" He slams a fist into his open palm. "Lucretia has coerced Paxton into believing he is your true love—probably even put a spell on him. The sick part is, he thinks that's supposed to mean it's his destiny to kill you." Troy grits his teeth. "Surely you hear how stupid *that* sounds."

My heart is racing. It hurts to hear his words, but I get it. "It doesn't sound right, that's for sure." But I know about his sister. That's why Paxton is doing this. Right?

"Please listen to me," Troy pleads. "When you die, Lucretia has promised fairy boy he'll be next in line to take over all of the upper kingdom of Isluria and since Lucretia has him under her thumb, that means she'll rule the entire fairy kingdom."

And there it is. The whole reason Troy is freaking out.

Paxton glances up at me, his eyes wide with sadness. "It's true. Everything he said." He stands, his fists clenched at his sides. "But I don't care about the throne and I would rather die than allow Lucretia to rule. The only things I care about are rescuing my sister and saving you. I swear."

"You say that, but it's probably because of the spell." Troy crosses one foot over the other, leaning against the couch. He's seething now. Smoke comes from his nose like the puff of a steam engine. "Here's why I can't believe your lies. I've read the *Tome of Fates* and I've seen what happens." A wave of pain crosses his features.

My stomach jumps into my throat. He already knows whether I live or die. He knows whether Lucretia rules. Part of me is desperate to make him tell me what happens, but mostly it makes me sick with fear.

“If you’ve read my destiny, then you know I would never betray—”

Before Paxton can finish his sentence, a loud cracking noise, like thunder during a lightning storm, shakes the house, causing books to tumble from the shelves and a family portrait to fall off the wall.

Troy moves to protect me, lifting me out of the way just as a bolt of indigo light strikes the spot where I was sitting. There’s no time to thank him before bolts of blue and green light hit the couch and floor, charring the areas. They smoke and sizzle like fires recently put out.

Paxton is on his feet, his shadow wings beating at his back, a blade in one hand. It looks similar to the one I saw him hold right before he was about to kill me in my dream.

OceanofPDF.com

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?" I shout, not expecting an answer.

"I don't know," Troy says just as the roof vanishes and my aunties fly through, their blue, green, and purple magic trailing behind them. In the same instant, the house is restored like nothing happened. The only telltale sign is the swaying semi-dead potted plant dangling from a macramé plant holder attached to the popcorn ceiling.

My mouth falls open as I take them in. Their dresses and aprons are frayed, the edges singed. Soot covers most of their bodies and their hair is in disarray. But strangest of all are their wings. They're shaped like bees' wings. Fae's are royal, sky, and baby blue, the most prominent color being the royal, same as the dress color she always wears. Vera's are emerald, seafoam, and mint green. While Macey's are violet, amethyst, and periwinkle.

"Aunties." I run to Vera since she's closest and gingerly, so as to avoid touching her wings, pull her into a hug. She smells of ash and her body is freezing. A slight breeze pushes back my hair and I see her wings are beating softly before she closes them. They vanish. "Where have you been? I thought you were taken." I glance at Troy who shrugs like he can't believe they are here either.

Vera hugs me back. "We were, but we escaped." She holds up a hand when I start to ask another question. "We cannot focus on that now."

"Yes, dear. Suffice it to say, Lucretia has no clue who she's dealing with," Fae adds in a huff, coming over to me and resting her head on my shoulder.

"That's right, but never you mind. They will be here for you soon and you must be ready." Macey and Fae hug me tight for the briefest moment.

Before I can respond, all three of them have their wands out and

are waving them as they move in a circle around me.

I spin the opposite direction, unable to do anything but watch as dazzling lavender, fern, and blueberry magic encircles me. Like a heavy rain, I am soaked in colorful sparkles. Instead of fictional lightness, the magic lands on my skin with a weightiness I don't understand. Each tiny glint enters my body until I'm sure I'll become a kaleidoscope of colors. "What are you doing?" I finally whisper. Pax and Troy are forgotten. I don't even know that my aunties know they are here. The guys stand in the background, watching without saying a word. Troy's sarcasm is gone, replaced with fierce worry and a hint of wonder. Paxton's expression is blank, as though he's doing all he can to keep his true emotions hidden.

Fae gives me a tired smile, stepping back and tucking her wand into her apron. "We should've known Lucretia would find a way. Despite our best efforts, the woman is relentless and your destiny is set."

"Once we saw your magic had awakened, we knew time was running out," Macey continues, putting her wand away too.

"This spell is our last gift to you, dearest daughter." Tears leak onto Vera's hollow cheeks. The others are crying too.

It sounds like they're saying goodbye. It sounds like they know. "I'm sorry." There's so much more I want to say. I want to tell them how much I love them. How grateful I am for them. That I couldn't have asked for better parents. As I look at each of them, tears dampen my face. In their expressions, I see what I'm feeling reflected back to me. Our time together was a gift. One I will cherish for as long as I live.

"There is nothing to be sorry for." Fae squeezes my hand.

My eyes begin to feel heavy, but I keep them open. In that moment, I also think of Tiana and Merida. "Make sure my friends are okay," I say, though there isn't any reason to. They've already figured out their lives after graduation, though I can't help but worry.

“We will, dear.”

Troy looks like he’s ready to punch something. His skin changes from tan to golden and bronze. I try to thank him. Let him know I appreciate his efforts.

Before my eyes close, Paxton steps forward.

Is it my imagination or do my aunties wilt as he nears them?

“If you possess a single decent bone in your body, you will keep her safe.” I’m not sure which of my aunties says the words. They sound so far away. As though I’m seeing them through a dirty lens.

Paxton wraps an arm around my waist and touches my shoulder. Cinnamon fills the air.

There’s a blur or a wash of colors and we are no longer in my living room, but at the school. Hellgate, my human high school. Lockers line the walls. The bell rings. Students hurry to class. Some ignore the bell and continue talking. “Why are we here?” Of all the places I imagine he would take me, school in the human realm isn’t one of them.

“Can you feel it?” Pax repeats.

“What?” Everything still feels out of focus and far away.

His low voice is in my ear. “Take a deep breath, close your eyes, and use your magic to search the surroundings.”

I do as he says and try to listen. At first, all I hear are the sounds of school. Talking. Shouting. Lockers slamming. The pitter-pat of running feet. After a few moments though, I do hear and sense something. It’s below us. Deep, deep down.

Without knowing how, my magic travels toward it. Through the floor and the concrete. The insulation and the wood. Then it goes even deeper, past the basement and dirt and the writhing worms. Until I see menacing red eyes. Several sets peer from the darkness. There is growling and sharp, pointy teeth attached to squirming bodies in shapes my mind can’t comprehend. One leaps out and I gasp, pulling

my magic back.

I focus on Paxton. He looks at me with deep concern. “Can you sense what I’m talking about it?”

“There are dozens of… beasts below the school.” My knees start to shake.

“It’s okay. The demon hounds cannot hurt you. They are protecting the entrance to the fairy realm’s under kingdom.”

My vision clears, but only slightly. I feel like I’m drugged. “We have to go through my high school to get there?” That seems odd, but at this point I should know better than to question any of it. I want to giggle. It’s silly, but I can’t make myself laugh.

“More or less.” There’s a hint of humor as well as nervousness in his voice.

We are suddenly in the basement. There’s a click and the furnace roars to life. Pax releases me and I feel cold, as though his absence leeched away all of my warmth. A haunting light glows in the distance as the ferociousness of the demon hounds seeps into my veins. They are close. “Pax.” I cling to him, though I shouldn’t. Not if what I saw in my dreams is meant to be my fate.

“It’s alright. I’m here.” His arm is around my waist again. “Close your eyes, Aurora. I will keep you safe.”

Despite what I see, I have no choice but to trust him. My eyes shut before I can stop them. My feet leave the ground. There is a pop and a whoosh.

“We’re here,” he says. “Sleep now.” His voice is right next to my ear and I shiver at his closeness just before I drift into unconsciousness.

OceanofPDF.com

AS I COME INTO CONSCIOUSNESS, several things about my surroundings unsettle me. The first is that I can hear Pax and Lucretia talking.

"I have released your sister. You are no longer in debt to me and I promise not to use your family against you again. But you are to obey my instructions to the letter."

"She is my true love," Pax says.

"You think that only because that is what I led you to believe." She cackles lightly. "Though how you believed me, I'll never know. The spell I cast wasn't that strong. It should wear off."

So Troy was right.

"What do you mean?" I hear the bite in Pax's voice.

"You are the son of banished parents. As such, you will never be allowed to marry the only heir to the throne. A pariah and a princess?" She snorts. "Your union will never be. I'm sure even my treacherous sister would agree it would be better the girl die than she marry the likes of you."

"But you said—"

"Quiet, you insolent boy. You have served your purpose. Be grateful I allowed you and your sister to live and that I've given you both places in the Academy. Now away with you." Her words are final.

I sit up in time to meet Pax's eyes. There is pain in them, but defiance as well. He turns and leaves through an open door, slamming it behind him.

Lucretia faces me. She is wearing a red power suit, complete with a ruby red tie. Her hair is up high on top of her head and her wings are settled at her back, so they almost look like a cape. "You are to avoid

all meetings with Paxton unless they are professional in nature. Do you understand?" She stares intently, as though she can will me to agree.

"I guess," I say, carefully. The more I witness, the more the dream of her and Paxton together worries me. "I'm here. Ready to attend your Fairy Academy. Are you going to remove the curse and let me live?" I ask the question carefully.

She presses her lips together into a tight line. Pulls out her wand, which is also a rust red in color, and comes toward me. "Hold still."

I think of running, but where I would go? Toe to toe, I see she is taller than me, but she also has on four-inch heels. I guess we are probably close to the same height.

She taps the wand to my forehead, closes her eyes, and speaks some words under her breath.

Various shades of red ooze from her wand and shimmer as they cover me. My insides clench and I forget to breathe, but still get a hint of burnt vanilla. At first, I don't feel any change. That only lasts a moment before Lucretia lifts her wand into the air. Like tearing off dead skin, something dark follows. At once, I am lighter and my magic springs to life in my chest. There's a pop behind me. I glance back and gasp as my wings flutter, lifting me off the ground. "Help," I say, knowing my fear is unwarranted. The feeling of my wings beating is altogether new. I can sense them, sort of. It's like they were always there, and I was feeling them all along. It's just now I can see them too.

Lucretia laughs. This time it's soft and very un-maniacal. Almost friendly, which in some ways is creepier. "I still can't believe you're afraid of heights. And wings, too. Your fear is an unexpected side effect of my curse. But it's gone now." When she speaks, there's a shift in the sound of her voice, like she's lying, but she continues. "Your fears should fade away too. I mean, just look at them." She waves her wand and a mirror appears, giving me unobstructed access to a view

of my wings.

I peek at them sideways, nervous about what I'll see.

"They were exquisite when you were a baby, but now?" She shakes her head. "You will be the talk of the school."

My wings are big and bold, like a newly bloomed peony. Outlined in black, the interior is mostly magenta with hints of bubblegum and amethyst. I admire them. They beat like a butterflies wings and my heart lurches. "Can I touch them?"

"Or course you can." She watches me intently, tilting her head in a way that reminds me of myself.

I reach back and gently stroke one of the bottom wings. Softer than kitten fur, I worry I'll rub off the color or tear them, but the wing itself is pliable and strong. When I look at my fingers, I'm relieved there is no dust on them either.

"Now," Lucretia says. "The dirty details."

I cross my arms. It isn't a surprise. "I'm listening."

"Good." She waves her wand. Red magic swirls around me. "Those obnoxious fairies." She grits her teeth before taking a deep breath.

I wonder which fairies she means. My first guess is my aunties.

"Fine. Whatever." She taps her foot. "They think they can play that way, well they have another thing coming."

Now I'm positive she's talking about my aunties and the final spell they cast over me before Paxton brought me here. "I'm guessing I'm in the under kingdom of the fairy realm?" I ask to hopefully distract her from her anger.

"Of course you are." She rings a bell and a bent old man enters. "Is Aurora's room ready?" she asks without looking at him.

"Yes, my liege." He glances at me without lifting his head as he rubs his hands together. "All is ready for the pretty princess."

"And her classes?"

"Her classes, her room, and the other business." He smiles, sticking

his tongue through the place where his missing top teeth should be.

“Excellent. And what of the other student?” Her eyes form twin slits and I wonder how she can see.

“He is settled in.”

“That is all, then.” Lucretia waits for the man to hobble out. She turns to me and smiles, though it’s anything but joyful. Wicked is the word that comes to mind. “You are to start school tomorrow. Your uniforms, class schedule, and a map of the academy are all in your room.” As she speaks, she walks around the room, straightening a throw pillow or adjusting the placement of an item. As though she’s sharing information about the weather.

The room is an enormous office and so much more. There’s a shiny black desk on one side. Behind it are black bookshelves. Hosts of books are stored there. They look old and give off an eerie vibe. On the other side of the desk sit two chairs. They look to be covered in red and white leather. On the other side is a living area set up in a square with two couches, two coffee tables, end tables, a love seat and two oversized chairs. The color scheme everywhere is red, black, and white. Even the chandeliers above the desk and in the middle of the living room are black. The light shining from them is a peculiar color. Every once in a while, I see what I think are shadows fluttering around them, though they very well could be moths.

“What will I be learning?” A nervous twitter flits through my stomach as my wings shoot me forward into one of the coffee tables. My shin cracks against it and I suck in a breath at the pain.

She rolls her eyes. “How to use your wings, how to use your magic as well as how to fight.”

“Why would I need to know how to fight?” I don’t like the sound of that.

“It is always better to know how to fight and never use it then to be in a predicament and have no way of defending yourself.” Her smile widens. “Ask your aunties. I’m sure they would agree with me.”

She smacks her wand against her hand. A zing of red magic shoots from it. “The brownie will take you to your room. I’ve left you some food. Eat well and be ready to leave your room by eight in the morning. Not a moment later.”

“Very well.” I carefully step around the coffee tables and head to the door.

“And, Aurora?”

“Yes.” Not for the first time, it dawns on me Lucretia is my actual aunt, unlike Fae, Vera, and Macey. She and I share the same blood. Yet unlike with my aunties I only feel nervous contempt for the woman in front of me.

“Remember what I said. Stay away from Paxton. I know what he told you, but it’s a lie. He wants nothing more than to have you. Understand?”

I force a swallow to hide my shudder. “Of course.” She’s the queen of lies. Why would I ever believe her? Still, I can pretend for as long as I need to.

“Off you go, then.” She waves her wand and the door opens on its own.

I can’t leave yet. I still have one more question. “The curse has been lifted. So I won’t be stabbed through the heart and die on my eighteenth birthday, right?”

She studies me a moment, considering my words. “If you die, it will not be because of my curse.”

“How long do I have to stay?” I know it shouldn’t matter, but it does. Because I miss my friends already.

The question surprises her. “This is your home now. You will remain for as long as is required,” she snaps. “Now go. I no longer want you in my presence.”

Talk about vague.

OceanofPDF.com

THE fiRST THING I teach myself after leaving Lucretia and shutting myself in my room is how to make my wings go away. I practice several times until the act is as easy as breathing. Paxton and Lucretia both said my fears would vanish when my wings returned. They weren't wrong. I'm not afraid any longer, but I'm not thrilled with them either.

I think about that as I check out my room and get ready for bed.

Surprisingly, sleep comes easily in this realm. In a way, the room reminds me of my room in the human realm. There's a bed, chest of drawers, closet, table and chair for homework, lamps, and an area rug. Off my bedroom is an en suite bathroom, complete with all the necessary items, including makeup and hair care products.

Though all the furniture looks relatively normal, it feels slightly off. For instance, everything is black. Black bed frame. Black chest of drawers, bathroom sink, and toilet. Even the area rug partially under my bed is black. Fine. I get I'm in the under kingdom. Seems like overkill, but whatever.

When I touch the items, I get a surprise. Because they all feel the same. For instance the bathroom sink. It looks porcelain and I expect it to be sleek and smooth. When I touch the bowl, it is smooth, but instead of cool and glass-like, it feels warm and rubbery… almost like it's alive. It's slightly unnerving.

After handling necessities in the bathroom, I dress in my new uniform. A pleated skirt, white shirt with slits for my wings, though I don't bring them out, and a hot pink sweater. I'm surprised by how normal my clothes are, like something a human kid would wear, aside from the slits in the backs of them for my wings. My socks are white, and I pull them up to my knees. The black boots, while they look normal, feel the same as my bedroom furniture. Rubber stretched thin.

When I finish doing up the last button on my sweater, someone knocks on the door. “Coming.” I glance over at the desk wondering again why there aren’t any books or paper or writing utensils, or something. Shrugging, I open the door.

The girl in front of me is obviously a student. She’s dressed the same as me, except for her sweater. It’s purple and she has orange wings, though not just any orange, but sunrise, amber, and ginger. She’s taller than me, with brown skin, black hair and candlelight yellow eyes. “Ready, your Highness?” she asks, looking me over and sniffing.

“Yep.” I close my door. “But it’s just Rory.”

“Sure, whatever, Rory.” She says my name like it’s a bad word.

I sigh internally. “What’s your name?”

“Samantha.” She takes off like there’s a fire and she needs to get away from it. Actually, it’s me she doesn’t want to be near, but I jog to catch up.

“Do you go by Sam?” I ask lightly, hoping if I show her how nice I am, she’ll warm up.

“With my friends.”

Got it. We aren’t friends.

The hall we walk is covered in black—black walls, black floor, black ceiling. It’s like I’m traversing through a shadow. Thankfully there are lights next to each door, illuminating our way. I notice there are no light switches. Makes me wonder how they work.

“Where are we going?” Seems like a logical question. Up ahead I hear the sounds of talking and laughing, and my stomach flip flops with nervousness.

“To pick up the stuff you need for classes.” She rolls her eyes as we enter the main common area. Dozens of students are there, loitering, chatting, and flying around. It’s like a kaleidoscope of colors. And wings! The ceiling goes on and on and doesn’t seem to have an end.

It's dizzying and I have to close my eyes a moment to adjust.

When I open them again, a sliver of fear sluices through my stomach. There are so many fairies. Samantha is already farther ahead, but I can't move. "Samantha, I—" My breathing starts coming in ragged gasps.

Samantha looks over her shoulder, sees me and comes back. "Knock it off." She grabs one of my arms and forces me forward. Thankfully, she keeps to the edges of the room. I hug the wall, wishing I was anywhere else. "What's your problem?" she hisses. "Stop acting like a fool. You're embarrassing me."

"Okay," I eke out, wondering how my legs are working. It doesn't feel like I'm moving. When I look down, I notice I'm not walking, but flying. I gasp in surprise, as an uncontrollable urge to run away overpowers me. Before I know it, I pull away from her grasp and head toward the closest escape.

It's not an exit, but a closet where brooms and other oddities are stashed. But no one else is inside so I dive in. I think about my wings disappearing, and trip over a broom handle on the way down. I bend over and take several deep breaths. The air is different in the under kingdom. Thicker. Full of moisture.

"Aurora?"

It's Pax. I gulp down my relief but don't respond. We're supposed to stay away from each other.

The door cracks open and he pokes his head through. Then he comes all the way inside, closing the door behind him. "The uniform looks good."

"You think?" I'm self-conscious as I search his cobalt blue eyes for a tell, a sign to convince me he's serious. Because I feel like a dork. I swore I would never attend a school where a uniform was involved. Yet here I am. Ready to start my first day at an academy for fairies. It's too much. "You look nice too," I say. It's weird to see him in clothes that aren't his usual black. I shift from one leg to the other. At

the movement, my newly returned wings appear and flutter and I hover a foot off the ground without meaning too. As soon as I understand what I'm doing, my wings close and I drop, falling into him.

He catches me and wraps his arms around my waist. A light scent of spice fills the air as he whips his hair out of his eyes.

I should pull away. Tell him to leave me alone. Now that I'm here, I'm to have nothing to do with him. It's part of the deal. "What do you want?" My breath catches in my throat. He's gorgeous, like painfully so, but it's more than that. I feel more alive at his touch and I find myself relaxing into him.

"You," he says, his voice warm and dark as melted chocolate.

"But we can't," I begin, and search his face for a hint that he's kidding. "Lucretia made us promise to stay away from each other."

He gives me a mischievous smile. "A secret romance. Clandestine encounters. Stolen kisses. You know you want to." He tightens his grip on me. Our lips are so close, I can smell the cinnamon on his breath, practically feel the pressure of his lips on mine.

"No," I lie, my voice shaky. Because I do, without a doubt, want to, but I don't want to get kicked out of the academy. Not on my first day. There's so much about myself I don't know.

"Right." He loosens his grip and his fingers caress my waist where my top has come untucked from my skirt. Electric heat races along my skin at his touch. "Meet me in the garden shed at midnight." He turns and opens the door. Then looks back, his eyes meeting mine. A force stronger than reason exists between us. Dangerous or not, I'll be there.

I nod.

His smile says it all. I'm his and he knows it. "I'll see you later." He exits the closet and it's like he took part of me with him.

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER SEVERAL MINUTES, I roll my shoulders back and step out. The fairies nearest me snicker, but I don't care. Samantha is talking with a group of friends a ways off. I want to believe it isn't about me, but who am I kidding? Of course she is. I cross my arms and head her direction, accidently bumping into someone.

"Sorry," I say, keeping my gaze on Samantha. She's close enough to hear and looks up just as I run into someone.

"Watch it." He turns, a mild glare on his features until he really sees me. "Rory." He smiles.

"Uh, hi." I'm surprised he knows my nickname. Though strangely, he does look familiar. His wings are several shades of gold and bronze and his eyes are a deep golden color with flecks of bronze along the edges. His hair is blond and longish, though here most of the guys have hair longer than his. He whips his bangs out of his eyes. "Troy?" I squint, trying to figure out how it's possible. He's a dragon, not a fairy.

"You know the new guy?" Samantha asks, coming over, her disdain softening slightly.

"I-uh think so." I step closer to him. "It is you, right?"

Troy winks. "Surprise." He glares back at his wings a moment.

I can't help but smile since I know how he feels about fairies. Having him here is so great though and I immediately relax. "How?"

He leans in. "I have my ways." His cheek touches mine briefly. "Plus, I couldn't let you come down here alone."

"Thank you," I say, and mean it.

He stands straighter. It's then I notice the flock of fairies surrounding us. Like bees to honey, they are drawn to him.

I smile. If they only knew how he feels about them. "Seems you've

already made friends."

He clears his throat. "I suppose."

"Well introduce me then, Rory," Samantha says, pushing in front of me so she and Troy are face to face. "I'm Sam." Her voice has taken on a sultry tone.

"Troy." He looks around her at me. "It's so good of you to befriend Rory. She's such a great fairy."

"How do you know her?" Sam asks, glancing over her shoulder at me.

"We went to the same high school together in the human realm." He shrugs like it's no big deal.

I cover my mouth, thinking we only went to school together there for one day. But sure, we go way back.

"You're so lucky," Sam said, turning so she can talk to Troy and me.

"Yeah." I don't know what else he's said about us, so I keep quiet.

"It's funny though because I didn't even know she was a fairy until a couple of days ago. It was all a big secret." He shrugs. "When she said she was coming here, I had to come too. The human realm is so boring anyway." He pats her on the shoulder as the group behind him surrounds us. "Everyone, this is Rory. Rory, this is everyone," he says.

A long chime sounds, like that of an old bell, though it isn't loud.

"We better get to class," one of the girls says, taking Troy by the arm. Her wings are various shades of green, though not as pretty as Auntie Vera's.

At the thought of her, a pang of sadness pushes against my heart. I cross my arms.

Troy shrugs. "See you later." Then he pats the girl's hand, causing her wings to flutter as they walk away.

"Come on, Rory, let's get your schedule." Sam walks me over to a room that looks a lot like a small store. At the counter, she speaks

with the white-haired fairy with cotton candy wings.

“This is Aurora.” Sam pauses and lowers her voice. “The king and queen of the upper kingdom’s daughter.

“Oh, good gladiolas.” The woman behind the counter pushes her half-moon glasses up onto her nose and studies me. “Bless my soul, you’re the exact image of your mother.”

“I am?” My pulse quickens.

She blinks several times. “Well, of course you are.”

Before I can respond, she turns away and shuffles through some papers. “Let me see. Ah, yes. Here it is.” She produces what looks like a dried flower petal about the size of a sticky note. It’s hot pink in color with black writing on it. “You have Magic 101, Wand Wielding, Potions, Combat Training and Introduction to Flying.” She glances at me and titters. “I’m afraid you’ll be the oldest in your flying class.” Then her brows furrow. “Oh, actually not. You’ll be taking the class after school in the rose garden. It says your teacher is Master Narcissus.” She glances at me over her glasses. “I didn’t realize that boy was teaching.” She presses her lips together. “Good luck with that.”

“Thanks?” I want to ask her who this Master Narcissus is, but she continues before I have the chance.

“Sam, you’ll help her collect what she needs and get her to her first class?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Very good.” The fairy, whose name plaque says Madame Begonia, hands my class schedule and the list of needed books and items over to Samantha. “Welcome to the Fairy Academy, your Highness.” She curtsies.

“It’s Rory,” I say and smile, but the woman doesn’t return it. Instead she turns away, busying herself.

“Come on, *Rory*.”

I follow Sam around the counter.

From the common room, the store appears as nothing more than a small classroom. Once inside, I expect our excursion would be quick, but as we go up and down the aisles collecting items, it's easy to see the store is deceptively large.

When we're nearly finished, my arms are full of books, papers, and vials filled with liquids, including unicorn tears. Plus writing utensils that sort of look like pencils, except they're black and have the same texture as the book covers and my bedroom furniture.

"One last thing," Sam says, and picks out a black bag similar in look and size to a backpack, only I think it's more like a satchel.

"You're going to fit all of this in there?" I don't believe it.

"Look, Rory, I get that you're new, but if we're going to be friends, then you've got to stop saying idiotic things." She pulls her wand from her sweater pocket. It's a burnt orange color. Without saying a word, she waves her wand, taps the items in my arms one by one in my arms then the few she's holding. As she does, they shrink in size and disappear inside my bag. "See."

"Cool." My pulse flutters. "But when I need something, what do I do?" I peek inside the bag and retrieve a book. As soon as it's no longer within the confines of the satchel, it grows back to its original size. "Oh, okay." Samantha must've used a spell. I appreciate her willingness to help, even if she is a bit begrudging.

"Then when you want to put something back, you simply place it in the bag, and the item will automatically shrink down so it fits."

"Really cool!" I can't help smiling.

"Sure." Sam tucks her wand back into her pocket.

"Do I get a wand?"

"Of course you do. We're heading there next."

We say goodbye to Madame Begonia and leave, crossing the common room, which is mostly empty, and enter another store.

Inside, it’s pitch black.

OceanofPDF.com

"WHERE'S THE LIGHTS?"

"No light in here." The man's voice is directly in front of me and I jump.

"Then how?" I ask, my bottom lip trembling.

"Close your eyes, child."

I do as he says, grateful Sam is nearby.

"Now, think about your magic. That pushing and pulling you feel inside your chest." His voice is deep and raspy and reminds me of what a talking cheetah might sound like. "Concentrate!"

"Okay." I heave a deep breath and turn my thoughts inward. My magic is waiting there, like my favorite pet, and seems to swirl with joy when I notice it. Along the edges is a darkness that hovers nearby as though it's waiting for something. I try to gather it in with the rest of my magic, but it won't come.

"Very good," the voice says.

Though he's still super close, I am no longer afraid. My magic swirls around in various shades of magenta, amethyst, and orchid. The same color as my wings. In my mind, I watch my magic come together and form a wand. It's mostly magenta, but the other colors swirl within until it appears to be solid. As I watch the wand form, I suddenly feel it in my hands.

"Impressive," he says. "It took the new boy several tries before his wand was created."

I know he's talking about Troy and I smile. "Thank you."

He grumbles and I feel him move away. "You're done," he snaps. "Now get!"

I yelp as I turn back toward the door, which has a small window in the top of it, allowing a little light in. "Thank you," I say at the door,

looking back.

With the tiny bit of light, I see the outline of the creature I was speaking to. It's squat, almost like a giant pile of mud, dressed in mustard pants and a rust colored shirt. He has no hair to speak of—at least none visible. A few feet away, he stops and looks back. Yellow eyes like those of a pit viper study me and I think he's trying to imagine me as dinner. Finally, he smiles, showing off his pointy yellow teeth. "You see me." I can tell he's surprised. "Only those about to die see the Wand Caller." He laughs. It's high and guttural at the same time. Like fingernails on a chalk board.

I open the door and hurry out, slamming it behind me. It's then I remember Sam is still in there, but before I can go back for her, I see she's actually sitting at a black table, drumming her fingers on its surface.

"Finally." She stands and focuses on my wand. "Better tuck that away."

I don't ask her why, but sense there's something wrong with mine. Which doesn't surprise me. It all feels wrong. "What was that thing?" I ask as we start back across the common room.

"The Wand Caller. He's an invisible being, which is kind of freaky, right?" She starts across the common room again.

"He looks like a pile of mud in clothes," I say, hoping we'll bond over making fun of the creature.

She gasps. "You saw him?"

I nod, throwing the satchel strap over my shoulder. "That's bad, isn't it?" I reach out and touch the wall. Just as I suspected, it has the same texture as everything else. Everything here is so weird.

"It definitely isn't good." Sam shrugs and keeps going. I rush to catch up.

"What's all this stuff made of?" I ask when I reach her. "It's everywhere."

She looks down at the bag I'm holding and wrinkles her nose. "I don't know if you're ready to know." She turns a corner and disappears.

I hurry to catch up as a sick feeling washes over me. I know I'm in the under kingdom and that this is the place where fairy dark magic is taught. I saw the demons guarding the entrance when Paxton took me through the basement of Hellgate High. This isn't an enchanted place filled with rainbows and fluffy bunnies. It's the opposite. Maybe Sam is right. Maybe I'm not ready. Even as I think it, I have to know. "Tell me," I say, touching her arm. "I need to know."

She pulls from my grasp and crosses her arms. "Everything you see, everything you use, from that bag to your bed to the desks in the classrooms, consists in some way of the demons that make their home down here."

I immediately take my hand from where it rests on my bag. "What do you mean?"

She shakes her head. "Fairies who are cast out of the upper kingdom are sent down here. Those sentenced to live down here tend to wither and become different kinds of demons rather quickly."

I look around at the hallway.

"Yep, it's all made of demon dust. Skin. Sinews. It's better than having their bodies just piling up." She shrugs like she's telling me the menu at a restaurant.

"That's disgusting."

She makes a face. "That's life in the under kingdom. Get used to it."

I don't think I can touch anything ever again. "And the lights?" I ask, though I'm worried about what they will be. The souls of the damned? I hope not.

"Pixies," she says matter-of-factly.

"Living creatures?" I ask to verify.

She looks down at me. “Yes, Rory. Pixies are alive and it’s their job to keep the academy lit up. Otherwise we would have to dwell in complete darkness and I’m sure you wouldn’t like that.” She stops at a doorway, so I’m unable to respond. Not that I have anything good to say about the situation. I’m beyond grossed out. Walking on, sleeping on, writing on, and constantly touching demon dust. Fairy dust, basically.

I glance inside the room and see it’s filled with students. The teacher flutters back and forth across the front. Her wings are various shades of violet and she’s wearing a matching robe.

“Are you in this class?” I ask, swallowing.

“Of course not.” Sam doesn’t give me more but walks inside and says something to the teacher.

“Thank you, Samantha. Close the door on your way out.” The teacher watches, her lilac eyes like a weight on my shoulders.

When the door is closed, her kind, wrinkled face becomes hard. I know from my class schedule her name is Madame Carnation. “Have a seat there, your Highness.” As she speaks, a desk and chair are conjured out of thin air and drop against the same wall as the door, near the front of the class. “As princess of all of the fairy realm, it’s best you sit where you can see all of your subjects.” She clucks her tongue and turns. “Don’t you think students?”

They all laugh and holler.

My magic churns darkly. I hadn’t planned to be friends with everyone, but I hoped to make a friend or two. The way the class reacts, it doesn’t seem likely. Lifting my chin, I walk over to the desk, wishing I didn’t know what it was made of and wondering whether the demons were killed the instant the teacher used her magic to create the desk and chair. At the thought I shudder, dropping my bag to the floor beside me. Just before I sit, I catch sight of Troy. He winks and I feel immediately better.

OceanofPDF.com

"Now, before we were interrupted, we were discussing the distinctions between the magics." She taps her wand. "As I was saying, black represents which magic?"

Several students raise their hands. They are much younger than I am.

"Mr. Henry," the teacher calls.

"Black represents the Hierarchs," Troy says.

"Correct. And what is the reason?"

"Because those fairies were born with more than one magic."

"Precisely."

Over the course of the class, Madame Carnation talks about how the color blue represents water fairies. Green is for earth fairies. Purple is for air. And red is for fire fairies. As I listen, I check out the students. Their sweaters reveal what kind of fairy they are. Troy's sweater is black. No one's sweater is hot pink. There again I've been singled out. It's embarrassing. No doubt Lucretia did it to make me uncomfortable. She said I could attend. She didn't say she would make it easy on me.

I also find my mind wandering. Troy said his father wasn't in dragon form when Troy was created, but he didn't specifically say he was in human form either. Is Troy half fairy and half dragon? It would explain so much. Like why he's so adamant he help me. I decide to ask him when we get a moment alone.

"Your Highness, has our class bored you already?" Madame Carnation asks sarcastically.

My face gets hot. "No, mum."

"Well good." She turns to the rest of the class. "Thanks to your future queen, there will be a five-page essay on why the different

classes matter."

A long chime sounds just as several of the students groan.

"You are excused." Madame Carnation flashes me a glare before returning to her seat.

I wait until most of the class is gone. Troy is with a couple of fawning female fairies. They are whispering.

He is kind and flirty as they make their way up the aisle.

I quickly gather my things and drape my satchel over my shoulder. Then walk out of the class and wait.

A girl whose wings are various shades of red stomps over. "I hear you're already making trouble."

I blink several times. "What? No."

She puts her hands on her hips. "So you aren't the reason my little sister has a five-page paper due tomorrow?"

"Oh, that." I press against the wall. It seems to caress and hold me to it. At the feeling, I quickly jump forward and accidently smack the girl in the face. "Sorry," I say, but it's too late.

The girl has a fiery ball of magic dancing in her hand and is about to throw it at me. Blood dribbles from her nose. "You'll pay for that, princess or not." She cocks back her arm.

Before she can throw it at me, Troy appears and jumps in front of me. "Hey, it's Millicent, right?"

"Maleficent," she corrects, but I see her features softening.

"Got it. Listen, Maleficent, as a favor to me, can you please not kill my friend? She isn't from around here and doesn't know the rules or how to behave." He glances over his shoulder, giving me a sad look. "She's like a child when it comes to our ways."

"She hit me," Maleficent says, her ruby, rust, and orange-red wings beating violently.

I move around Troy. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Bull." The fire in her palm grows.

Troy caresses her arm. “Mal, hey.”

I hear his voice change. It’s low and soft.

“Will you have lunch with me?”

Her face changes. No longer furious but excited. One of her friends gives her something to wipe her nose. She quickly handles the blood. Then smiles. “Sure. I’ll save you a seat.”

“Sweet.” He leans in and whispers something in her ear.

She giggles. I sense the danger is gone. Maleficent flips her hair, giving me the stink eye before walking away.

“Seriously, Rory.” Troy faces me. “You won’t last the day if you keep this up.”

I shake my head, looking at my hands. “I know, but I swear it was an accident.”

“Uh-huh.” He takes me by the elbow. “We better stick together the rest of the day.”

“Except at lunch. You have a date.”

A flirty smile lifts his lips. “Right.”

“Are you taking Wand Wielding for Beginners next?” I ask, after checking my schedule.

He peers over my shoulder. “It looks like we are in all of the same classes, except flying.” His brows crunch together. “Master Narcissus is lucky to have you in his class.”

“Yeah, sure.” I bump into him and remember my question. “So which magics did you convince the Fairy Academy you possess?”

He notices I’m eyeing his black sweater. There aren’t very many Hierarchs in wandering the halls. “All of them,” he says.

“You said you have all four and they believed you?” I’m still confused about how he convinced them he was a fairy, let alone a Hierarch.”

“Well, no. I had to prove it, but that wasn’t hard.” He pulls on my

sweater. “Hot pink is the color of the king and queen. Lucretia really isn’t going to let you blend in, is she?”

I shake my head. “I guess not.”

“Since they haven’t already, I’m sure later today you’ll be called into the office and asked to reveal your magic. Maybe once they see which magics you possess, they’ll change your sweater color?” He doesn’t sound convinced and I can’t blame him.

His words don’t ease my mind. I don’t know how to show my magic. Even as I think about it, my magic stirs as though telling me it won’t let me down. I sigh and steel myself as we enter Wand Wielding.

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER WAND WIELDING and Potions is lunch. Troy walks me to the cafeteria but doesn't stick around. He intends to keep his promise to Maleficent and I don't blame him. The fire fairy is intimidating, to say the least.

As soon as she sees him though, her fierce posture relaxes and she smiles, immediately softening. I watch Maleficent go from Xena: Warrior Princess to Strawberry Shortcake in a matter of seconds.

I get my lunch, which is a big salad filled with all kinds of interesting looking vegetables with a side of equally interesting looking fruit. Once I'm through the line, I spot Sam, but there isn't a spot available near her, so I go to a small, empty table and sit by myself.

"Mind if we join you, princess." A guy with short, curly black hair slides into the seat across from me as two other fairies sit on either side of him.

He's tall and muscled, like he pumps iron every second he isn't at school. His eyes are a deep brown as is his skin. The other two fairies are female. The plump one sports green streaks in her straight black hair. The other's hair is dirty blond and cropped short. She's the epitome of what I imagined fairies looked like before I found out I was one.

Mid bite, I pause, concerned I'm going to have another fight on my hands. But the guy smiles and it seems genuine. From their sweaters, I know they are earth fairies. Their wings are various shades of greens and browns as are their eyes.

"Of course," I say, sticking the salad still on my fork in my mouth and chewing. It's good. Refreshing. Unlike anything I've tried, but my taste buds are happy none the less.

"I'm Thrun. This is Flora and Holly." He points to the girls and

they smile.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Rory.” I stab a piece of fruit and gingerly put it in my mouth.

“I thought it was Aurora,” Holly says, eyeing me anxiously before biting into her roll.

The fruit tastes like a cross between a banana and a grape. It’s good though and I stab another of the same kind. “It is, but I go by Rory,” I say after I swallow.

“Oh.” She looks at the others. “Why don’t you have your wings out?”

I shrug and decide to be honest. “I’m still getting used to them.”

She looks away and takes a drink.

“How are you liking your first day?” Flora asks, clearing her throat. She picks out a vegetable from her salad and sticks it in her mouth.

“It’s better now,” I say and mean it. “Thank you for sitting with me.”

“We had to,” Holly says, and then her eyes get big. “I mean, we wanted to.”

It’s obviously a lie and uneasiness fills my stomach. “Why did you have to sit with me?” I don’t care that I’m putting them on the spot or that the atmosphere around us has turned awkward. I want to know the truth.

Thrun, grunts. “We didn’t have to, but Master Narcissus asked that we make sure you have company.” He glares at Holly. “That’s all she meant.”

“What, like for extra credit?” I’m no longer hungry and push away my food. Tears form behind my eyes and I feel like crying. I miss my friends and my aunties. I even miss Carson and Kelly. Sort of. At least with them I knew what to expect and how to act. Here, I’m completely lost.

But I have to be strong. I said yes to coming to this school and as tough as it is, at least my curse is lifted. At least I won't die when I turn eighteen. I'm committed. I blink several times and force myself to live in the moment.

The three of them are eyeing each other as though unsure whether to tell me the truth. It isn't my wish to make them uncomfortable. "You don't have to answer that, but I promise I won't bite." I look at Holly. "And if you don't want to be here, then leave. I'll tell the teacher you did your part." I pull my tray back over and take a bite like I'm all good. The food in my mouth is a combination of pineapple and cherry flavors. "I certainly don't want to ruin your lunch," I add before taking another bite.

Flora shakes her head. "I'm happy to stay. Everyone says you're awful, but I think you're nice. Nicer, probably, than anyone else here."

"This is the Fairy Academy for the under kingdom. Were here to learn dark magic so we can defeat the upper kingdom. Nice doesn't really apply." Holly crosses her arms, giving Flora an irritated scowl.

"Wait. What?" My pretend ease is suddenly gone.

Holly's face turns red. "Nothing, your Highness."

"Hey, it's fine. You can tell me." I place my hands in my lap and grip them tightly together, forcing myself to remain calm. "I'm in the under kingdom too, so I'm one hundred and ten percent in support of all that's going on down here." Inside I'm freaking out. Is this why these students are here? Have they chosen to go against the upper kingdom and my parents? To fight them? That's what it sounds like.

"Right," Thrun says, shoving a piece of what looks like meat into his mouth. My stomach rolls because I'm almost positive that meat is from the demons. "See, she's fine. She's one of us. Right, Rory?"

I force myself to smile. "Definitely."

During the rest of lunch, I learn that Thrun, Flora, and Holly are on their final year at the academy before they graduate and are obliged to serve in the under kingdom army for three years as payment for

their schooling.

When the bell chimes, I throw away my lunch and head to combat training. A changing room is off the indoor/outdoor gymnasium. Madame Colin assigns me a locker and shows me where it's located before leaving me to change. The lockers are similar in size to those in Hellgate high, but these don't have combinations or a place to put a lock. Inside are clothes. They smell clean and are folded precisely. After hanging my bag on the hook, I change into black shorts that feel like a second skin when on. I take several deep breaths and convince myself that it isn't because they are actually made of demon skin. Then I put on a hot pink shirt. It has the Fairy Academy crest on the chest, same as the sweaters.

Sitting on a bench, I tug on white socks and white shoes. They're different from tennis shoes. These grip my feet like a glove.

Dressed, I fiddle with my satchel while waiting for the water fairy next to me to be done. She closes her locker and glances at me before saying, "*Eoni*." She smirks and takes off.

"*Eoni*?" I whisper the word, hoping it's a spell to lock the locker. It sounds weird on my lips, but nothing happens. The bell chimes, telling me I should be in class. With a sigh, I follow the girl out of the changing room and onto the field.

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN TROY SEES ME, he smiles and jogs over. He's holding a long stick in each hand and gives me one. "Hey, I got you a staff."

"Thanks," I say, moving so my legs are hips width apart, same as the rest of the students.

The rest of the students spread out and are waiting. For me, I'm guessing, and my face gets hot.

Madame Colin is hovering off the ground a few inches, her shades-of-blue wings beating rhythmically behind her. Wearing tight all-black pants and a long-sleeved shirt, they look like the same material as my shorts. Her white hair is twisted on top of her head. "Now that everyone is here, let's begin with warmups."

We spend ten minutes warming up before Madame Colin breaks us into groups of two. Troy and I are paired together.

"I want you to run through the moves we learned yesterday. Each person will take a turn playing the assailant and the defender. You may begin."

Immediately, the sound of staff striking staff and grunts can be heard.

Troy and I look at each other.

"Should we tell her we weren't here yesterday?" he whispers, eyeing the others.

"Probably." I face him as I watch the groups on either side of us.

Troy's hands move while he watches them run through the sequence once. "Seems pretty simple. Pops… I mean, my Dad taught me something similar." He lowers his stance and smacks my staff lightly before he twists and smacks it again in another spot, barely missing my fingers.

"Careful."

He grins. Spins and strikes. Does another move and attacks. The whole time his wings beat and flutter as though to music I can't hear.

I continue to stand there, unsure what else to do except watch him. "See," he says, when he's finished.

"Very nice, Master Henry." Madame Colin made her way over to our group and is standing just a few feet away.

It's then I notice the rest of the class stopped to watch him as well. I clear my throat and look at my shoes.

"Now it's your turn to play the assailant, your Highness," the teacher says with only a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"I-uh," I glance at Troy for help, but he isn't sure what to do either. "I wasn't here yesterday," I finally say.

"Well neither was Master Henry but look at him." She pats Troy on the arm, admiring him openly before tearing her eyes away so they can rest on me. "He obviously did the homework and even improved it, I dare say." She lifts her chin and looks down on me.

"I'm sorry, Madame." I fold my hands together.

"That'll be fifty demerits." She snaps her fingers and though I can't see what she's done, I'm aware I've just lost fifty. "Master Henry, will you please help the defunct princess?"

He works to keep his face serious. "Of course, Madame."

"Very good." She lifts a seductive brow. "Come see me after class. There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Sure."

When she's gone, he comes over to me. "I have to admit I'm a little nervous about what that something is. You saw the way she ogled me, right?"

I giggled lightly. "Yeah. Either they don't have the same teacher/student policies, or she doesn't care."

"Good thing she's hot," he says, tapping my staff with his.

I shake my head. "Seriously, is that all you see? It doesn't matter

that she's way older than you?"

"Not even. She looks amazing and in case you didn't know, fairies live a really long time. In the scheme of things, she's probably still considered a teen." He wiggles his brows.

"Whatever floats your boat, lover boy." I step back, retreating from our little bubble. Troy's charisma can be a bit overwhelming. Not sure if it's the heat from the dragon in him or what?

He shows me the different positions and moves until the bell chimes. "See you at dinner," he says and heads over to Madame Colin.

"Yep, thanks for your help." In the changing room, I debate whether or not to change. I still have flying lessons with Master Narcissus, but I want to get my bag. Relief rushes through me when I see it's still there.

The girl beside me whose name is Strata pulls on her boots and looks over at me. She's the same girl I tried to copy before class. She said "*Eoni*", which I thought was for a spell, but it didn't work for me. "The spell didn't work because you don't have the same magic I do."

"That makes sense," I say with a light laugh. "Thanks."

"Sure." She takes her bag and starts to leave.

"Hey, can you tell me how to get to the rose garden?" I ask, only half expecting her to help as I catch up with her.

"This way." She waves me on as she starts out of the changing room and down the hall. We cross the entire academy. At least it feels that way.

When she turns down a hall without any lights, I start to worry. "Are you positive this is the way?" I ask, hesitant to follow her.

"Don't be a pansy." She gives me an innocent look. "Would I steer you wrong?"

"I don't know," I admit truthfully, planting my feet.

She crosses her arms then turns to leave. "The rose garden is through that door. Go or don't go. It doesn't matter to me."

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN STRATA IS GONE, I debate what to do. I decide to ask someone else, just to verify, but each time I try, I get ignored like I'm invisible. Taking a deep breath, I carefully walk down the hall and pull open the door. Immediately the stench of swamp hits my face. "Master Narcissus?" There's a flicker of light a ways down the cobbled path. Without going in, I can tell this isn't the rose garden. Unless this is the under kingdom's version. I take a tentative step inside, just past the doorway, and the door slams shut behind me.

"No!" I search for a handle to get out, but there isn't one. "Help!" I pound on the door, working to keep myself from freaking out. "Strata," I yell."

"You smell delectable." The voice is oily and low, each syllable ringing in my ears like he's right beside me.

I spin in a circle, unable to see anything. "Hello?" My teeth chatter.

"I'm right here," a voice says in my other ear. This time it sounds female.

"I-I can't see you," I say, opening my satchel and searching for my wand. I don't know what I'll do with it, but at least it's a weapon. Except I can't find it.

When I look up, there's the form of a man in front of me. "Yummy." He's shirtless and stark white. And when he opens his mouth, I can see pointy teeth. Then, before my eyes, he shifts into a woman with long red hair covered in daisies. Her lips are blood red. "Come closer, dear. Let me have a look at you."

"No thank you." I take off running. Anywhere is better than here. I pass into trees with low hanging branches. The tiny leaves brush against my hair and face. I bend lower as I hurry forward, but each step grows more and more difficult. A quick look up reveals the

branches are like fingers. They cling to me, wrapping around my neck and chest.

Squeezing.

Squeezing.

I can't breathe.

Stars dot my vision.

The shirtless man is in front of me. He leans in and sniffs. "The hidden princess." A shudder runs through his body and suddenly he's the red-headed woman. "We aren't supposed to touch you but she will understand." A clawed finger runs down my cheek and to my bottom lip. I want to cry out but I am still struggling for breath. She pushes in, piercing my lip so it bleeds. "The poison will do its work quickly," she says. Then she lifts her finger to her lips. A forked tongue slithers out for a taste.

At once, her features become furious. She cries out and shrinks away as the branches strangling me slacken slightly. "What is it? It hurts." She spits, putting her face in her hands.

I take a quick breath and then another. My arms are pinned to my sides, but I move from side to side, working myself loose while keeping my focus on her. Or it. Every second or two, it shifts from male to female, cycling back and forth between the first two figures and then to other faces and bodies. Some of them don't look like fairies at all.

When I'm free, I start to run back the way I came, hoping there might be another door. But after several long seconds, the landscape changes. In the distance is a castle. At once, I recognize it as the one from my dream. "No," I whisper and run to the right until I'm under the cover of trees once again.

The scent of death and decay is heavy. I have to breathe through my mouth so I won't gag. But that's bad too. Every few seconds at least one bug flies into my mouth and I have to spit it out. The ground shifts and I slide forward into thick water, falling to my knees.

My face goes under briefly, but I quickly pull myself out and gasp. In that moment, I know my life is over. There's no escaping this place. I wonder why it's in an academy, but this is the under kingdom. Why not?

Tears of frustration run down my cheeks as I stumble through the water. I think I turn back, but feel the water getting deeper.

An eerie song slowly reaches my ears. Like smoke from a fire, it floats over until I'm enveloped.

The bog's Agog. Agog. Agog.

Your flesh a feast. A feast. A feast.

Suckle on your bones. Your bones. Your bones.

A tasty treat. A treat. A treat.

The chanting is all around, as though the swamp itself is serenading me. A whole choir singing what sounds like a nursery rhyme, though the words are terrifying. Inside I'm screaming. With all my might, I try to stop, to turn around, but my body continues to move deeper until it's up to my chest in the murky water.

The bog's Agog. Agog. Agog.

Must snack on your toes. Your toes. Your toes.

Extract the meat. The meat. The meat.

Delicious and sweet. And sweet. And sweet.

The water is up to my neck and smells like rotting fish. It laps against my chin and some gets in my mouth. I press my lips together, turning them in, wishing I could cry, but I don't have control over my body.

"Aurora!"

My name comes from far away and I'm not sure who it is. "I'm here." I say the words calmly and wonder if this is what lobsters feel like as they're boiled alive. Terrified, but unable to save themselves. Makes me want to stop eating meat. At that, I laugh. The sound hits my ears and I'm surprised.

“I’m coming. Hang on.” In the distance, I see a shadow. It sails on the air, getting closer and closer and I don’t know whether it’s nefarious or benevolent. Not that it matters, because I’m about to die.

The water covers my mouth and I hold my breath.

It passes my nose. My eyes.

I’m underwater, but I keep my eyes open, thinking it is better to see death when it comes. My murderer is close. Waiting for just the right moment.

A face appears in the distance. Pointy ears. Red eyes with long lashes. It seems young and old at once. Chilling and brutal.

Death is coming and it looks like the scariest mermaid creature ever imagined. It reaches out, it’s long, white claws so close…

In that same moment, two strong hands yank me from my watery grave. As my feet break the surface of the water, it grabs hold. I look down in time to see the creature. It isn’t a mermaid but is half elvish and half alligator, though the skin is pasty white and silver. The weird feeling it had over me evaporates and I kick at it, pulling my legs away. It crashes down into the water and vanishes within the muddy depths.

“Hold on, Aurora.”

“Pax?” I say, knowing it’s him by the sound of his voice.

“That’s right. It’s me.” His arms turn me to face him while we’re still flying.

Though whatever the thing did to poison me still weighs on my limbs, I force myself to see him. I need to make sure. “It is you.” Relief echoes through my body as I try to wrap my legs around his hips, but I don’t have the strength and sigh, dangling like helpless a rag doll. All I can do is stare at his face. Watch the furious determination in the line of his lips and the angle of his brow. His dark hair whips around his head.

After a few more minutes, he comes to a stop and lands so our

bodies are flush. He crushes me against his chest, holding me tightly. “I thought I lost you.” His voice is heavy with emotions.

I bury my head in his neck and cry, unable to be strong a second longer.

“Shhhh, it’s okay. I’m going to get you out of here.”

There’s a strange sound behind me before Paxton picks me up. I wrap my arms around his neck, hoping that’ll stop my shaking, but it doesn’t.

Moments later we are out of that horrible place and inside a bedroom.

It’s masculine with a heady, spicy scent. “Is this yours?” I ask quietly.

“Yes.” he says, smiling seriously as he sets me down.

OceanofPDF.com

"WHAT WAS THAT PLACE?" I ask through chattering teeth, crossing my arms.

He leads me into the bathroom. It's similar to mine, only much more masculine. "That's the Olclag," he says as he turns on the shower. "Can you take care of yourself or do you need help?"

I'm still shaken, but there's no way he's helping me. "I can do it," I say, gritting my teeth to make them stop.

He snorts. "I figured. Let me get you some clothes." He leaves and I hear drawers open before he's back with a pair of shorts and a white shirt. "Here." He goes to hand them over, then looks at me and shudders. "Better yet, I'll just put them here and you can touch them once you're cleaned up."

"Thanks," I respond, giving him a once over. He's been holding me and has some of the Olclag on him too. "What does Olclag mean?" I slide off my shoes, feeling bad when some of the muddiness gets on his pristine white floor.

"Sorry," I say. "Do you have something you don't mind throwing away that I can use to clean up when I'm done in here?"

He looks up at the ceiling, debating. "Hang on."

The room is starting to get steamy and I'm anxious to get the gunk off. When he comes back, he's holding a ratty looking cloth. "Use this," he says, tossing it on the floor.

"Great. Thank you."

He nods and goes to close the door but pauses. "Olclag is fairy for wicked."

Before I can respond, the door shuts. I strip and throw the disgusting clothing into his waste bin. There's no way I'm ever wearing it again. As I shower, I think about what Pax said. Of course

fairies have their own language, but I hadn't noticed anyone using it. When fairies speak to me, they sound like they're speaking English and apparently when I speak to them, it must sound like fairy because they understand me. I'll ask Pax about it when I'm finished.

I climb out of the shower, feeling wholly better. After dressing, I use the cloth to clean up any remnants of the Olclag before tossing it into the trash as well. Wiping the steam off the mirror, I study my reflection. I look paler than usual and long for the sun. With a sigh, I run my fingers through my long hair and twist it into a knot on top of my head before opening the door.

Pax is standing there in solid black, his shadow wings gone. It looks like he cleaned up some other way. Probably magic, I guess.

"Hey," I say, crossing my arms. He saved my life and I'm beyond grateful, but I don't want to give Lucretia an excuse to return my curse.

"You seem better." He gives me a once over and my face heats.

"I am." It's not a total lie. "So why does a place like the Olclag exist?"

He snorts. "We're in the under kingdom, Aurora. Most of us learn quickly where is safe and where isn't." He clenches his jaws in frustration. "Why did you go in there?"

"I asked for help to find the rose garden because I was supposed to meet Master Narcissus for my Intro to Flying lesson, and that's where she led me." It's my turn to be frustrated. "I only went in there because she told me that's where it was, but, apparently, she wanted to kill me." I shake my head as I speak, unable to get a grasp on that truth. She sent me in there to die. I don't doubt that for a second. In the human realm, I dealt with plenty of bullies, including Kelly. Here it's different. Worse. A place like the Olclag is right inside the school.

"Who was it? Tell me her name and I'll be sure to punish her." Fury changes his features and for a moment he looks older than high school age.

I could tell him her name, but I don't want him to get in trouble either. "It doesn't matter." I cross over to his dresser. On top is a book. It smells old. As I lift it and turn it over, Pax is suddenly there, his body pressing against mine. At his nearness, my body heats. The scent of spice lures me in and I want nothing more than to kiss him.

"You don't want to touch this," he says, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"Okay." I turn and look into his eyes. He's watching me. A burst of cinnamon fills the air, and I know he wants to kiss me too. He said he was my true love. In that moment, I don't doubt it. Whether it's because he saved me from certain death or something else, I don't care. "Pax," I whisper, placing my hands on his shoulders.

Confusion fills his eyes before he clears his throat. "Aurora." He puts me at arm's length and I immediately miss his nearness.

"How did you know where to find me?" I ask, watching the different emotions change his features.

"You were supposed to meet me for class. When you didn't show, I asked Samantha where you might be. She said she saw a student walking you across the academy in the direction of the Olclag. When I couldn't find you nearby, I knew I needed to check in there." He blows out a breath in frustration and rubs the back of his neck. "The student who led you there is in serious trouble. What was her name?"

I have no loyalty to the girl, but for some reason I don't tell him. I protect her. "I don't remember."

"Fine," he growls.

Something else he said hits me. "Wait, you're in my flying class too?"

"Yes, Aurora. I'm Master Narcissus."

"Wait, you're the teacher?" I'm confused. Why would Lucretia tell me to stay away from Paxton and then have me take a class from him? Unless—

“What? You don’t think I can show you how to use your wings?”

“It’s not that.” I swallow. “I’m just surprised. I mean, I thought we were the same age.”

“Not quite,” he admits, a wry smile splayed on his lips.

For some reason, the fact that he’s my teacher makes him even hotter. “But you think we’re still meant to be together?”

He glances down at his black shoes. “Look, Aurora.” The tone of voice I heard when he spoke to Lucretia is back. “I know what I know. And I want you.” As he speaks, he’s suddenly in my bubble, his arms on my waist. His hunger for me is so strong I can feel it. “Do you care that I’m older?”

“No,” I say, my eyes on his lips. “It doesn’t matter at all.”

“Good.” His mouth is so close to mine.

“Pax,” I whisper, my lips brushing his. No one will know…

“Master Narcissus, did you find her?” someone shouts from the other side of the door as she knocks loudly.

I jerk away from him nervously.

“Stay quiet.” He puts a finger to his mouth and goes to the door. Clears his throat. “Not yet.” He cracks his door open. “I’m sure she’ll turn up,” he adds. “Thank you, Samantha. Have a good night.”

“Mind if I come in?” Sam asks, her voice sultry. “I want to talk to you about that new move you showed us yesterday in class. The one where we dip—”

“Not tonight.” He closes the door.

I watch him, seeing him like it’s the first time. Using his wings, he flies over to me and scoops me into his arms.

I gasp, clinging to him breathlessly.

“Let’s get out of here.” He pulls his wand from his back pocket. Turns it in a circle. Then he steps into the swirling colors.

Moments later, we’re in a garden. He releases me and I grab my head. “Where are we?”

“The rose garden.” He tucks his wand into his back pocket and flies backward, extending his hands. “This is where we were supposed to meet. If anyone asks, you got lost but finally found your way here,” he says.

“What about the girl who led me to the Olclag? She can tell a different story.” I purse my lips into a straight line at the memory of what I went through.

He taps the side of his nose and points. “Remember her name yet?”

“No.”

“Fine.” He shakes his head. “She tried to have you killed. I don’t think she’ll be blabbing because despite the fact that we’re in the under kingdom, killing a fellow student is against the rules.”

“I guess you’re right,” I say, thinking about flying. My wings pop out. Without a second thought I’m in the air.

“Impressive,” Pax says, watching me. “Flying is second nature to you, I see.”

“Is it?” At the thought, I feel myself falter and touch down again.

“Come on, let me show you around the Under Kingdom.” He whips his head in the direction behind him.

“Sure, but first, let me get my bearings.” I search behind him and the sky, checking out the scenery. We are outside, but everything is different. Darker. The sky is not quite black, but a dark gray. There are stars twinkling above, but they aren’t the same color as the stars in the human realm. Instead they are red, like rubies with light behind them, causing them to sparkle and shine. There isn’t a sun or moon, at least not that I can see. “Are we really beneath the fairy realm? Like underground?”

“Basically,” he says, looking up.

“Are we in, like, a cave?” I’m confused, which is obvious.

“No. The under kingdom is a shadow image of the upper kingdom. Everything you see down here has an exact equivalent above.” He

spins around and I do the same. Behind me is a tall building, black in color and enormous. All around us are rose bushes. They are also black, but with hints of their original color. I bend to smell one of them. They're sweet, almost overly so. Yet they are still beautiful in a creepy way. "It's still beautiful. Come on. I want to show you."

"But what if someone sees us?" My heart flutters into my throat. Tomorrow is my eighteenth birthday. According to the curse, that is the day I will die. Even though I'm away from my friends and my aunties, I'm grateful that won't happen. Unless someone sends me into another Olclag.

"I'm your teacher. It'll be fine." He waves me up.

"Right." I flutter my wings and am flying beside him instantly.

Pax grins. "Seriously, you're a natural."

OceanofPDF.com

WE SPEND the next hour exploring the under kingdom. Paxton is right. Though it consists fully of darkness and shade, the landscape is still beautiful in a peculiar, almost eerie sort of way. Parts of it even feel familiar.

The scenery leading away from the building is filled with roses. Farther on is a stream and beyond that is the forest. Colorful fairies in all different sizes stand out against the dreary backdrop.

At the town, Pax waves to a group of people.

They seem happy to see him. Until they notice me, and their faces turn hostile. Pax doesn't notice or doesn't care.

"Want to get something to eat?"

We're flying through a market, and the air is filled with amazing scents. All of them fresh. It's a wonder they can grow produce down here, but the lack of sunlight doesn't seem to hinder the production. "Sure."

He lands in front of a fruit and vegetable cart.

A sweet elderly fairy is restocking some fruit that looks like a cross between a mango and a strawberry. When she sees Paxton, she smiles. It's bright and jovial. "Hello, Paxy. It's been a while. I thought the queen finally killed you." It's obvious she's teasing. Sadly, she has no idea how close to the truth she is.

"Paxy," I whisper.

He makes a noise that says to never call him that before landing and going to the woman. She puts out her hand and he takes it, kissing the back sweetly. "It's good to see you again, Neneth."

"And you, my boy. Where have you—"

When I land, she stops talking and studies me. "The princess of the upper kingdom, I presume." She glares at me.

“Hi.” I wave nervously.

She turns her scowl to Paxton. “Why did you bring her here?” Her kindness is gone, replaced by a wrath I don’t understand. It’s the same with the students at school. I’m beginning to understand that everyone knows who I am, and no one likes me. Quite the opposite. They despise me.

“Neneth, she is a guest of the queen’s and a friend of mine.” He chides her gently, pressing her hand to his cheek. “Be kind. You have the best stangos in the marketplace. I want Aurora to try one.”

At his compliment, Neneth softens. “Very well.” She selects a round fruit, shines it with her apron, and hands it to me. “Here you go, dear.”

I take it, admiring her wings of various shades of orange. “Thank you,” I say bringing it to my nose. The scent is sweet, like pineapple and strawberry combined. Carefully, I take a bite. It’s as good as it smells. Better even. The flavors dance on my tongue. “So good.” I smile and swallow.

She bows lightly and I can tell it’s taking a good deal of effort to keep from snapping at me. “Here you go, Paxy.”

He takes a huge bite and melts. “Excellent.”

She titters behind her apron. “You’re just saying that.”

“You know I’m not,” he says as another woman, this one much younger, comes over. His face pales at the sight of her. “Verbena.” He says her name like someone is strangling him. “I thought you returned to the upper kingdom.”

She makes a face, then gives him a look from under her lashes. “I came back.”

The woman is exquisite. She and Paxton could be siblings. Her hair is dark like his and her eyes are nearly the same color, though hers have a bit of lavender. Her wings are dark as well, though there’s a hint of violet within the veins. She’s wearing a purple skirt and a white shirt with a white apron over it. Her hair hangs long and full, in

twin curly tales with a violet streak in each. Her red lips are deep as blood.

I glance at Paxton, wondering what will happen next. It's obvious he has feelings for this woman. And then I remember the conversation where he mentioned he was in love with a woman who loved him back. That woman is Verbena. Without a doubt.

"Hi, I'm Aurora," I say, surprised by the twinge of jealousy striking against my heart.

"Of course you are." She smiles and it's sweet like the fruit I'd just sampled. Almost overly so. She's trying too hard, I think. Did he tell her I was his true love? Awkward.

"Verbena and I go way back," Paxton says, his eyes still on the striking fairy.

"It's true. We do." She starts to reorganize the fruit but glances up at him every once in a while. Such a simple act, but on her it looks positively sensual. "Remember that time we got caught out in the rain and had to take shelter inside a calum tree?" Even her voice is sexy. "That was one of the best nights of my life." She bats her thick, dark lashes as she studies him coyly.

Paxton chuckles and shoves his hands in his pockets. Glances at me and clears his throat. "It was a good night," he says, and I know it was much more than good. He clears his throat again and takes my arm. "We should get back." With effort, he pulls his eyes from Verbena and looks to Neneth. "Thank you for sharing your fruit with us. It was great to see you both again." He takes something from his pocket and presses it into Neneth's hand.

She gasps when she sees it. "That is too much, my boy. Way too much."

The elderly fairy tries to return it, but he shakes his head, holding up a hand. "Keep it." He gives me a sideways glance before focusing once more on Verbena. I think he's going to say something more to her, but he just nods his head.

“I’m staying at the Tortid, if you need some company later on,” she says as he turns us away.

He waves before lifting off the ground.

As I give over to the wind under my wings, I look back the way we came and am shocked when I see the Academy. It looks exactly like Hellgate High. “Is the fairy realm part of the human realm?” I ask the question softly, afraid of the answer.

“Not necessarily. More like the human realm is a glove that sits over the fairy realm. It’s why humans have seen fairies for thousands of years. Sometimes it’s too easy to cross between realms.” He drops low and picks a flower while continuing to fly. Then he hands it back to me, his face soft, though I see a hint of sadness.

I appreciate his answer but am not satisfied. “And that’s why the Fairy Academy looks like my high school?”

“Correct.” He shrugs, waiting for me to catch up with him.

“That isn’t an answer,” I say, wanting more. “But thank you for the flower.” It looks like a carnation, its coloring gray with golden sparkles along the edges.

He doesn’t elaborate further and I’m frustrated.

“Tomorrow is your birthday,” he says, changing the subject.

I’m surprised he knows, but I shouldn’t be. It’s important to know the day you’re meant to kill someone, I think. A shiver hits my body, causing me to tumble mid-flight. “Yep,” I say when I recover. “The big one-eight.”

“I thought you could skip school and I could take you to the upper kingdom.” He glances at me and smiles.

My heart literally stops. “We can do that?”

“Why not?” But I sense we would be breaking the rules.

I think about Lucretia and the curse, but only briefly. “We can see my parents?” Seeing them is the only reason I want to go.

His eyes become twin slits as he studies me a moment. “If that is

your desire."

An excited jolt shoots through my veins and I twirl in midair. "I'd like that. A lot."

He chuckles. "Then it's settled."

I want to hug him, but we're close to the school now and fairies are out and about once again. He lands at the edge of the rose garden.

With little effort, I land beside him.

"You're a natural," he says. "Not that I ever doubted you." His lips curl into a grin, but I sense his mind is elsewhere.

"Pax." I touch his arm gently.

He faces me. "What is it?"

"If you still love Verbena, then you should be with her." I say the words, but my heart clenches. If I'm honest, I don't mean it. I want him. But I don't love him. My feelings for Pax are purely physical at this point. And I can't be selfish. At least one of us should get to be happy.

He shakes his head once. "I'm sorry you witnessed our interaction. What we had was special, but it wasn't real."

I tilt my head, wondering why he's lying. "It felt pretty real to me. The tension between you two was intense."

"Can we not talk about her? She's part of my past." He strides to the entrance of the school and pulls open the door.

"Whatever you say." I go in after him, but I know I'll never be able to fully let myself go with Pax until he opens up to me and is honest.

At the end of the short hallway, he pauses. "Pay attention. This is where we'll meet after breakfast."

He starts forward, but I stop him. "Wait," I say.

He crosses his arms, shutting down. "I don't want to talk about Verbena."

"That's too bad but it isn't what I wanted to ask." I lay my other hand on his arm and search his face.

“Lucretia has no control over me,” he adds. It’s possible the words are more for himself than me.

“What’s on the other side of the school?” I watch him, waiting to see him calm down since I changed the subject. But he doesn’t relax. If anything, he becomes more closed off.

“Nothing exciting,” he says and shrugs.

The thought hits my brain and comes out of my mouth before I can censor it. “Is that where the military trains?” Instantly, I know I’m right.

He can’t hide the truth from his face fast enough. “Who told you about that?”

It’s my turn to shrug.

“Like I said, it’s nothing exciting. Once a student graduates, there are two options. One of them is to join the queen’s army.” His expression becomes serious as he turns left and hurries down the hall. He’s Master Narcissus and no longer Paxton as we enter the common area. He scolds two students fighting and catches a ball one of the students throws his way, then pitches it back before we head down another hallway and turn, then turn again. And again. And again.

I’m completely lost. “I’ll never remember this,” I admit. It doesn’t help that everything looks the same. There are no telltale markings or signs to help with directions. Makes me wonder how everyone else finds their way. Am I just too dumb to figure it out?

We arrive at my door. Not that I can tell. It could be anyone’s for all I know.

“Yeah, the school is a bit repetitive.” Pax glances both ways down the hall, checking to see that we’re alone.

“That’s an understatement.”

“I know,” he says, brushing some hair out of my eyes. “Let me show you how the students figure out where they’re going.”

Relief washes through me. I knew there had to be something.

“Kay.”

“Close your eyes.”

His fingers work their way over my eyes, so I have to close them. My skin tingles at his touch and I clench my fists to keep from shuddering.

“Can you sense your magic?” he asks, his breath soft against my skin.

“Yes. It’s like it’s in a box of unopened happiness, dying to get out.” The description sounds a little off, but it’s the best I can do.

“Good. Now concentrate your magic and open your eyes.”

When I do, I’m immediately breathless as my gaze darts between his black hair with the streak in it and his magnificent lips… “Okay.”

He leans in like he’s going to kiss me, and opens his mouth. “Take out your wand.”

I shake my head and he lifts a brow in question. “It’s still in your room with my bag.”

The magical feeling between us is broken.

“Right.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Let’s try it anyway. The wand is just a way to focus your magic. I’ve seen—” he chuckles, “—and felt the force of your magic without a wand. You can do this.”

“I’ll try.” I purse my lips, hoping he’s right.

“Spells are based on the type of magic you possess. It’s like each group has their own language.” He pauses.

I take the opportunity to interrupt. “You know what kinds of magic I have?”

“I have a feeling,” he begins slowly, “you have all of them.”

“You think?” I haven’t learned enough to know whether he’s right or not. “Earlier today I tried to copy a spell and the girl told me it didn’t work because I don’t have her magic.”

“Makes perfect sense. If you have all fairy magics combined, then your spells and the words needed to access them will be different.” He

studies me a moment.

“I don’t like that.”

“Well,” he shrugs. “Say these words.” He clears his throat. “*Faeneth arenti webet entriti* as you hold your door handle.”

I glance down and grab hold. Then, with Pax’s help, I repeat the words. As I speak them, the magic in my chest erupts and spills over, filling my veins. Like cool water, it emboldens and vitalizes. I close my eyes and witness the colors of my magic—the same colors as my wings—swirl through and drift out of my fingers.

When it touches the door, my magic sparks, then shoots off down the hall. I open my eyes and watch it zing to the end of the hall and disappear. “It’s like magical breadcrumbs,” I whisper.

Pax nods. “That’s a great way to put it.” He claps softly. “Congratulations. I knew you had it in you.”

“Thanks,” I say, though I can still feel the magic working. My guess is it’s taking me to each of my classes as well as the rose garden. Gratitude fills my soul and I breathe deeply through my nose. This is me. I have magic, and the fairy realm is the right place for me. When it’s done, there’s another spark and then my magic quiets, though it’s still buzzing. I smile, feeling slightly nervous, wishing he would kiss me. “I did it,” I say, bouncing on the tips of my toes. For a moment, I lose my balance, but before I fall into Pax, my wings correct me and I’m fine.

He takes my hand, shaking it. “It was a pleasure working with you today, princess.”

“I appreciate your help,” I say as a student walks by. She looks at the two of us and snickers. It’s doubtful she bought our teacher and student act. “You have two magics, right?”

He nods, but looks away.

“Then how do you know the spells for mine?” Seems a perfectly good question.

“It’s my job to know,” he says evasively and sighs. “Night, Aurora.”

“Night.” I watch until he turns the corner at the end of my hall. It’s then I realize I can see shadows of other magics. The memory of it, at least. Interesting. I head inside my room. After closing the door, I lean against it and sigh.

OceanofPDF.com

I CAN'T SLEEP. I try for hours. As I lie in bed, the drip-dripping sound of the faucet keeps me up. The noise keeps me a little distracted from my anxieties. When the clock strikes midnight, I hold my breath, not sure what to expect.

The dream of Pax killing me comes to mind. I push that aside and think about kissing him. That warms my body and I close my eyes, trying to float into oblivions sleep, but a soft knock on the door startles me. I check the time. It's only ten minutes after twelve.

I pull the covers over my head, hoping they will go away.

The knocking sounds again, a little louder.

My heart beats inside my ears, making it difficult to think let alone breathe.

"Rory."

"Troy?" I whisper back, kicking the covers off my legs and going to the door. "What do you want?"

"It's urgent. I need you to come with me."

I crack the door open a smidge. He's wearing clothing similar to Paxton's. All black. His wings are out, and his eyes have shifted slightly to that of his dragon form. "Are you lost?" I ask, trying to be sarcastic, but it comes out sounding breathy and silly.

He gives me a confused look. "No. It's…" He pauses and blows out his breath, sending a puff of smoke with it. "I promised your aunties I would stay with you on your birthday. That's today, right?" He watches me, a little worried. "Did I get the date wrong?"

"Today's the day," I say simply, dropping my hands to my sides. I should be thrilled. I'm officially an adult. I can vote and do other adulting things. My friends were excited when they turned eighteen. Sadly, I'm no longer like them. "Yay," I say with little feeling.

“Yay is right,” he replies, and means it. “Get dressed. There’s something I want to show you.” He eyes my plain shorts and tank top.

“Fine. Come in.” I open the door even further. “I can’t sleep anyway.”

“I get it. Not sure whether it’s because we’re underground or all the flying fairies, but my skin is constantly crawling.” He closes the door and scopes out my room.

“Dragon issues?” I open my chest of drawers and pull out a pair of pants. They’re slick and I try not to think about the fact that they’re probably made of fairy demon skin or ash or both.

“Exactly.” He snorts and his skin changes to golden-bronze scales briefly before it switches back.

“How is it Lucretia let you in? She must know you’re a dragon.” For a second I stare at him in awe. He’s a dragon—at least partially so. That’s the coolest thing ever.

“Like I said before, dragon magic is very powerful.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, I’ve heard that once or twice.” I retrieve a black tee shirt and shut the drawer. I’ll never tell him I think he’s cool. That would be just too embarrassing. “Pax is taking me to the upper kingdom later today. It’s his birthday present to me.” I say, disappearing into my bathroom. With the door closed, I get out of my pajamas.

“Really?” That’s all Troy says, but I hear a whole novel of emotions in his voice.

Why do I get the feeling Troy doesn’t want me to go up there? After putting on my clothes and shoving my hair into a high ponytail, I come out of the bathroom and put on black shoes and socks. “You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

“It’s complicated,” he says, turning away. “Plus…” He glances at me over his shoulder. “I didn’t think anyone could get to the upper kingdom from here. Not even Lucretia.” He shrugs, his features softening. “But enough of that. Happy birthday, Rory,” he says,

switching gears as he holds out his arms for a hug.

“Thanks,” I say, stepping into his warmth, grateful for his friendship. It’s weird how easy he is to get along with and be around, even when he’s obnoxious. “Think we can sneak out of here?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah. I snuck in, didn’t I?” He puts his hands on his hips while I grab a jacket.

It isn’t really cold down here, but I want the extra comfort. “Alright, then lead the way, dragon fairy.”

He glares at the nickname.

“What?” I whisper as we tiptoe down the hall.

He puts his fingers to his lips and locks them as voices filter toward us.

I nod, pressing against the wall, trying to ignore the way it nestles against me, and watch as a two male fairies wearing dark gray uniforms pass, their measured steps in sync. They’re speaking quietly, but I catch some of it.

“Last I heard, she somehow escaped the Olclag. That place is brutal. My best friend’s cousin died in there.”

Are they talking about me?

“Probably didn’t escape but was rescued. You know Master Narcissus has a thing for her.”

My cheeks warm as they continue on, saying words I can’t understand. Troy tilts his head and I wonder if he can still hear them. But I don’t ask as he waves me forward. I creep behind him until he turns in the direction of the guards. We stick to the shadows, keeping a good distance between us and them. I can still hear their quiet whispers, though I can’t understand what they’re saying.

Finally, they exit the Academy, the door clicking shut behind them.

“Why are we following them?” I ask, my voice a barely audible hiss.

“Because you need to see what’s happening in the under kingdom. It isn’t a good place. There’s an uprising coming, and you need to ask yourself if you are with the under kingdom or against them?” He jogs toward the door, opening it without a sound and peeking out.

I stand in place, stunned by his words. Until this very moment, I would’ve vehemently concluded I was against the under kingdom. Why wouldn’t I be? The fairies are horrible. One of them tried to kill me. The place is horrible, too. Plus, no one even likes me. The only good thing about the academy is Paxton. And he’s a teacher.

“Come on,” Troy says, waving at me before disappearing beyond the door. I quickly run forward and slip through, allowing the door to snap shut behind me. Troy is standing in front of me, so I can’t see past him, but someone is speaking into what sounds like a microphone. The voice echoes through the air, crackling with magic.

“What’s going on?” I move around him so I can see.

At first, it’s hard to comprehend what I’m looking at. I asked Paxton earlier today if this side of the Academy was where the military trains, and I was right. But it’s more than that. There are rows and rows of fairies. All of them dressed in varying shades of gray uniforms. Their gazes are on Lucretia as she speaks from atop a black stage like she is everything.

“Paxton,” I whisper, when I see him sitting in a chair to the left of Lucretia. He’s there as well as others, including some teachers I recognize. But that’s not even the worst of it. In front of Lucretia, on the ground, are three fairies. They are bound and gagged, but wriggle about, trying to escape. I turn to Troy, who’s looking at me.

“I didn’t know about this. I swear.” His eyes are fearful, but angry too.

“Who are they?” I ask, regarding them more closely.

Lucretia speaks again. “These three rebels have been against me from the beginning. Captured by the great Master Narcissus, these are three of the Royal Guard.”

In unison, the crowd stomps a foot and shouts, “Death!”

“It was his cunning that brought them to us.” She looks back at Paxton. “His courageous bravery.”

I follow her gaze. Paxton’s face is a mask of empty emotion. That she’s speaking to him shatters my heart.

“Rory,” Troy says, but I don’t look away. “We should go. I can get my dad and he can bring Snow White. She’s queen over all the realms. She can put an end to this.” He touches my shoulder, but I shrug him off.

“I’m not going anywhere.” There is something familiar about the captives. Each is wearing a dress with an apron. A blue one. A green one. And a purple one. “Aunties,” I whisper as a ferocious anger fills my chest and snakes out to my limbs. It hits a barrier. Something like a protective coating covers my body. My anger bangs against it over and over, fighting to escape.

Lucretia steps forward and a long blade appears in her hand among a small red cloud of magic. “Death is too easy a punishment.” Her feet kick against Vera and she whispers some words. When she’s done, she speaks louder. “May your deaths be torturous and your pain endless.”

The group of army fairies repeat the words back as one.

I want to cry out and beg her to stop, but the furious power of my magic has other plans. Not only can I feel it, but I can see it now too. Burning and shifting colors. Changing from magenta, bubblegum and amethyst to pure, liquid darkness. With the change comes an influence I can’t describe nor control. I become unbeatable, and the influence shatters the protection around me, breaking free and consuming me until I become the magic.

“Let’s go back,” Troy says, pulling on my arm. “Please.”

I hear the desperation in his voice, but it just angers me further. “Over my dead body,” I respond, shoving at him until he steps back.

It’s like I’m moving in a dream. Each step is purposeful, bringing

me closer to my destiny, though I don't know why or how. When the group of fairies nearest Lucretia sees me, they rush forward. I raise my hand and with a thought, I send the entire group crashing into the guards behind them. They fall like dominoes.

A dangerous glee fills my chest.

A part of myself wants to stop and isn't sure about this course of action, but the majority doesn't listen or care.

The teachers stand at the sight of me. Fear distorts their faces. They have their wands at the ready. There's no doubt they have the magic within them to end me. All it would take is one word from Lucretia. But she shakes her head, motioning them to hold back. "Do nothing," she says. "No matter what. That is an order."

Their wands lower. Some even return to their seats though they're clearly uncomfortable with the decision.

Lucretia continues, "This is between Aurora and me." She smiles, but all I see is evil.

"You will not harm them," I say. My voice doesn't sound like my own.

"Aurora, no," Paxton says, taking a step toward me. "This is what she wants. You're playing right into her plan. This is the curse." He takes another step forward.

"Liar!" With the flick of my finger, I send him flying back. He smacks into the chair, knocking it over as he tumbles out of sight.

OceanofPDF.com

FROM BEHIND ME, I hear Troy beg me not to do anything I'll regret, but he has the good sense to stay back. I ignore him and focus on my aunties. They look afraid, but not of Lucretia. "You fear me," I say, knowing it's true. "I won't hurt you." My voice sounds so strange, not like my own.

"It doesn't matter what Lucretia does to us, dear," Macey says. "It's you we're worried about."

"She's right," Vera adds. "That's why we put the spell on you. We wanted to protect you from yourself."

"Please, Rory, you need to calm down. It's going to be okay."

I'm only a few feet from my aunties and Lucretia. She still has the wicked knife aimed at Vera's chest and my aunties' words mean nothing. "No. Not until Lucretia is destroyed." My magic thrashes against my bones and sinews, encouraging me onward.

"That's it, Aurora," Lucretia says, and I turn my full attention to her. "You want to annihilate me, don't you?" She nods, licking her lips. Almost like she's anticipating the moment and wants it.

That little part of my brain sounds an alarm, but my magic is too powerful and beyond control.

"Take my life, Aurora." Lucretia offers me the knife.

More warning bells are going off deep in my mind, but my magic moans hungrily for Lucretia's demise, and I take the blade from her. Wrapping both hands around the hilt, it sighs in my grip and changes to fit more easily against my fingers. "You will never hurt anyone I love, ever again." As I speak the words, I lift the blade over my head.

Lucretia seems to shrink in front of me. At the sight, my magic roars louder, demanding I finish her. "This is for my mom and dad," I say. "This is for Paxton, and my aunties, and for me." All the

heartache I've held inside over the years. Pain at wondering why my parents abandoned me. Fear that I'll end up alone. That I'm not good enough or worth it. All of that combines with my magic, turning it into something new, something sinister.

"Don't," I hear Paxton plead. When did he return?

But my path is set. Lucretia will be destroyed. And I'll be the one to do it. At the thought, the blade lowers swiftly and sinks into Lucretia's chest. I feel her flesh and bone part as the blade cuts through to her heart.

Her eyes widen and she lets out a breath before falling to her knees and to the ground, yanking the knife from my hands. She clasps her fingers around the hilt of the blade as her eyes roll back in her head. It's like I'm watching from a distance.

I look at my hands. They are covered in Lucretia's blood, but that isn't what shakes me from my raging fury. It's the shadowy magic swirling hungrily around them. Around me.

As the realization of what I've done fills me, I start to tremble.

In the distance, I hear a strange sound and look over at the army of fairies.

They are on their knees, their heads touching the ground. They lift their heads and put one fisted arm in the air. "All hail Queen Aurora."

They're talking about me, I think, confused.

I glance over at Troy. Devastation pinches his face. Disappointment too. I turn to see Paxton. He's in shock, as are the rest of the teachers.

My aunties are quiet. I'm almost afraid to look at them.

When I finally do, I see they're wrecked. Tears leak from Fae's eyes. Even Vera looks ready to cry.

But I don't understand. I saved them. I saved us all.

Lucretia is dead. Even as I think the words, a cloud of red magic swirls around her body and whips her away like a miniature tornado, leaving only the blade behind.

“I won,” I say, surprised it’s over. Happy birthday to me. “I won,” I say again, louder. I want to jump for joy, but everyone else seems so gloomy. I pick up the blade.

“You didn’t win, dear,” Macey whispers. Her lips quiver.

I use the bloodied knife to release my aunties from their restraints before holding out a hand to help them stand. As soon as they’re up, they move away from me, like I’m the monster.

Their dread hurts and I’m unsure what to do. “I won,” I repeat for the third time, thinking the words should mean more, but they sound hollow.

“It’s okay, Rory. You’re okay,” Fae says, and carefully wraps an arm around my waist.

“We’ll figure this out,” Vera adds.

For the briefest moment, I allow myself to be coddled, grateful for them. But before I give in fully, my intense magic is back. “I’m not going anywhere,” I say, pushing away from them. “I belong in the fairy realm and I’m going to stay and attend the Fairy Academy.” As I speak, my magic rolls off me and toward my aunties like a thundercloud.

They clutch at one another as I picture in my mind the desire to send them home. At once they are gone, but I know they’re safe. I’ve only sent them back to the human realm. Away from me.

“They don’t understand,” I whisper. How could they? They aren’t my blood. Besides, now I can disband the army and see my parents. I smile as I hold the blade out in front of me. I have the power to do whatever I want.

OceanofPDF.com

STOLEN MAGIC

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE

If ever I flutter into the night sky,

I shall sail up through the clouds by and by.

A bird without feathers, but wings just the same.

I will reach for the moon and call her by name.

Higher. Higher. Passing through the inky abyss.

Embracing the heavens, I shall stroke them a kiss.

The poem from my aunties secret book of spells repeats itself in my mind. Whenever I allow myself a moment of quiet, the words materialize. Sweet and slightly silly, I sink into the picture the poem creates and focus on my wings in the bathroom mirror.

I wipe away the steam and purse my lips as my wings flutter like those of a butterfly's. I am a bird without feathers. My wings not paper-thin but strong, nearly indestructible. Could my wings fly me high enough to embrace the heavens in the night sky? Possibly. I think to add something to the poem about passing the millions of twinkling stars in all of their vast glory. The idea of soaring like that sounds beautiful and yet utterly terrifying. But a lot has changed recently, especially me. I am no longer afraid of flying. At least not like a few months ago.

"Queen Aurora." Maleficent shouts from outside in the hallway as she pounds on the door. I know Sam is nearby. They are basically the same wicked fairy. Neither is too far from the other.

"I'll be out in a moment," I holler back and frown at my reflection. Because the trivial poem has no place in my thoughts. Sam and Maleficent might be wicked, but neither compare with what I've become.

OceanofPDF.com

"HANG HER BY HER FEET." I bark the words at Sam from my magically-made throne in the oversized common room of the Fairy Academy. My extravagant seat is the color of a new bruise and sparkles with dark magic, each pointy spire along the back sharp as the tip of a needle. I feel the chair quiver and hum against my body. Created from my dark magic, it supports me in a way nothing else ever has.

"Of course, queen Aurora." Sam winks and uses her wand to lift Strata off the ground, turning her upside down.

I've told Sam more than once to call me Rory, but down here in the under kingdom, Aurora does seem more fitting even from my closest friend.

All around me students jeer and laugh. I join in as Maleficent hands Sam a rope. It sparks and flashes the whole time Sam uses a fairy spell to thread the bond through the center chandelier. Several of the chandelier's lights wink out as the little Brownies fluttering in their positions to keep the crystals sparkling are knocked away and fall to the ground, dazed. Sometimes I forget the Brownies are the reason the Fairy Academy isn't consumed in utter darkness. I should treat them better, but it's hard. Especially when I'm distracted by my game. The one where I get to torture Strata.

I study the fairy student. Her eyes are wide and filled with unshed tears while her navy, aquamarine, and sky blue wings beat spastically behind her. She's frightened but doesn't speak. After four months of suffering through my bullying, she knows better.

Payback baby!

She should've considered the consequences before lying and leading me into the Olclag like I deserved to die. At the memory, my dark magic ripples around me as my fury rises, though my wings stay

tucked away. I've grown more accustomed to them over the months, but I still feel more comfortable without them.

Once Strata is dangling a couple feet off the ground, I snap my fingers and a baseball bat materializes in my hand. Since my birthday, my dark magic has grown even more powerful. I barely have to think about what I want, before it happens, particularly if my intentions are sinister as they are in this moment. I want to hurt Strata. Make her feel fear and suffer the way I did.

Sure, I could kill her, but where's the fun in that. "Get her swinging," I shout, leaving my throne and move through the crowd toward the center of the room where my classmate is suspended. Like a child preparing to hit a pinata, I wind the bat.

There's a chime to indicate lessons will start in five minutes, but no one moves, not even the teachers. They linger in the back. Some whisper to each other. Others don't speak. I know they're afraid which is exactly as it should be.

It's been like this since I defeated Lucretia on the field those many months ago. There is lots of partying. Some bullying. And a constant stream of games at another fairies' expense. I guess those who don't like the way I rule can leave, but really, where would they go?

Once you choose the under kingdom, you aren't welcome back to the upper kingdom. It's the way things are since Lucretia cursed me eighteen years ago. Since then, even Lucretia didn't break that protocol. I guess the disgruntled fairies could go to another of the many realms, including the human one. But our kind aren't allowed there either.

"Truth or dare?" I ask, raising one brow as I watch Strata twirl and spin.

I meant to disband the under kingdom's army after Lucretia's demise, but they've been useful in keeping fairies honest when playing my dangerous games or running clandestine missions. At the word honest, I chuckle internally.

“Truth,” Strata says quietly, her bottom lip quivering.

“You always choose truth.” Disappointment is evident in my voice. A dare is much more fun. “Why did you lead me into the Olclag?” It’s a simple question. The same one I ask every time. I step close so she can feel the strength of my magic. It rolls around me like a dark cloud.

“As I told you before, queen Aurora, I didn’t mean to, but Lucretia put a spell on me and made me do it.” Her voice begs me to believe her.

I don’t and force myself not to roll my eyes as I smack the bat into her stomach. “Lies,” I shout, knowing exactly what a lie looks like. I’ve told more than a few fabrications myself.

The wind is knocked out of her and her face goes stark white as her breath hitches in her throat. “I swear that’s the truth,” she says after she recovers. A tear falls from one eye and lands on the ground.

“Sam, do you believe her?” I ask the girl that is my closest friend in the under kingdom. She is shocked I hit Strata. It’s like that every time and I force myself not to bark an obscenity.

“Hit her again,” Maleficent shouts wildly appearing beside Sam.

I do, sending Strata swinging and spinning into the air. As Strata cries out, the irritating feeling I so desperately keep at bay is back. Grounding my teeth, I stomp it out. Strata deserves whatever I give her. She nearly killed me. If it wasn’t for Paxton, I would be dead.

At the thought of Pax, the little voice inside my head reappears and starts to give me a talking to. But I use my magic to silence that part of myself. Just as I did Pax. He’s deep below the Fairy Academy, in a dungeon he can never escape. Not even Lucretia can save him.

During the first month after our fight, I thought I destroyed her, but there’s talk from some who say they’ve seen her or heard from someone else that they saw her. I don’t doubt it. Her death was too easy. She played me just as Paxton said. That one decision—almost killing her—brought out the darkness in me. Do I wish my dark magic wasn’t so strong and powerful? Occasionally, but not today. Besides, I

can't do anything about it now. With a secret sigh, I give in to the darkness so prevalent within.

Though truthfully, I'm grateful Lucretia isn't dead. In the moment, I was killer angry. Sure, I'm wicked right now and enjoying the deliciousness of my dark magic, but at least I'm not a murderer.

Not directly anyway. "Truth or dare?" I ask Strata again, steeling myself against my guilt.

She sniffles and I feel the protective barrier over my heart crack. I can't let that happen. In the time since I took over as queen of the under kingdom, Troy left. His displeasure in my choices too strong for him to remain and witness. Before he went, he said he hoped I would come to my senses. That was three months ago.

Not happening, I think.

Since my ascension to queen, I also could have gone to see my parents. That had been one of my greatest desires. But that was before. Nearly daily, I end up talking myself out of it.

I'm living in the moment villain style.

I don't think about Pax.

Or Troy.

Or my parents.

Definitely not my dear aunties.

And not my friends from the human realm. They wouldn't recognize me anyway.

"Dare," she whispers between hiccupping sniffles.

My heart leaps with excitement. "It's about time." Obviously, she's grown tired of my game. "I dare you to go into the Olclag and remain there for ten minutes. If you are still alive when the timer is up, I'll think about forgiving you." I glare, watching her eyes get wide as saucers. It's a lie anyway. I have no intention of forgiving her.

From the corner of my vision, I see the shadow of wings and wonder who it could be sneaking around the outskirts of the room. I

refrain from looking directly to keep the element of surprise and make it a point to keep my gaze on Strata.

“Aurora.” The sound of my name flutters to my ears and I know it’s Pax. He’s somehow escaped the dungeon the guards swore was unbreakable—unless they’re on his side. They will pay for their insolence.

Pax believes he can save me. Maybe he’s right.

“Sam, cut her down,” I shout, ignoring Pax and my trembling heart. “You and Maleficent get her to the Olclag. Those who wish to can watch from the observation room with me.” I tug on the bodice of my black dress. It’s suddenly stifling and sweat pools under my breasts and along the back of my neck.

A cheer rises from the crowd as Strata crashes to the ground. Two of the guards appear and help her stand. Sam and Maleficent lead as they all make their way to the Olclag and the observation room.

The observation room is a new addition to the school. I created it using my magic by turning one classroom wall into shatterproof glass. It makes watching those fairies I send into the Olclag much more entertaining.

Freeing my wings, I lift to the air, hovering above everyone. Pax is around somewhere. I can feel his frustration from here, but I don’t see him.

Strata is no longer walking, but making the guards drag her. What’s worse? She’s openly weeping. “Please, Aurora, don’t do this. I don’t want to die!”

Sam and Maleficent laugh and I join them.

When they reach the door to the Olclag, I yell, “Toss her in.” I fly over the crowd until I reach Strata. The girl will suffer the way I did, except she won’t have Paxton there to save her.

The guards hesitate only a moment before one opens the door and the other works to shove her in.

But she clings to the door, holding on tight. “No. Don’t. Please. No!”

I keep my features blank, but I notice even Sam is cracking. We all know sending her in there is a death sentence. It’s only ten minutes though. She might survive.

The guards work to peel her fingers from the door.

“Stop this!” Pax shouts. He’s behind me and I flinch.

The fairies in the room seem to hold their breaths at the authority in his voice. When I turn, he looks more shade than fairy and a shudder pierces my veins.

“Don’t test me, Pax. Otherwise I’ll send you in there with her.” I don’t really mean it, but I can’t have him undermining me in front of the student body. Besides, I already know he can defeat the monsters within, but that’s only if he has a way out. After my birthday, I magicked away every exit from the Olclag.

“If that’s what you want,” he says through gritted teeth. With purpose he pushes through the crowd, brushing his shoulder against mine before passing the guards and going in. Strata calms down slightly as Pax turns and looks at me in a way that makes my knees weak. Regret is plastered all over his face. As though he’s saying he can’t believe he gave up the woman in the market for the likes of me. I don’t blame him either.

Our eyes lock and I work to find a way out of this for him, but there isn’t one.

Rolling his shoulders back, he walks through the entrance and into the Olclag. The door closes with finality and I take a step toward it—toward him.

OceanofPDF.com

"GOOD RIDDANCE," I hear Sam say.

"Right. Master Narcissus might be hot, but he's also way too arrogant for his own good," Maleficent adds.

My heart is racing at what just happened. I don't want Paxton to die.

A bunch of students and teachers rush into the observation room and my hesitation of a moment ago is forgotten. They don't want to miss a thing. Foreboding presses against my chest. Sam and Maleficent follow the crowd into the room.

With head held high, I join them. Inside I feel anything but confident.

Inside, Sam and Maleficent shove fairies out of the way, allowing me to pass through so I can have a front row peek at whatever is going to happen. My insides clench. I don't want to watch. Instead, I want to take it all back.

Pax, I think, my heart pounding in my throat. Because even though I'm wildly wicked at the moment, my feelings for Pax are stronger too. I can't get rid of them regardless of my dark magic holding sway over me, and despite the fact that I have pretended he didn't exist since the night of my birthday. I was just lying to myself. I know that now.

What's going on with me? In an instant, the answer comes. I'm freaking in love with the stupidly handsome fairy.

At the realization, I press my hands against the glass and search for him. "Pax," I whisper.

He seems to sense I said his name and turns just as an enormous caterpillar monster with wings too small for its body eats its way out of the ground and flops itself on the earth. The monster tries to lift off with its much-too-tiny wings as its teeth gnash in Strata and Paxton's

direction. Saliva drips from its gaping mouth. When it lands on the ground, it sizzles, sending puffs of smoke into the air.

Paxton pushes Strata behind him as his wand becomes a longsword. He says something to the girl before rushing the slimy dirt-covered beast.

Strata doesn't stay behind Paxton but comes to the glass and pounds on it. "Let me out. Please Aurora."

I ignore her, focusing on Pax, terrified for him.

The monster ignores her too as a tongue flicks out of its mouth. Forked like a snake's, it wraps around Paxton. In a moment faster than a second, Paxton is inside the monster's mouth and gone before I can wrap my mind around what just happened.

Maleficent and Sam cheer beside me and high-five.

"No," I whisper, my hands turning to fists. What have I done?

There's a loud cackle behind me and my veins become ice. I know that laugh. It's been four months since I heard it, but I know it's Lucretia. Slowly, I face her, knowing I'm not emotionally ready to fight her again. But at least I still have the knife. I keep it attached to my thigh for just such an occasion. As calmly as possible, I maneuver behind a student and lift my dress, retrieving the knife from its sheath.

"You shouldn't be here, Lucretia." The words come out shakier than I want.

"Neither should you," she responds, her dark eyes glittering with malice. "In the time since I've been gone, you've done nothing for the under kingdom. I knew you were inexperienced and naïve, but I didn't plan on such immaturity." She clucks her tongue. "Frankly, it's embarrassing." With her wings, she lifts off the ground, flying over students until she lands directly in front of me.

I keep the knife hidden in the folds of my dress, knowing the weapon is my only chance against Lucretia. She watches me, waiting for me to say something, but I can't. There's nothing to say.

“I thought your dark magic would turn you into an evil worthy of my time. We are family after all. Instead you’re playing childish games. Games!” The word comes out in a hiss. “I was mistaken. You’re obviously too much like your parents.” She takes another step toward me. “I’ll have my knife back now, Aurora.”

“No.” I tuck it behind my back like the child she accuses me to be. “It’s mine now.”

She grits her teeth. “You aren’t worthy of that knife or of the title of queen.” As she speaks, she raises one hand.

Though I can’t see her magic, I feel it pummel into me, forcing my fingers to release the hilt of the blade. “Stop.” I cry out in pain as the knife sails around me and into Lucretia’s outstretched hand. Mortified, I look around the room at the faces of my peers and teachers. Surely, they’ll support me. But I realize instantly how wrong I was about them. They enjoyed watching me torture others, but they weren’t my subjects. They are hers and have been from the beginning. Each of them was biding time until Lucretia regained enough strength to return. My face heats at the knowledge, but I can’t back down. Plus I still have my own dark magic. It hasn’t failed me yet. “Give it back.” I move my hand and with my mind order the knife to return to my grasp. It jerks and sways, but she keeps a tight hold. I’m not strong enough.

She studies the blade before smiling at me. “Well at least I wasn’t wrong about your power. What a pity.” Internally, I feel her will overpower my magic and shove it back, causing me to fall against the glass. Her smile widens. “Your magic is strong, but it is also willowy and uncontrolled. Perhaps if you spent time in your classes honing your magic…” Her smile vanishes. “I have an idea.”

Sam and Maleficent clap for joy. They were never my friends. It hurts to see their treachery, though I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Since you’re so fond of throwing fairies into the Olclag, I will do the same to you—”

“But I’ve already been in there,” I whine and then snap my mouth shut. I’m not doing myself any good.

“Instead of ten minutes, I’m giving you two weeks.”

I feel my mouth fall open. Sure my magic is much greater than it was, but as Lucretia said, I’m inexperienced.

“If you can survive in there that long, then I will let you out and you can continue your studies at the Academy. If not,” she pauses and smiles again, but it isn’t one of happiness. Her eyes are filled with greedy murder. “Then you won’t be my problem anymore.”

I know I can’t defeat her. Beyond that, I know I have no desire to spend two weeks in the Olclag. So I put my head down, and try to rush her, but she stops me, her magic squeezing me with an invisible rope.

“You aren’t going anywhere.” She waves her hand and her staff with the giant red jewel appears in her hand. She smacks it on the ground once and my dress changes into inky black pants and a matching black shirt—almost like scuba gear. Then she places the jeweled orb to my forehead. Immediately, there’s a pressure.

“What are you doing?” I ask through chattering teeth. Fear beats out any of my anger.

“Stealing away some of your magic. You don’t deserve it anyway.” She closes her eyes as my magic fills her. I remember the story my aunties told about how Lucretia obtained her magic. She killed for it. As my knees buckle, I realize that if she takes all of mine, I’ll die too. She’s like a vampire. Only instead of sucking out all of my blood, she’s sucking out all of my magic.

“Stop,” I say, my voice low and shallow as my breath goes in and out in chunks.

Her gaze fixes on mine and she stands back. “There. I left you just enough magic so you will think you have a chance.” She cackles. Everyone else in the room laughs too. “Take her,” she shouts.

The same two guards who forced Strata into the Olclag, take me by

the arms. I don't fight them. I'm too weak. I can sense it. Not only that but I already feel defeated. It weighs on me like lead. I let them walk me out of the room and into the hall.

"By the way, I do love the idea of the observation room." She bangs the bottom on her staff on the ground and suddenly all of the black walls in the room, including the ceiling and the floors are gone, replaced by the same glass as that of the one wall. "Now we can have a front row seat to all of your adventures all the time."

It takes only an instant to see the Olclag is part of the academy. The craggily and vast woodland holds the school together as does the demon skin on the walls. I swallow, trying to think of what to say to make her stop this and change her mind, but there is nothing. Because deep down, I know I deserve the consequences. Blowing out a determined breath, I keep my head up and my eyes forward and shuffle down the hall toward my impending doom. One of the guards opens the door. I don't fight, I just walk through. Before the door closes, I glance back.

"One more thing," Lucretia says.

"What?" I ask, monotone, knowing there is no hope, especially since Paxton is dead.

"It's always better to struggle through life with your friends." She whips her staff in a circle before snapping her fingers. The door closes.

"What do you mean," I ask aloud, though I'm alone.

OceanofPDF.com

WELL, not really alone. As soon as my feet touch the damp earth, it stirs beneath my shoes. I can feel its maliciousness and shudder. The last time was bad enough. Strata screams to my right and I take off in that direction. Pax is over that way too. Or at least he was. I don't have my wand, but I haven't needed one in months. What I need is to kill the beast that ate Paxton. It's the least I can do—take my revenge. I think of the monster who ate him and in the same moment think of its destruction. Blowing it to bits with Pax still alive somehow inside. As soon as the monster is in view, it begins to shudder and rolls onto its side.

"Crap." Lucretia stole a lot of my magic. But that isn't what has me stunned. There's a jagged hole the size of a person cut out of the side of the monster. Blood drips from it like red rain and its guts spill out. It's gross and smells like rotten fish, but I'm too relieved to care because the monster's demise means Pax escaped.

"Pax," I shout, turning away from the dead creature and searching the gray and shadowy landscape. My knees are weak as I dare to hope he really is alive.

"Aurora," Strata calls from the other side of the creature.

I don't respond. Just because we're both in the Olclag doesn't mean I like her any more than I did when I threw her in here.

A glimmer of light shines in the distance and I move away from Strata and toward it, hoping it's Pax. Creatures writhe and hiss all around me. I feel claustrophobic, like at any minute I will be swallowed whole. And I'm not far off. If another one of those enormous caterpillar things is around, I could be.

In the distance, I hear the call of a bird. Or probably something much scarier and carnivorous. Working to keep calm, I relax my hands, shaking out my fingers since they were clenched so my nails

cut into my palms. Strata is somewhere behind. I can feel her back there. The flutter of her wings tells me she's flying, and I wonder why I'm not. That's better than touching the ground. It's just most of the time I forget I have wings. They are still new to me.

"Aurora wait." Strata comes up beside me.

"Did you see which way Paxton—I mean Master Narcissus went?" I try not to look at her.

"No— What are you doing in here?" Surprise laces each word with spite, and I can't blame her. Her pretty face is scrunched up in arrogant confusion.

A frustrated howl exits my throat and I walk faster toward the light.

She keeps talking though. "Did you come in to rescue Paxton?"

I see from the corner of my eye she's shaking her head.

"That can't be it because Paxton is the one who saved you from before…" Her mind is working through what could've happened. It won't be long until she knows I was betrayed.

I glare at her and her words die in her throat.

"Lucretia returned, didn't she? And she threw you in here." There's a harrumph of satisfied finality from her that sends me into a panicked rage.

"Why do you all hate me so much? I didn't do anything to you. To any of you," I shout, throwing my hands up in annoyance. Tears press against the backs of my eyes, but I blink several times to keep them from falling. One false step could send me to my death in this place.

Strata balks at the force of my words. Opens her mouth and closes it. Crosses her arms. "You are the princess of the upper kingdom. Destined to rule us all. Just like your parents, you'll treat those that don't belong to the royal families like trash, the same as they do."

I grit my teeth together. Jump over some muddy sludge and catch myself as I start to slip. The sky, which is heavy with bleakness begins

to lighten, casting more shadows as a shot of lightning slashes the clouds. It's been too quiet for too long. Something is coming and I'm not the least bit prepared. "I don't even know my parents. I was taken from them when I was still a baby. Raised by the Royal Guards in the human realm. How can you think I would be like them?" I rip out a weed from the mud and toss it away.

She shrugs. "You're right, I guess. But Lucretia—"

"Is the queen's sister," I finish. "If anyone will make the same choices as the king and queen, it's her." I shudder at the thought. "Why hasn't she tried to kill them or dethrone them and take over?" I voice the question aloud, not expecting Strata to have the answer. But as I say the words I think of her army and know that's exactly what she intends to do. "That's what the army is for. That's why the fairy academy exists down here."

"That's right," Strata snaps. "She intends to kill them all and reset the system so there aren't statuses. No royalty. We will all be equal." Strata crosses her arms and her wings flutter faster.

"Including Lucretia?" I ask, knowing my aunt would never consider herself anything but a queen.

"She— Her—" Strata shakes her head. "I guess," she says, though it doesn't sound convincing and her wings slow.

"You guess what, Strata? She'll be queen. That's what. Then she'll choose a select few to be in her court. Before long, it'll be exactly as it is now." At the edge of a clump of low hanging trees, I stop. This is where I saw the strange light. Chasing the light might have been a stupid idea. Like the fish in the deep who lure their prey with light, I think that is exactly what the Olclag did. "Pax," I yell, hoping to stop my chattering teeth. "It's me. Rory. Where are you?"

"Stop yelling you crazy girl. I'm not the only one who can hear you," Pax says, stepping out from behind one of the trees.

OceanofPDF.com

WAND IN HAND, Pax marches toward me like he's going to kill me on the spot. I take a step back and his face softens. "Lucretia?" he asks, knowingly.

"Yeah," I say, my voice hoarse, grateful I don't have to explain that my own flesh and blood sent me in here. Again.

He shakes his head. "I'm usually not one to say I told you so, but…" He tilts his head to the side. "I told you so." He blinks slowly, watching me.

I nod, fighting back raw emotions. "It isn't every day I see how much of an idiot I am."

His features soften further. "Hey, it's okay. I got you out of this last time, I can do it again." He pulls me into a quick hug.

I cling to him, desperate for his touch, for his understanding, and forgiveness. Not that I deserve it. But being in his arms feels like I'm home.

Too soon, he releases me and says hello to Strata.

She responds and I wait, unsure how to share the dangerous reality of our situation.

"What?" Pax asks, squinting as he moves in close, searching my face for answers.

"Um… After I stabbed Lucretia and she vanished, I sort of magicked away all of the exits." I swallow, not wanting to reveal the rest.

"And?" Pax asks.

Lucretia is making me stay in here for two weeks." I glance down at my muddy boots. "I'm sorry," I say and mean it.

"That's impossible." Paxton flicks his wand and a cockroach monster that was trying to sneak up behind me turns to dust. "She

can't keep us in here. If I figure a way out, we will be leaving." He sounds so confident; I can't help but nod.

"No. We'll never make it that long. No one ever has," Strata whines. She's turning in a circle and tears are leaking down her mud-stained face.

Before Pax or I can say more, there's a loud scream followed by another. It's coming from within the forest.

"Help," a female voice shouts.

The voice is familiar, but I push the thought away as impossible.

"Someone, please, for the love of grizzly bears, get us down from here!"

A different voice, but equally familiar and I find myself moving toward the sound.

When I pass Pax, he touches my arm. "Going in there is foolish," he says. "It's probably a trap. I know a place we can hide where none of the monsters in here will find us, but it's this way." He points in a different direction.

I glance cautiously at the ominous forest next to us. Paxton is already moving toward the course he indicated.

"Okay," I say, working to figure out how I know the voices as I fall in line behind Paxton and Strata.

"Please!"

"Somebody!"

Like a giant tidal wave, it hits me why the voices are familiar. "Merida. Tiana." I forget where I am or that I'm filled with dark magic. I forget about everything except saving my friends. "Merida! Tiana!" I say again, this time with purpose. Fear for their safety fills every crevice and pushes out everything else. As quickly as the dark magic took over four months ago, it vanishes and in its place shines newness and light, like the sun pushing through the clouds as they part after a storm. "I'm coming."

“Who’s Merida and Tiana?” I hear Strata ask.

Paxton growls. “Follow her.”

In the back of my mind, I know they’re behind me and I’m grateful. I need Paxton. Strata, not so much, but whatever.

Giant grayish green leaves smack against my thighs as low hanging branches tangle in my hair. Some pull, but I think about them shriveling up and dying. The branches retreat and I continue on.

It’s a shock when I see them. Merida and Tiana are dangling from an enormous pine tree. At least that’s kind of what it looks like. The scent of moldy cheese wafts from it, probably because the tree itself is in some weird stage of decay. More of an ash color reminiscent of a shadow instead of the actual tree. Wilted vine arms swing Tiana and Merida around like I did Strata from the chandelier earlier today.

“Rory?” Tiana shouts. Her features are a combination of dizziness and shock.

“Help us,” Merida adds.

Connecting with my magic, I tell the tree to turn to ash. The branches shudder, but don’t die like I commanded, and I grind my hands into fists that Lucretia stole most of my magic.

Pax’s wand changes into a bow and arrow. Nocking the arrow, he fires. The end sinks into the thick vine and it drops Tiana. Faster than I believe possible, he shoots another arrow into Merida’s vine and it drops her as well.

I run toward them, but the vines are swinging wildly, and one smacks into me, sending me flying. Branches suddenly surround me as I’m flung into a tree a ways off. I land with a thud as branches circle me into a death grip. Howling in pain, I demand the tree release me. The hold is loosened slightly, and I wiggle my way down and trunk.

Strata is just standing there as though she’s in shock. One of the wild vines picks her up. At the same time, another vine wraps itself around her neck. Until that moment I believed I wanted Strata to die, but no more.

“Let her go,” I shout, flinging my hand and my magic out and into the vine around her neck. It slackens but doesn’t drop her. I send another jolt of magic into the tree. And another and another and another. I’m breathing hard and drop to my knees, but they still hold Strata.

Paxton is dragging Merida and Tiana out of the reach of the vines.

“Help her.” I can’t tell whether he heard. Strata’s eyes are big and look like they are about to pop out of her head. There’s a snap and I witness the life go out of her. “No. Please. No.” As Strata’s body turns to ash, tears burn down my cheeks. Because I did this to her. I’m to blame. And I don’t know how to deal with that.

OceanofPDF.com

PAXTON IS SUDDENLY in front of me. “Aurora. Can you walk?” He pulls me to my feet, but my legs feel like rubber and I sag against him. “Please,” he says quietly. “I can’t carry you and Tiana.”

At the sound of my friend’s name, I crack to attention, forcing my legs to respond. “I can walk.”

He leans down and kisses my cheek. His lips are warm, and the touch sends tingles over every inch of my body. “Good.” He helps me stand. I let him pull me over to my friends. Merida is on her feet but looks dazed, her eyes glazed over with a faraway look in them.

“Merida are you okay?” I rush to her and take her hand. She’s freezing and I think about warming her. My magic flows from my fingers and into hers until she pulls away.

“Stop that.” She shakes her hands, rubbing them together. “What is this place?” she asks, zeroing in on me.

Relief washes over my heart. I’m just so happy she’s okay. I need some good news right now. Sure, I didn’t like Strata. She was conniving and rude. But she was still a living being. A fairy. One of my kind. And I couldn’t save her.

“Rory!” Merida snaps her fingers in my face.

I jerk back. “We’re in the Olclag,” I say, forcing down my guilt. “In the under kingdom of the fairy realm.

“Figures.” She walks in a circle, her curly red hair swirling like a fire around her head.

I glance back to see Paxton is working to revive Tiana. Merida notices too and together we rush over to them. “Please tell me she’s alive.” I fall to my knees beside him, desperate for her to be okay. Her features are soft and slack, and she has an ashy look about her, like the Olclag has already taken her over.

“She shouldn’t be.” He shakes his head and touches the tip of his wand to her chest and a gauzy bandage wraps her up.

I fall to my knees beside her. “Tiana.”

Her eyes flutter open and she breathes in. Before my mind can grasp hold of what’s happening, she grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me down so that my neck is at her mouth. There’s a pinch and she’s sucking. Drinking my blood!

“Tiana!” I try to pull away, but she holds me fast a moment longer before releasing me.

I stumble back, pressing one hand to my throat. It’s slick with blood, but that’s not what has me in shock. “You’re a vampire?”

She jumps to her feet and tears the bandages from her chest in one motion. “I told you Lance was going to change me.” She smiles and a chill runs down my spine. “Your blood is delicious. Sweet with a dash of dark.” She licks her lips just as an enormous monster shaped like a millipede materializes just outside the tree line and directly behind her. It bends over, legs like a shadowy wave.

“Look out,” I holler, but Tiana senses it before I finish. She spins as the thing whose face is mostly teeth opens its mouth, giving a liquid roar. So fast, I lose track of her a moment, she’s on its back just behind the neck. In one motion, she shoves her bare hand into its neck and rips out its tongue. Using it like a rope, she jumps down and wraps it around the things neck before getting back up and choking the life out of it. The creature expires, letting out a final breath all before I can blink.

Tiana is wearing jeans and an emerald green top, though it’s dirty. Her hair is up, and out of her face, but several pieces have fallen out and are standing at odd angles like the jagged points on a crown. In that moment, she looks like a warrior princess and I can’t help but be in awe of her.

“Gross,” she says, wiping her hands on her pants before jumping down.

“T, I—” I’m unsure what to say. She’s a vampire and I’m a fairy. We make quite a pair.

Merida screams. We all spin around and watch as a snake the size of a Doberman sinks its teeth into her thigh. It’s eyes are the color of fire as it releases her, flashing its fangs and prepares to bite her again.

Paxton sends magic from his wand into the gigantic thing. It hisses and slithers away, but not before Tiana catches it and tears it in half.

She growls and her eyes flash red a moment too.

I shudder at the sight of her. She is a little scary.

Merida lets out a soft breath and grabs hold of her leg. “Ouch,” she says, barely above a whisper. Her eyes roll back into her head and she falls to the ground.

“Please be okay,” I say, holding my breath.

Paxton kneels beside her and does something with his magic. “She is for now but will die if we don’t get her the antidote.” He lifts her into his arms. “Let’s get out of here.” Pax gives Tiana a wary look before heading along a cobblestoned path I didn’t see before.

T and I glance at each other before following behind him.

“You are bad ass,” I whisper, hooking an arm through hers.

She doesn’t respond, but we walk in silence for a few minutes until I can’t help but ask her, “How long have you been a vampire?”

“A few months,” she says, her voice soft as mine.

“Did you die?” I recoil at the thought.

“Pretty much.” She feels me tense beside her and continues on. “But that’s how it works. It didn’t hurt.” She shrugs. “It is what it is.” Sadness rolls off her along with obligation.

I nod, unsure how to respond. “Does your family think you’re dead?”

She doesn’t answer right away. “That was the hardest part,” she finally admits. “I went to my own funeral.” Her sadness deepens until it’s so thick I can almost touch it.

“Sorry, T,” I say squeezing her lightly.

“Me too, especially since Lance and I are on a permanent break. Now that I’m a vampire, there is a whole lot of his crap I’m seeing about the guy, and I don’t like it.”

“Like what?” I trip over a root. T rights me before I can even think to use my wings. They flutter behind me though and Tiana glances at them.

“Like it doesn’t matter. Just know I appreciated the talk we had the night you left, and I love you for it.” She bumps into me and I smile.

“Love you too, T.”

“By the way, your wings are cool. Love the colors.” She glances back at them again. “What’s it like to fly?”

“When we get out of this, I’ll show you,” I say, giving her a wry smile. Now isn’t the time to have fun, especially since we can be killed or eaten at any moment. Though, this part of the Olclag is silent and I wonder why.

“This place is nuts,” Tiana adds.

“Agreed,” I say. “How did you get here?” Lucretia mentioned my friends. I thought she was talking about Pax and Strata or even Sam and Maleficent. Instead, she dragged my actual human friends, though Tiana isn’t human any longer, and brought them here.

“I have no idea. One minute I’m in California having a midnight snack and the next I’m in this place being strangled by a disgusting vine.”

“It’s my fault,” I say as the reality of our situation hits me in the gut the way I hit Strata with the baseball bat.

“How so?” She looks at me.

OceanofPDF.com

I DEBATE what to say but decide it's time for the truth. "I did something to the queen of the under kingdom and she is paying me back by dragging you and Merida into this." I study the ground in front of me as I speak, too much of a coward to look her in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

She wraps her arm around my waist. "Don't worry about it. We'll figure this out." She pauses and I look up. "I need to apologize too."

"It's fine. Giving you some of my blood is the least I could do," I say, thinking she's going to tell me she's sorry for using me like a sippy cup.

"Oh, not about that. I mean, yeah, I guess I'm sorry for not asking first, but I meant about telling you I was going to take off for a guy. And one I barely knew." She blows out her breath. "So not cool."

Up ahead, Pax arrives at what looks like a hovel. The roof seems to be caving in on one side and there's a tree branch growing through it.

"I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me," I say, stopping to show her I'm genuine.

Pax kicks the door in and goes inside.

"Done." Tiana moves forward and I trail behind her.

Something laughs behind us and I turn around, my wings fluttering me backward and into Tiana, knocking her to the ground. "Sorry," I say, but don't help her. The creature is the same one that called me delectable when I came in here the first time. Her hair is long and red and covered in daisies, though they aren't the usual color, but more gray and grimy.

"Hello Aurora." She steps forward, reaching out her hands, but is stopped by an invisible force. When she touches it, the area lights up with a blueish black light. She looks at it, surprised and her pleasant

features become angry. “What is this?” She pounds against it, each time causing the area to light up.

I swallow and turn. Tiana is on her feet. “Run,” I say, grinding my teeth.

“Who is she?” Tiana asks, not even a little afraid.

“I don’t know.” I get my feet moving, though they feel like lead. My wings remind me they are there as I am lifted off the ground.

Tiana runs toward the hut, passing me like I’m standing still.

Paxton suddenly appears. “Hurry,” he says, waving us in.

Tiana slows as she reaches him and walks past, moving inside.

There’s still a good distance between me and Pax and I push forward, forcing myself to fly as fast as my wings will carry me. My body gets heavier and heavier until the tips of my boots drag on the ground. “Pax,” I say. “Help.” I don’t understand what is happening.

He steps off the small wooden porch. As soon as he does, a vine shoots up from the ground and wraps around his leg. He sends a bolt of magic into it and it disintegrates.

I can’t do anything but watch. My mind is dull, like I’m only half awake. I know it’s the Olclag and know I should do something but can’t for the life of me think what.

Pax flies over. “I’ve got you,” he says, wrapping his arms around my waist. I fall against him as a vine wraps around the both of us. He growls, moving against it and I guess he’s trying to get his wand into place to use his magic.

But the vines squeeze us tighter until I feel like I’m going to burst open like a pinata. Release us, I think, though it’s vague.

If anything, it squeezes us tighter.

Pax hollers in frustration. “I’m sorry, Aurora.”

I’m not sure whether that’s him saying he can’t save us or what, but I refuse to let us die. At that thought, a jolt of magical power I didn’t think I still possessed springs into my chest. With suddenly

clarity, I send it radiating out of my body and into the vine.

It crumbles and we are free.

Pax goes limp, his arms loosening from around my waist. I catch him and fly with all my might toward the entrance of the shack. When I land on the porch, Tiana appears and helps me get Pax inside.

“Sorry I didn’t help,” she says. “But I’m no use against those vines.”

“You did good,” I respond, glad she didn’t try to help.

Paxton is heavy and we drag him out of the doorway so we can close the door. Merida is still unconscious and on the drab couch. I try to roll him on his side, so his wings won’t get squished, but they vanish, and I carefully put his head on the ground.

“Isn’t this the guy from school?” Tiana asks, her voice shaky at the sudden clarity. “What’s he doing here?”

“Yeah. This is where he’s from,” I say, resting my ear against his chest, listening for a heartbeat. I can’t hear it, but his chest rises and falls. “Well, not the Olclag, but the fairy realm,” I say, correcting myself.

“Is he alive?” she asks.

“I think so.” I touch his face, unable to help myself. It’s strange, but the man has my heart on so many levels. As I watch him, I think healing thoughts. My magic radiates from me and into him. I can sense the damage in him—the broken ribs, and his torn wings. His injuries are worse than I thought, and I push more magic into him. As much as I can. I feel myself weakening, but I don’t care. He needs to get better because we can’t survive this place without him. It’s more than that too. I don’t want to survive without him.

In the background, I hear Tiana. She’s saying something, but her words are muffled, and far away. I feel my strength abating, but still I don’t let go of Pax. I can’t. His injuries heal under my command, but I’m dying, I think.

My head smacks against Pax's chest, and I close my eyes…

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN I WAKE, there's bright light shining in through the window. It's warm and brings with it the scent of peonies like the ones in my aunties front yard. After a moment more, the aroma of baked bread fills my nose and my mouth waters.

Blinking my eyes open, I look around. It's the same old place, but somehow feels more cheery. There are patterned curtains dancing in the window as a soft breeze fills the room. The hut is built with trees, giving every inch of the place a honeyed glow. I'm lying on a yellow couch and sit up, admiring the solid wood table beyond the living area and the kitchen past that.

"Pax?" It looks like him with his dark wings with the blue streak and his matching hair. He's wearing light gray pants and no shoes as well as a white shirt and a yellow apron. Against his wings, all of the color stands out and I have to blink several times to make sure I'm not dreaming.

Except I must be. "Where are we?"

He looks up and smiles before taking something from a bowl and popping it into his mouth. "The Olclag," he says when he's done chewing.

I go over to the window and look out. Before, it was ferocious and covered in gray and dreary. Now, it's all color and light. The trees are lush and different shades of green, including pine, grass, and lime. All around them are lush green grasses and an exorbitant amount of fully bloomed flowers in a rainbow of colors. Beyond is the lake, the one I almost drowned in. It's sparkles in frothy blue. Overhead the sky dazzles as rays of orange and yellow light shine down, giving me a complete view of the landscape. It's glorious, like something out of a painting. Dust particles twinkle in the air and I think I must have died.

"How is this possible?" I ask, noticing the surprise in my voice. I

pinch myself and feel the smidge of pain. Am I dreaming? I pinch myself again. Supposedly I'm not supposed to be able to feel that. Right?

"This is what the Olclag looked like before Lucretia came to power."

I flinch at his sudden nearness. I didn't hear him come up beside me. "Ohhhhhh—" I struggle to form a fully coherent word as my insides tingle. I have no idea where I am. I could be dead, yet my body responds to him on a cellular level. "Cool." I clear my throat. From the corner of my eye, I watch him smile. My heart thumps against my ribs.

"See, the Olclag is where fairies get their magic." He pauses and I look over at him. He's beyond handsome with his chiseled jaw, kissable lips, and stunning eyes. Even in his comfy clothes and an apron, he's the most gorgeous man I've ever met. Not to mention his hair and the width and breadth of his perfectly sculpted body. The fairy was blessed in every way. No doubt about it. "At least it was," he continues.

"What do you mean?" I clear my throat and force myself to focus on what he's saying.

"Since Lucretia took power, she's polluted the Olclag. It's dying. Everything that was once good and glorious is changing into evil and monstrous."

The giant caterpillar things comes to mind and I try to see that as good and glorious. What was it before it became that?

Paxton continues. "Her goal is to destroy the magic of the Olclag. Over time, fairies will be born with less and less until they have none." He looks at me then, his eyes brim with an unreadable sadness. "It'll be easier to rule all of the kingdoms if there isn't anyone powerful enough to rise against her."

I suck in my breath, unable to help myself. Sometimes when I look at him, it's like looking at the sun. "But that will take centuries,

surely," I say, facing him.

"True, but she has time. Fairies live long lives, and new fairies aren't born that often. So if she can destroy the Olclag, then it won't be long belong before the fairies are easy to control." He crosses his arms, but his features remain soft.

"Why can't my mom and dad do something about it? They have the royal guard. Surely, they have armies too. Why can't they send down their armies and capture her and put her in jail?"

He takes in what I'm wearing and I do the same. It's then I notice I'm still in my dirty clothes. "Why don't you get cleaned up? Then we can eat, and I'll tell you all about it."

"Okay."

He heads past the kitchen and down a hall. To the right is a door and he opens it. "Here you go."

I glance inside and see the room is as light and airy as the rest of the hut, decorated in eggshell and other neutral colors.

The hut is bigger than it looks from the outside.

Pax shows me the bathroom and I quickly get cleaned up. Change into a butter yellow dress. Two slits are in the back for my wings, but I don't bring them out. Running my fingers over the front of the dress, I sigh. It's soft as cotton and skims across my skin. I follow Pax's lead and don't put on any shoes. Plus, I leave my hair down. It'll dry with natural waves in it.

Timid, I make my way into the kitchen. Pax has berries on the stove. They boil gently in a thick syrup. He's making jam, I think and smile.

At that moment, he catches my eye and smiles too. "You look nice." He hugs me and my body warms.

"Thank you." There's sliced bread on the white counter as well as what looks like butter or thick cream. "Did you make all of this?"

"I did." He takes the sauce from the stove and pours it into a dish.

Then using magic, the boiling syrup stops steaming and thickens. “Ready to eat?”

In answer, my stomach growls. “Definitely.”

I sit on one of the rustic stools on the other side of the counter. Pax pushes the bread, plates, butter, jam, and silverware over so I can reach it and then comes to sit beside me. I watch as he takes a piece, slathers butter on it, followed by the jam and then hands me the knife. “Rodithian berries are the most delicious of all the berries in the Olclag.” He takes a bite.

I do as he did, putting a little less jam on top than him and take a bite. Flavor like I’ve never tasted floods my mouth. Sort of like if strawberries and raspberries had a baby.

He smiles as he watches me chew. “What do you think?” he asks after he finishes his bite.

“So good,” I admit, wishing I put more jam on my bread.

We eat in silence a few minutes, but I have to know more about the Olclag and what we are doing here. I’m still not sure whether I’m alive or dead. “Tell me why my parents haven’t captured Lucretia and put her in jail or something?”

“They’ve tried. When the Olclag began to die, they made every effort to apprehend her, but her magic is very powerful. In the last eighteen years, they’ve sent down their armies more than once, but many of those fairies stayed. In the last year or two, the tides have shifted and there are more who support Lucretia than your mom and dad, I’m afraid.”

My mouth is hanging open. I can feel it and snap it shut, my teeth clamping together. “Why are they on her side?”

He takes my hand, twining my fingers with his. “It isn’t so much that they’re on her side as they want to be on the winning side, and they believe she will win.”

“They’re afraid,” I say tightly, wiping the butter from my face.

“Yes, but I can’t blame them. Even I was afraid when Lucretia took my sister and I thought she would kill her. But now?” He stops and looks away, playing with some breadcrumbs that have fallen onto the counter.

“Now what?” I shake his hand, desperate for him to look at me.

“My sister is on her side anyway,” he says quietly.

“Maybe not. Maybe Lucretia has a hold over her as well.” I want to believe because I want to give Pax hope.

“No.” He swallows. “She likes the darkness too much. It’s been that way since she was a child. The dark parts of her magic were always the strongest. I thought if I fought hard enough for her, she would change, but if anything, she’s embraced it even more.” He brushes the crumbs onto his plate and looks at me. His eyes shine with unshed tears.

“I’m sorry, Pax,” I say, wishing I could make him feel better. “But how do you know?”

“My sister is Maleficent, one of your supposed best friends. You saw how she behaved. What she did. Do you think she has any light inside her?”

I gasp, but quickly shake my head as I think about the three of us over the last four months. “Maybe,” I finally say. I allowed the dark magic within me to flourish, but I knew the light was still there, just buried. “I mean look at how I acted. I went dark within a few days of getting my magic. If I can overcome the darkness, then she can too.”

He nods and let’s go on my hand. “I hope you’re right.”

OceanofPDF.com

WE CLEAN up the dishes in comfortable silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. I can't imagine how hard it was to watch his sister behave the way she did. After he puts away the last of the dishes, I take his hand. "Can you ever forgive me for how I acted?" I'm referring to the way I let my darkness take over. I liked the power it brought, and I liked feeling as though I was on top. But it was all a ruse. Lucretia planned it and the students and teachers sat back and watched me behave like the queen I wasn't. There's a saying, the bigger they are the harder they fall. As I study Pax, it's embarrassing to reflect how true the statement is.

He observes me intently for a long moment and I think maybe he can't forgive me. That I did too much bad and could never make up for it. He smiles. "There's nothing to forgive. It's me who should be asking you that question."

"How so?" I ask, curious why he thinks he owes me an apology.

We walk hand in hand past the dining area and into the living room. The chairs look cozy and I'm full. Briefly I think about getting comfortable in one of them and chilling for a while, but I don't know how or why I'm here and I long to explore the Olclag as it is in this moment—full of light and color.

"You're here because of me," he responds quietly. "I could've told Lucretia you didn't possess magic. I could've lied and let you live your life in the human realm. But I was a coward and now we're in this predicament." He squeezes my hand.

"You're not a coward," I say, opening the front door. "If you left me to my life, I wouldn't have met you." I stop and rest my head against his chest, inhaling his deliciously warm scent. "And I'm so glad I did."

He smiles, releasing me and walking slightly ahead, stepping off

the porch before facing me. “You mean it?” There’s sweet sincerity in his eyes.

“Without a doubt.” Before I can think about it, I rush toward him and do something bold, pressing my lips to his. It was going to be quick, but the feel of his mouth on mine sends me into the stratosphere. I sense his hunger as his hands cup my face, his thumbs gently stroking my cheeks.

I step off the porch and into his arms and he tugs me against him. In that moment, I’m the happiest I’ve ever been. It doesn’t even matter if I’m dead, as long as I can remain with him like this for eternity.

Too soon, he lifts his head.

I open my eyes. There’s a happiness I haven’t seen before on his mostly serious face. “Are we dead?”

He smiles, sending a jolt of longing through me. “No. Our bodies are still in the hut in the Olclag, but I wanted to show you why it’s important you defeat Lucretia.” He takes my hands. “We’re here because I want to show you how it all began.”

For some reason, my heart skips a beat as nervous energy flows through my veins. “Like how fairies came into being?” I ask as I follow him down the cobbled path that leads away from the hut and into the forest.

“That’s right.” He tucks my hand into the crook of his arm and pats my hand. “You know about the seven magics?” His wings lift his body off the ground.

I nod. The few times I did attend class, I learned about the seven creatures created and the magics that came with them. “I do,” I say, giving him a sideways glance as I extend my wings and lift off as well.

“Tell me what you’ve learned.” He looks at me and smiles.

In that moment, he reminds me of a teacher. “Sure, Master Narcissus.” I pause, watching him voraciously. The fairy is hot.

His lips twist as he kisses my hand. “I’m not really a teacher. I just

help out with flying lessons." He smirks. "But go on then. I'm listening."

"The vampires, Silindra and Sharra came first. Then the fairies," I say slowly, trying to remember.

"What else?" He's listening intently.

I lift an eyebrow, working to decipher what he's looking for.

"Where do fairies draw their magic?"

We fly over a thicket of purple wildflowers. Their lovely scent fills my nose and I forget for a moment what I should be thinking about.

"Aurora?" Pax gives me a worried look.

"Fairy magic comes from the heart," I say, tapping my chest when I snap out of it. I also remember vampires get their magic from essence while dragons use the soul. I think of Troy, but quickly push him away. He left after I used the blade on Lucretia, obviously disgusted.

Trolls get their magic from their strength while unicorns get their healing powers from their horns. And finally, the seventh magic comes from Hunters, who draw magic from blood. Many other creatures exist and their magic falls under the seven originals, but we didn't discuss them, though gargoyles and ghouls, Nephilim, and even werewolves were mentioned. And I'm not too sure where dragons fit it. Some say dragons came before the vampire sisters. Others say dragons came after. I have no idea.

"Correct." He seems pleased. "The original fairies moderated our heart magic into subcategories, including air, water, earth, and fire, as well as those who have more than one of the four."

We leave the brightness of the path and the field of flowers and are in the shadow of the forest. I pull away as fear of flying in such close proximity to the enormous trees and their branches sends my feet to the ground.

"What's wrong?" He lands and comes over, his features scrunched

in worry.

“I don’t think I have the skills to fly in there.” I say the words calmly, though my insides are shaking. It’s more than just fear my wings might get caught on a branch and tear or that I’ll fly into a trunk. I sense a powerful vibration of magic deep within. It calls to my heart and there’s a pull that’s difficult to resist. In fact, my feet respond before my mind is ready.

“No problem.” Pax strolls beside me, our arms brushing against each other.

I can’t help but feel the tingle of skin against skin and wish we could do something fun, like a date with dinner and a movie. Normal stuff. “Thanks.” The word comes out timidly because I don’t want him to be disappointed.

Not more than a few feet beyond the tree line, rustling from every direction surrounds us. I lean into Pax. After my last experience in the Olclag, I can’t help myself. “Something’s coming.” My fingernails dig into his flesh.

“It’s okay.” He stops and wraps his arms around my waist, trying to protect me.

But I don’t feel safe. As my fear rises, so does the dark magic within my chest. It builds and builds until I think it might burn a hole.

Pax senses what’s happening. “It’s okay.” He massages my arm and shoulder. “I promise. Nothing will hurt you here. As it is now, the Olclag is safe.”

I want to believe him, but my fear is stronger than my common sense. “I-I can’t stop it.” My knees are quaking as colors fill my body as all four of the magics within turn and turn.

Before the magic can leave my body, Pax acts fast and his wings suddenly surround me, like I’m in a soft and shadowy cocoon. His eyes are locked on mine. They’re filled with worry and love. I don’t understand how he can love me. I’m not very lovable. Besides that, we haven’t known each other long. But I see it. “I can’t let you hurt

anything in here," he whispers. "But if you need to use your magic, if you can't control it, then use it on me."

At his words, I swallow. I don't want to hurt him. I won't. Taking a deep breath, I nod. "I'll make it stop." I blow out, looking down at the space between us, ashamed of my uncontrollable magic.

"Another one," he says, his voice barely audible.

I do. Each breath is ragged until the darkness subsides. I force myself to look into his gorgeous eyes.

"Better?" He nods like he can sense I've calmed down.

"Yes, I think so, but what was making those noises?" I cling to his arm, forcing myself to remain unruffled even as I watch his vivid blue eyes dance with anticipation.

"See for yourself." Slowly, his black wings retreat until I'm no longer surrounded by them.

From the corner of my vision, I catch twinkling and turn toward it. Sucking in a breath, I surprised to see dozens of golden shimmering fairies surrounding us. Dressed in gilded armor, their wings sparkle with gold, silver, and various shades in between. "What are they?" I ask, though it's obvious they're fairies, but it's also apparent they are special too. Thankfully, they don't seem upset or angry. Only protective. "What are they guarding?" I keep hold of Pax's arm as he faces them.

"They are the guardians of Werethea, the soul of the fairy realm," he says softly and bows.

I bow with him about to ask what Werethea is when several of the guardians gasp.

"I didn't bow right?" I'm confused and more than a little worried, though I look to Pax for help.

He smiles, clearing his throat. "It's unusual for someone of your stature to bow at all," he says.

"Oh?" I straighten and try to smile though I think it might have

come out as a grimace.

“They know who you are and consider you bowing to them a great honor.” He stands and pats my hand and I loosen my grip slightly.

“Well it’s an honor to meet them,” I respond a little louder so they can hear.

Pax nods and steps forward. I go with him.

“One of the guards. A woman with long silver hair steps away from the rest of the fairies. “Welcome Paxton.” She glances at me, but only briefly. “What is the meaning of this visit?” Her skin is deep brown like wet earth. What stands out are her eyes. Only a shade or two lighter than her skin, they glisten with intellect and curiosity. “The Soul’s whereabouts is a secret few know, and you were told to forget.” Her full lips form a grim line.

“I know, Roton, but Aurora must learn the truth of this realm. It’s why we’re here.” As he speaks, each word gets stronger, like he’s convincing himself as well as the tough leader.

Roton crosses her arms over her armored chest. “I do not think it wise. I can see the darkness in her. Its tendrils still leak into her heart.” She looks at me like I’m a cockroach. Obviously, her shock that I bowed a moment ago has worn off.

I work to make myself invisible, but the effort is useless.

“You know me,” he says, and swallows. “If this weren’t important, I wouldn’t be here, but it is imperative Aurora meet Werethea.” Pax keeps his voice controlled but kind. “The Soul has brought us here so let us pass,” he continues, gritting his teeth and crossing his arms. “Please.” The word is said without politeness. Yet, it wins Roton over and she drops her hands to her sides.

“Very well.” Roton turns away from us and faces the other guards. They part as one to the left and right in a unanimous movement, like they’ve been doing the move for thousands of years. Something tells me they have, and I study them more closely. No wrinkles on their faces. Nothing that would reveal the fairies ages. They might be

eighteen or eighteen hundred.

Roton walks through the center of the mass. “Follow me,” she says, her voice clipped.

OceanofPDF.com

PAXTON FALLS in line behind her. I hesitate a moment before hurrying to catch up. There isn't room for us to stand side by side as we pass the guards, so I take the opportunity to give tentative glances to either side of the line, searching the blank faces of the gold and silver guards. The guardians of Werethea, who or whatever that is.

It's difficult to know whether the guards are male or female. Sometimes like with Roton, there's an obvious tell. Hers is her long hair. But come to think of it, male fairies can have long hair too.

Once I'm through the line, I move beside Paxton.

He gives me a tender look, one that is void of displeasure and full of love. My stomach flutters in ways it never did with Carson. Or anyone else.

As I smile, I wonder if Troy has right or wrong. Was Paxton my evil true love? If anything, it was my own choices that led me down the path of dark magic, not the shadowy fairy beside me. Pax was as disappointed in me as Troy when I chose to channel my darkness.

At that line of thinking, my gut fills with guilt and I drop my chin to my chest, wishing I could take all of my horrible choices back. If only, I think and snort.

Paxton looks at me, one eyebrow raised in question.

I shake my head. It feels wrong to speak. It's as though we are moving closer and closer to something divine or powerful or both. Each step brings us deeper into the light, which is so different from the Olclag I know, I wonder if we're no longer in the grimy place.

Though, Pax did say we were at a different time.

Weird.

The whole supernatural, paranormal, fairies, vampires, witches, magic, angels, and whatever else I don't know much about is weird.

“That’s putting it mildly,” a soft voice whispers from behind. Or maybe it was overhead. I look up but see nothing new. Just more light.

Paxton gives me another curious look.

“Did you hear that?” I whisper.

“I didn’t hear anything.” He shakes his head, but I watch his shoulders tense and then relax. He’s on high alert. Then he relaxes again and smiles. “It’s okay.”

“What is?” It’s my turn to be confused.

“Werethea spoke to you. That’s good. She deems you worthy.” A shadow passes over his features and I shudder at what would’ve happened to us—to me if she didn’t feel that way. After only a moment to consider, I push those thoughts aside. They do me no good.

Anxiety twists up the trembling excitement I felt a moment ago and turns to knots. “What is Werethea?” I ask, my voice barely audible.

“She is…” Paxton’s voice trails off. “She wants to show you.” He nods encouragingly as though hearing something I can’t. “It won’t be much longer. We are nearly there.”

I wrap my arms around myself, fighting against my need to run away. There’s a voice in my head, different than the one from a moment ago and it’s telling me I don’t belong here. It’s telling me to get as far from this place as possible.

Paxton stops and I do the same, sensing that whatever is in front of us, whatever it is the guard, Roton is blocking from my view, visiting with the being will change my life forever.

I hold my breath as Roton moves out of the way. Before I can see what it is, I drop my gaze taking the cowardly approach.

Paxton gets down on one knee.

Without thinking, I do the same, keeping my eyes focused on a tiny golden pebble just in front of me and wishing I wasn’t so terrified of

letting myself see what Werethea is.

“Welcome, Aurora.” The voice is soft like the fur of a kitten as it brushes against my ears.

I don’t respond. My body begins to shake. I can’t help it.

“Rise Paxton,” she says.

Paxton stands, his fingers brushing against my shoulder, sending a shiver of love beaming through my veins. The unexpected feeling comes in such a wave that I sway and am nearly knocked over.

“Rise Aurora,” Werethea repeats to me.

I do, standing on wobbly legs but keep my focus on my hands.

“You need not fear, Aurora.” Her voice is close and my breath hitches in my throat at her nearness, though I can’t see any part of her yet. “Look at me,” she adds.

I have no choice but to lift my head. My eyes pan slowly from the creamy folds of her long gown until they reach the ends of her midnight hair, hanging past her waist in gentle curls, her small hands at her sides, resting comfortably. She shimmers as though I’m looking at her through a filter. Her waist is small and circled by a thin black belt. As I continue up, I see there’s a charm dangling at the end of a long golden chain. It looks to be filled with a silvery substance and rests between her breasts. I continue up and see she’s wearing a black choker made of what looks like the same material as her belt. It’s shiny and thin. On the end is a small diamond charm. When my eyes take in her face, I start breathing again. Not because she isn’t stunning, because she is, but because I forgot I was holding my breath and need some air. Her lips are thick and pouty and a soft pink. Her face shaped like a heart with large eyes. The scleras are white, and they shimmer like satin while her irises are mostly black with a deep blue ring near the pupil. She has long black lashes. Along the lids is diamond encrusted eyeliner. Her hair is parted in the center of her face and frames it without a wayward strand.

For the briefest moment I wonder if she’s real. Her smile grows

larger and I find myself returning it. The longer I look at her, the more beautiful she becomes. Though I guess beautiful isn't the right word. She's beyond anything I've ever seen. Other worldly… Or divine.

Werethea waits patiently for my appraisal. "Welcome to the center of the Olclag. I am the soul of the fairy realm." She pauses.

My throat is dry again, like sandpaper and hurts when I try to swallow.

"You've had a lot going on recently, haven't you?" she asks.

I think I nod but can't be sure.

One of her hands reaches out and takes one of mine. She's neither hot or cold, but a pleasant warm. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Aurora."

"And yours," I say after several bumbling and embarrassing tries. My gaze falters and I take in our touching hands.

Werethea smiles, seemingly bemused by my idiocy before releasing my hand. "We must celebrate Aurora's visit," she says, stepping back so she can look at Roton.

The guardian leader bows slightly. Then snaps her fingers. Two lesser guards step out of line and go over to her. Roton speaks to them briefly before they rush away.

In that instant, the overwhelming light dissipates, and the lush green forest once again appears around us. It comes alive. Birds sing their songs while other creatures get back to whatever they were doing. Werethea turns and I see a throne made of twigs and blooming flowers in pinks, purples and blues. She sits, crossing one leg over the other. She reaches out a hand. "Come, Paxton."

He takes her outstretched hand.

"How does a party sound?" She looks at him like a mother elated to see her son after a long trip away.

"Wonderful," Paxton says. I can't tell how he feels about Werethea. Reverence comes to mind, but there's also some nervousness too and I

wonder why.

My question is immediately answered.

“I’m not upset by your decision to leave the guard, Paxton. No need to be anxious. You did the right thing,” Werethea says. “No need to dwell on it.” She speaks with finality, releasing Paxton’s hand. Then she looks at me. “Before Paxton became a Master at the Fairy Academy, he was the leader of my guard.”

That surprises me and I feel my eyebrows raise as I study him.

Werethea continues, “His dual magics were of great use to me and he was my greatest protector before Roton.” She sighs and looks again at Paxton. “But alas he wanted more from his life, including love.”

I shudder when she speaks the last word. Because I know she’s talking about me, though I can’t help but think of the woman in the market. “You didn’t care that he is born of two magics?” I ask hesitantly, knowing it’s a crime in the upper kingdom.

“Definitely not.” Her features become sharp. “More than one magic is a blessing, not a curse regardless how it is brought about.”

I feel the weight of her words and am grateful she feels that way, mainly because that’s how I feel as well. It’s a relief to know Werethea agrees, but I wonder why. “Who are you?” I ask boldly, clenching my fists a moment before relaxing them. Pax said she is the soul of the fairy realm, but what exactly does that mean?

“I am the original fairy and keeper of this realm. My heart and body keep the realm vibrant and alive.” Her features tighten a moment before she softens them. “But enough about me, for now.” She stands. “A celebration is in order and we will honor you.” She claps her hands and we are no longer in the forest, but in an enormous bedroom suite. “This is yours. I will send the best fairies to help you get ready for the party.” She heads to the silver door and is gone before I can thank her.

Paxton is gone as well, and I wonder what she’s done with him.

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER HANDLING PERSONAL NEEDS, I take some time to wander around my room. It's extravagant with a four-poster bed all in gold with gold and stark white bedding covered with dozens of throw pillows. There's also a sitting area that is white and is downy soft. I sink into it a moment and think about using the throw at the other end and taking a brief nap, but there's a knock at my door. Before I can respond, the door is thrown open and three fairies burst in. Their wings are the same in ruby, topaz, and lavender and I gather they are triplets.

"Hello, your highness," they say in unison. One is carrying a dress that is the color of onyx but has a shimmering overlay in her arms. She tosses it onto the bed before facing me. The other two wait. One carries a cherry colored tote while the other has all sorts of bags in her arms. I'm guessing they contain shoes and accessories, but don't know for sure.

I sit up and watch them like I'm in a dream and only an observer until the one who held the dress acknowledges me.

"I'm Clara and these are my sisters, Lara and Tara. We are here to get you ready for Werethea's party." She rubs her hands together before coming to stand in front of me. "Shall we get started?" She holds out her hand.

I take it, allowing her to help me stand.

For the next several hours, the three of them do their thing. They ask me questions, which I answer to the best of my ability. I ask them some as well. The sisters have worked for Werethea for more than five hundred years though they don't look a day over twenty.

When they are finally satisfied with my appearance, Clara motions me over to a full length mirror. My blond hair is loosely curled and pinned up with pins decorated with a black diamond. Each pin

together makes what looks like a crown around my head. It's stunning. My dress is strapless in the front and curves super low in the back, giving my wings plenty of room. It's black and tight-fitting, so it clings to all of my curves until it reaches my upper thighs. There's a slit up one side, showing off one of my legs, and giving me the chance to show off the black diamond encrusted shoes. By the looks of them, my feet should be hurting, but they are more comfortable than my most comfortable slippers.

My makeup is smoky, making my blue eyes pop, and my lips are a bright pink that matches the most prominent color of my wings.

"Thank you," I breathe, unable to stop turning from side to side as I study my reflection. The dress is a daring choice and I look older than I am. At the same time, I feel confident, though I asked the sisters how my dress remained up and they snickered before answering that it was by magic. "But it won't fall down," I verify.

"You'll need magic to get it off," Lara says before glancing at her sisters.

"It's amazing," I admit. "Thank you," I say again.

"It was our pleasure," Clara responds just as there's a knock on the door.

"That will be Master Narcissus," Lara says, and her cheeks blush bright red. Tara smacks her lightly before opening the door. Her cheeks have reddened as well.

Not that I blame them. I'm suddenly nervous and unsure what to do with my hands as I turn away from the mirror and toward the door.

Paxton steps in and I stop breathing a moment. He is wearing a black suit with a midnight blue shirt that is the exact color of the steak in his hair and the interior of his wings. His eyes get wide when he sees me, and I think mine do too. As one, we move toward the other.

"I want to kiss you," he says when he reaches me.

I want that too, but don't want to offend the fairies who just spent hours putting me together.

Clara makes a noise and Pax glances at her before continuing. "But I won't. At least not until after the party." He tucks my hand into the crook of his arm and escorts me out of the room and down the hall until we reach a set of double doors. There are two male fairies standing on either side. Dressed from head to toe in gold, they practically blend into the walls and decor. When they see us, they snap to attention and push the doors open.

Night has descended upon the Olclag, but there is still plenty of moody light. Thousands twinkle above us in rows and lines, though they aren't still. Upon closer inspection, I see they are brownies and I send out a silent thank you. A dozen round tables covered in golden cloth and ornamented with gold and silver settings fan out in front of a long rectangle table. It's decorated the same as the round ones, but with only three table settings and three gold and silver high back chairs. I can only look at them for a moment because creatures of all shapes and sizes begin to appear and find places to sit.

My mouth falls open more than once and I have to remind myself to keep it closed. There's a giant of a creature whose backside completely engulfs the little chair he sat on. I have no idea how it isn't smashed to rubble. At another table, there's is a woman dressed in a black hooded cloak that leaves most of her face in shadow. Except the spiraled red horn extending out from the center of her forehead. And then there's a woman whose skin is an emerald green and looks like the scales of an alligator. A thin sheath of a matching dress barely covers the important bits. Her hair is also long and green. It's up in a high ponytail, revealing slightly lighter green pointy ears.

She's an elf, I think, glancing at Paxton.

His surprise is nearly as great as mine, but he doesn't say anything because Werethea walks in followed by her guardians, including Roton who is at her right.

The rest of the tables fill up with others. It occurs to me that there is one creature of interest at each of them and then their entourage. Many look like a watered down version of the creature that caught my attention, including a beautiful woman dressed all in red and an incredibly handsome man seated beside her. No doubt they are in love. I feel the sensations rolling off them. To the right of the woman is another. She has wings, but they aren't like mine. They remind me of a bat. In a table directly to the left of them is a woman with similar wings, though they are much bigger and gray like a storm cloud, and her scaly skin is the same color.

Roton catches my eye and waves us over. Paxton takes my hand and together we weave through the tables until we're in front of Werethea.

She smiles. "You will sit beside me, Aurora." She indicates the seat to her right before sitting.

"O-Okay, thank you," I say quietly, wishing I didn't stutter.

Pax and I make our way around the table where a fairy holds our chairs out for us and pushes them in as we sit.

Once we're seated, our glasses are filled and Werethea picks up hers. Everyone picks up theirs as well.

"It is an honor to have you all with us." She pauses, taking the time to meet each of their gazes. "Aurora is young, but she is the one I've chosen, which is why I invited you all here on such short notice. You would do me a great honor to introduce yourselves and accept her as I have."

My heart stops and I glance at Paxton. "What is she talking about?" I'm not sure whether the words leave my lips or not.

Paxton shakes his head slightly, though it's apparent he knows, but doesn't want to say.

"Let us fill our bellies before we will our hearts," Werethea adds.

Before I can comprehend what she's said, food materializes in front of each of us.

By magic!

I stare at the salad but can't do anything else. The words Werethea said are stuck inside my brain. Finally, I lean over to her. "You accept me for what?" I think I heard what she said, but I really need her to say it again.

"Never you mind, Aurora. Eat. You'll feel better." She picks up her fork, stabs what looks like a small, yellow tomato, and puts it in her mouth. "Go on," she says around the small bite.

I do as she commands, stabbing a similar looking vegetable and gingerly putting it in my mouth. It does taste similar to a tomato, though not quite the same as those I've eaten in the human realm.

Once half her salad is gone, she leans over. "You look extraordinary, by the way." She smiles as she speaks, and I respond in kind.

"It's all because of Clara, Lara, and Tara." I set down my fork and place my hands in my lap.

"Their magic is special, but they can only enhance what is already there." She eyes my wings as she sips her drink, which I notice isn't the same as what's in my glass. Hers is clear and bubbly while mine is pink and slightly frothy. Not that I'm complaining. It's the most delicious beverage I've ever tasted.

"Thank you." It doesn't escape me she's wearing a similar dress to mine, only it's gauzy white with gold and silver threads throughout to match her wings. It also occurs to me that I feel a kinship to her. "Do I know you somehow?" I ask, studying her intently.

There's surprise in her eyes. "My blood runs through your veins, Aurora" she responds softly, glancing out over the crowd before continuing. "And that's why only you can save us."

I don't know what I expected her to say, but that wasn't it. "We're related?"

She laughs and it's a sound that resonates deep in my soul. "That's right, dear Aurora."

I can't even fathom what she means by the second part—that part about only me being able to save us. Who's us? And save us from what? So I do my best to ignore it, thankful the main course appears by magic as the salads are whisked away by an unseen force. Again, each of our plates are different. Hers looks like a stew while Paxton's is some kind of meat and potatoes with a little something green on the side. The big man's plate is enormous and filled with what looks like a rack of ribs the size of a cow. As for mine, it's similar to Werethea's only my sauce is white instead of red. I pick up my spoon and shove a bite in my mouth. My taste buds sing with happiness. Potatoes in alfredo with celery, carrots, onions and mushrooms. My insides immediately warm.

I forget about anything but my food until its gone.

Even dessert is amazing. It tastes like angel food cake covered in strawberries and topped with cream, though it's better than anything I've ever eaten.

Too soon the food is gone, and I know it's time to get back to our celebration which feels more like a meeting.

Werethea clasps her hands together in front of her. "Before the entertainment, I would ask each of you to introduce yourselves to Aurora and tell her how you know her." She indicates the table closest to her, which is the woman with the ruby horn. "Jada, you're first."

The woman stands, removing her hood as she steps over to the center of our table directly in front of me. She bows.

Her hair is long and covered in daisies. It's also a deep red, the same color as her lips and slightly brighter than her horn. Another surge of familiarity washes over me. I clasp my hands together, thinking she does look familiar, but I'm unsure why or how. I would remember if I met a woman with a horn growing from her forehead. But something about the daisies…

OceanofPDF.com

"AURORA," she begins once she's straightened. "We met on your first visit into the Olclag." As she speaks, her eyes flash and she becomes the shirtless and stark white man with the pointy teeth. He called me yummy, I think.

And I'm immediately shaking.

Werethea rests a calming hand on my arm and I relax. "It's alright, Aurora. Jada won't hurt you now." She eyes the man before he shifts again, this time into a black unicorn.

Her shiny black eyes are calm, and she comes forward.

"You must touch the tip of her horn," Werethea says. "In that way, you can get to know her."

I glance at the fairy briefly before looking at Paxton. He seems on edge, but nods. "No worries," he says, giving me a broad smile.

I trust him and swallow before reaching my pointer finger out and prick my finger on the sharp tip. Before I can pull away to see if I'm bleeding, I'm whisked away into a land not unlike this Olclag. Filled with bright white flowers like the ones in her hair and lush greenery. Off to the right is a whole herd of unicorns.

Jada nickers and I understand what she's saying. That they are her family. Sadness permeates my heart and I face the unicorn. She changes into the woman with red hair.

"I left them to help Werethea. It was my calling to be the Olclag's healer—to be the healer. But all things must come to an end and Werethea has been around for thousands of years. Her time has come." She takes my hand, turning it so the finger I pricked on her horn is facing us.

And we are no longer in Jada's land, but someplace else. It's dark and foreboding. In the distance is a castle. At once I recognize it as the

one in my dream when I passed out on my front lawn. It seems like forever ago, but the castle is unforgettable.

I blink several times. “What is this place?” There is a slight prick on my finger. I catch my breath as blood rapidly flows from the wound, down my hand to my wrist before it trickles to the ground. As soon as the first drop of my blood touches the darkened and decaying terrain, it changes. The decay vanishes and is replaced by a seedling. Vibrant green, the stem grows rapidly before the bloom of a white daisy touches the back of my hand. The flower grew in seconds. Surprised, I look to Jada for answers.

“This is the future of the fairy kingdom if you do not accept your fate and take your place.” Her eyes are kind and I sense the rightness of her words.

“But I don’t understand,” I say, caressing the flower after my wound heals.

“Your blood is the same as that of the original fairy, Werethea. Only blood from her blood will set this realm right.”

A noise escapes my throat as I try to voice my concerns, but Jada continues.

“You will never be alone. I will be around to help when you need me as will the others.”

Before I can respond, I am back in the Olclag seated between Paxton and Werethea.

Pax rests a hand on my thigh and I’m immediately comforted. He doesn’t say a word, but I know he’s here if I need him and am so grateful.

Jada walks back to her seat, putting her hood up so I can no longer see her face. A kinship has somehow formed between us, like an unbreakable bond. She nods as though to confirm she feels the same thing I do. Then picks up her golden goblet and takes a sip.

It’s then I recognize just how thirsty I am and pick up my glass as well. When I’ve drained the glass dry, I set it back down.

“Next up is Shereneth. Come forward please,” Werethea says.

The gray scaly woman with the enormous wings comes forward. Her dress is sleek, like liquid metal and her hair is long and the color of morning sky. She bows. Then holds out her hand. “If you would be so kind,” she says, her gunmetal gray eyes never leaving mine.

Hesitant, I place my hand in hers. Her skin is warm like an oven and sends a shiver of warmth through me as my mind is whisked away. We are flying. Well, she’s flying and I’m riding on her back. She is in the form of a great dragon. As we sail toward a setting sun, she speaks.

“You will recognize me as the caterpillar who ate Paxton.” She burps like it was only a moment ago, sending a puff of smoke in front of her.

I want to be nervous but can’t help the giggle that escapes my throat. Flying with her is like nothing I’ve ever done before. I think about that part in Harry Potter, when he’s flying on the hippogriff and want to spread my arms wide and embrace the moment. It’s a far cry from how I used to react to even the idea of flying and am glad to recognize far I’ve come and how much I’ve grown.

“We are changed in the Olclag because of the sickness spreading over the land,” Shereneth says, interrupting my thoughts. “Lucretia was chosen to take Werethea’s place. But instead of following her destiny, she used her power to wreak evil in the under kingdom. Soon that evil will spread to the upper kingdom. You must choose to take Werethea’s place or we are doomed to die.”

“But you’re a dragon. You don’t belong in the fairy kingdom,” I say.

“I may not be a fairy, but I do belong in the fairy realm. I cannot remember living anyplace else, nor would I want to. The fairy realm is my home and has been since Werethea was created. She is my dearest friend and understand me when I say that accepting you to replace her isn’t an easy decision. As a dragon, my magic comes from my soul and

I've seen into yours. There is darkness in you. Despite that fact and that you momentarily embraced the darkest parts of yourself, you have chosen the light. For that, you deserve to be the next Soul of the realm."

We are so close to the setting sun it feels like I can reach out and capture one of the rays. I want to pinch myself awake from this dream as I glimpse over the side and see just how high we are. I can barely make out anything below us. It's my decision she said, but whatever I decide there will be consequences. "Thank you for telling me, Shereneth." As with Jada, I feel a bond with her and know we are connected in a way I may never understand.

"It was a pleasure, Aurora." As she speaks, I am again in the Olclag and beside Paxton and Werethea.

I can't help but sigh with relief since I have a feeling something similar will happen with each of those I meet.

Next, I'm introduced to Carina. She is the alligator slash mermaid creature who nearly killed me in the Olclag. In actuality, she's an elf and it is her sight that warns of danger. She told Werethea about Lucretia's betrayal and my coming. Carina touches her forehead to mine and shows me what will happen to the fairy kingdom should I choose not to take Werethea's place. But she also shows me something else. My future if I do decide. There will be trials and hardships, but there is also family and love. When we return to the Olclag, I hesitate to release her as a tear drops onto my cheek.

"Are you okay?" Paxton leans in and asks.

"Yes," is all I can get out, but I squeeze his hand under the table. I don't dare hope what Carina showed me will come true. Not yet.

Landoth introduces himself next and takes me to the land of the trolls. While there, he explains he is the tree that almost killed Merida and Tiana and apologizes.

"In the Olclag as it is in your time, Lucretia poisoned us to the point where we don't know what we are doing or can't control

ourselves." He also explains he's the fairy realm's strength, but he is waning considerably and doesn't think he can hold off the sickness much longer.

After him, I meet the vampire queen, Snow White. She is beyond intimidating, but also, I sense her kindness. We are whisked away to her realm where she shares some of her story and what it means to be given a choice and choosing incorrectly. We talk in a forest with her castle as a backdrop. The fruit on the trees is plump and smells sweet and delightsome, like a perfectly ripened apple.

As we make our way through the orchard, a Hunter whose name is Christopher comes up to the two of us. At first, Snow seems ready to kill him and calls him a traitor. After a few tense moments and a lot of groveling by the Hunter, Snow reluctantly allows him to stay. He represents one of the seven magics of the world—that of the Hunter. Between the two of them, I learn that in every realm there is need for all seven magics. Otherwise the realm couldn't exist. But most importantly, I learn that there is an essence of each of those magics within me as well.

Then Snow shows me the beginning. As in the beginning of Earth's time. When the Unknowns created the world as well as the original vampires, Silindra and Sharra. She shows me the dragons, including the original called Abernathy as well as the creation of all seven magics and the beings correlating with them.

By the time I return to the Olclag and my place at the table, I'm exhausted. It's hard to tell how long Snow and Christopher kept me. It feels like days even though it can't have been too long. Still, all the other guests, except the man beside Snow and the young woman with wings on the other side of her have left. I want to know who they are.

Inside my mind, Snow gives me the answer. The man is her husband, Dorian. He is somehow part of the seven magics too, though she isn't sure how and then there's the girl. Her name is Jasmine. She is their daughter. I smile as I watch Snow return to them. They stand and leave the party, disappearing into a mist that I'm guessing will

return them to their realm. The girl, Jasmine studies me a moment before lifting her hand in a farewell wave as she vanishes.

“Now you see,” Werethea says when they’re gone. She stands and pulls me up with her.

“I think so,” I say, as all I’ve been taught circles through my mind in jumbled images and feelings. It’s a lot to take in. Overwhelming even.

Pax stands beside me, a hand rests on my waist. A rush of gratitude swirls through my heart. I am so glad he’s here. Troy got it wrong when he spoke about Pax saying he was my evil true love. Deep in my heart and soul, I know Pax is the only one for me. There isn’t a doubt. He isn’t my evil true love or my pure true love, but he *is* my true love. Good and evil. Right and wrong. Both exist in him as they do in all of us.

I rub my chapped lips together and lean against Paxton. “I do,” I reiterate, wishing for some water. At the thought, a glass appears in my hand and I drink it, not even bothering to be surprised.

When I finish, the glass is gone, and I force myself to believe I did actually drink water and that it wasn’t a figment of my imagination.

“Good. Now, Paxton, I need you to leave us,” Werethea says. “Aurora and I require a moment alone.”

He tenses behind me and I lean into him further. I don’t want him to go.

“Very well,” she says with a sad smile. “What I will now reveal affects both of you anyway, but it will be hard to hear.” She moves in close and takes us each by the hand.

OceanofPDF.com

THE THREE OF us are no longer at the party. The tables are gone, and the landscape is completely different. Where we are now is also a mystery. Walls of water roar on either side of us, misting us. Directly in front is a golden throne and behind us is darkness. Above, millions of stars twinkle and under our feet is a ruby paved road.

Werethea stands between Pax and I, but only for a moment and then she turns us, so we are in a triangle and facing each other. “You must understand,” she begins above the thundering water. “What I’m about to tell you must happen. Otherwise, the fairy realm and everyone in it will cease to exist… except Lucretia and her followers. But that cannot be. For once she takes over the fairy realm, after a time it won’t be enough, and she’ll move on. Power is a ravenous master and must be fed. She won’t be satisfied with just this realm for long.” Her eyes bore into Pax and then me. “Do you understand?”

I am shivering with cold and fear but speak softly. “Yes, Werethea.” After all that’s been shown to me by the others, there is no question what she’s about to tell us is the truth. I couldn’t doubt her even if I wanted to.

“Paxton, you have known me a long time. Despite your choices, do you believe I will not lie?” Her dark eyes wait patiently for him to respond.

Pax tugs me close to him, but nods. “Of course, Werethea. You have always spoken truth.” His jaw works in frustration, but only because he doesn’t want to hear what she has to say any more than I do.

“Good.” Werethea notices my shaking and stops the water, leaving me feeling exposed. The quiet is deafening too. She notices and starts the water again, but more slowly so that the water trickles down in a soft rush.

I sigh with relief and think of a cloak for warmth. One surrounds me and I snuggle into it. Pax pulls me against him, and I smile. Whatever she will tell us, we can get through it because we have each other.

A passage from one of my aunties spell books comes to mind.

Love is more than a feeling.

It's the beating of your heart.

The intake and exhale of your breath.

Without your true love, there is no life.

For when love is real, it realigns your every attribute.

Even your soul befalls change.

Twined as one.

When I read the words, I was with Carson and chuckled, thinking the person who wrote those words must've had one too many drinks of the hard stuff.

As the words fill my mind, I realize true love is its own kind of magic. When it's real, there is nothing more powerful in all the world.

"Aurora," Werethea says, snapping me back to the here and now.

"Yes, I'm listening," I say.

She closes her eyes a moment then opens them, and I swear I see fear. Quickly, she blinks and whatever I thought I saw is gone. "To save our realm requires the ultimate sacrifice," she begins.

"What's that?" I glance back at Paxton to see if he knows. By the look on his face, it isn't good.

"That cannot be," he says, his voice like steel as his hold on me tightens.

"I'm afraid so," Werethea says. "As you know, Aurora possesses all of the magics."

"There must be another way." Pax is furious and also scared. I sense both in him and wonder why.

“This is why I only wanted to talk to Aurora. I knew how difficult this would be for you to accept, but accept you must, Paxton.” The sadness leaves Werethea’s face and is replaced by a furious determination.

“Please clarify,” I say, my anxiety rising. “Lucretia stole most of my magic. I’m of little use really.” I hold out my hands like she can see my lacking.

“It isn’t your magic I need.” She blinks several times. “But I will clarify by getting right to the point.” She looks up at the twinkling night and then nods. “You are pure and rare and the best of all the fairies in the land. For that reason, you must die in order for the fairy realm to live.”

“I—” She must have sipped too much of her fairy juice and is confused or drunk. Before I can say that, I sense she is completely, one hundred percent serious. Not only that, but like the bonds I felt with the others tonight, there is a connection between her and I. For that reason, I know she is telling the truth.

Werethea continues. “Not only must you die, but your true love…” At that, she looks at Paxton. “He must be the one to kill you.”

Paxton is tight as a coil. I feel his body stiffen and get the sense he intends to whisk me away at any moment.

“So Lucretia’s curse over me must come true regardless,” I say.

“Yes,” Werethea says. “By the time she realized her curse was fulfillment of the prophecy, it was too late.” She shakes her head. “But even the wicked can’t escape their destiny,” she adds with a desolate smile.

“You will have to find another way because I don’t care what you say, I will never kill Aurora.” His hard voice breaks. “I can’t.” Tears fill his eyes and I see even he knows Werethea’s words are genuine.

“It must be done here, in the heart of the Olclag and you must retrieve the blade from Lucretia—the one you used on her those many months ago.”

At her words, shame reddens my face. “I am sorry for that,” I whisper.

“Don’t be.” She give me a gentle smile. “Sometimes we have to momentarily embrace the darkness so we can appreciate the light.”

I nod and she pulls me into a hug. At Paxton’s absence, I’m instantly afraid, but also resolute. We will do this. Paxton will kill me with Lucretia’s blade here at the heart of the Olclag and I will die. It must be done.

Werethea whispers in my ear so softly, I barely hear her. “I need to make Paxton forget all that’s been said. Otherwise he will do something foolish. I sense him making plans even now. We both know I’m right about what must be done. It’s imperative or the fairy realm with be destroyed. Understand?”

“Yes,” I say just as softly, and I suddenly feel alone. The burden of what must happen is mine to endure and I nod. “Do it.”

“Thank you, Aurora.” As she speaks, the world begins to swirl like rain on a painting and I am back in my seat. There is no one else around. Not even Paxton. At his absence, I’m afraid and push out of my seat. “Pax,” I shout, taking off in the direction we came from.

Inside the castle, I head down the hall toward the room where the fairies got me ready. As I reach my door, I sigh, wondering where he could be.

“Aurora.”

It’s Paxton. He sounds tired. Steeling myself against all I’ve learned, I plaster a smile on my face and turn. “There you are,” I say, rushing into his arms.

His hair is tousled, and his shirt is untucked from his pants, several buttons undone, giving me a glimpse of his muscled chest. Even his feet are bare. “I must’ve fallen asleep,” he says as his arms surround me in a cocoon of warmth.

I inhale the scent of him. “It wasn’t the worst party I’ve ever attended,” I say with a forced laugh.

“Yeah.” I feel him smile against my hair. “But the food was good.”

I turn into his arms and look up at him. He’s the most handsome man or fairy in all the realms. No doubt about it. And he’s going to have to kill me. At that thought, I feel my face fall.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, suddenly on high alert. “Let’s go into your room. I’m sure it’s nicer than mine.”

I open my door and walk us passed my bed and to the window. Stop and turn so that I can put myself back in his arms. “Can we stay here in this room, just the two of us forever?” The words come out with more force than I intended, but I do mean them.

“Just the two of us?” His face turns serious. “I could live with those terms.”

“Me too.” I tilt my head up, hoping he’ll understand what I need. His lips on mine.

“You want me to kiss you, don’t you?” He gives me a sensuous smile.

“If you—” Before I can finish, his lips brush against mine. It’s all the encouragement I n need, and I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers playing with the edges of his hair.

He crushes me against him, and our mouths become hungry. With a low growl in the back of his throat, he presses my mouth open and we are lost in each other.

OceanofPDF.com

I WAKE JUST as I fell asleep, with my body across Paxton's. A quick perusal of the room reveals we are no longer in Werethea's castle, but back in the hovel in the Olclag in our current time. Though I knew Pax and I couldn't stay in that moment forever, while we spent the night in each other's arms, I hoped.

Stifling a sigh, I untangle myself from Pax and stand.

He face is serene like he doesn't want me to know how he's feeling, and I realize there is still so much I don't know about the fairy. Like how old is he really?

Paxton stands as well and pulls me into a side hug. "My love," he whispers, kissing my cheek.

Tingles run the length of my body as memories of our time together rush through me. "Hi," I say, glancing up at him.

"When we finally fell asleep," he lifts an eyebrow and my face gets hot. "Werethea told me we need to go to the center of the Olclag and there we will find what we need to save the fairy realm."

Profound sadness overwhelms me a moment and I wish he could remember our conversation with Werethea. About what has to happen. To me. And what he has to do. To me. As I search his eyes, it's obvious he doesn't. Really, it's for the best. At least for now. "Good," I say, clearing my throat and rolling back my shoulders.

Merida and Tiana's laughter filters over to us.

"I have it—" Pax begins but is interrupted.

"It's about time you both woke," Merida says coming out of the kitchen and pulling something from her pocket. "While you were asleep, that guy Troy appeared out of thin air and gave me this letter." At the memory, I see her face react with surprise.

"He came here?" I go to her and take the letter from her

outstretched hand. “What do you mean?” I ask confused. “Where is he?” I turn in a circle, searching the hut for a sign of him, but am disappointed.

“It was weird. He wasn’t here-here, but here enough to give me the letter.” Merida sounds crazy, but no crazier than what Paxton and I just went through.

“What did he want?” I glance out the dirty window at the dreary Olclag unsure about the time. It could be midnight or midday.

“He didn’t say anything. Just gave Mer the letter before he vanished.” Tiana wipes flour from her hands onto her yellow apron. “It was bizarre and scared the crap out of me.”

“Of us,” Merida adds, tucking her hands into her back pockets.

“What does it say?” Pax leans in as I turn from the window and open the letter. There isn’t much written in his handwriting.

It’s super short and to the point. More a message than a letter.

Dearest Rory,

I haven’t forgotten about you. Be courageous. Help is on the way!

Your Friend,

Troy

I can’t help but smile. What Troy wrote isn’t urgent or even necessary, but it’s exactly what I need to hear. Warmth tingles through my body. He’s forgiven me and I’m glad, though a wedge of guilt interrupts my good feelings. Strata is still dead because of me.

Merida and Tiana are back in the kitchen, talking quietly between themselves. Though our situation isn’t great, it’s amazing to see them again. Nostalgia washes over my heart as I think about our baking cookies, pies, cakes, whatever we could think of when we were in elementary and junior high. Not to mention all of the fun and wild dances we choreographed. In those moments, our friendship solidified. We became more than friends, our bond like sisters.

“Are you guys hungry?” Merida asks, smiling lightly. There are still

deep shadows under her eyes. Still suffering from the ill effects of this place, but okay. She holds out a plate filled with something that smells delicious.

Except I'm not hungry and the scent rolls my stomach.

Tucking Troy's letter into my pocket, I walk over and sit on one of two rickety chairs along the small island. "You've been busy," I say, studying my friends.

"When I woke up, I was famished. T and I made these. Here you go." Merida sets the confections on the counter between Pax and I as Tiana set a plate in front of each of us.

"Thanks." I force myself not to wrinkle my nose.

Pax acts like he hasn't eaten in a week and takes one, devouring it in two bites. "Amazing," he says after swallowing as he picks up another.

I watch him in fascination. "You have a little sugar," I say, and pause, wiping at the powdery goodness from the corner of his mouth.

He watches me, his lips quivering slightly, and I know he wants to kiss me again.

"How long were we out?" I ask before I give in and let him, and then have to explain.

"A few hours," Tiana says before taking a bite of a scone. "But Merida woke not too long after you guys went unconscious, so I didn't have much time to worry, especially when Troy said you both were fine."

"I'm so sorry we left you alone like that." I pick up a ball of sugar from the plate and stick it in my mouth. It melts on my tongue, sending my taste buds into overdrive. But the queasiness subsides some.

"Don't even worry about it. I'm just glad you," she pauses and looks from me to Pax before going on, "are both okay."

Can she tell something happened between us? Vampires are

supposed to have an extra super keen sense of smell. I look down at my hands a moment.

Pax nods. “Me too.” He wipes his hands on a napkin before reaching back and pulling the map from his pocket.

“What’s that?” Whatever Tiana senses, she dismisses it, moving the nearly empty plate to make room.

“This is a map of the Olclag,” he says, spreading it out and pointing at the very center where there’s a set of golden wings. “We need to get here. Werethea said we will find what we need…” He trails off and looks at me.

It’s then I notice my hands are clenched into fists and my breathing is erratic.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, but Merida and Tiana have the same question on their expressions.

“Nothing.” I straighten and shake my head, focusing intently on the map. “Is this us?” I point at the little hut on the map. It isn’t very far from the center of the Olclag. At least it doesn’t look too far on the map.

“Yes,” he responds after a few moments. “It’s been a while, but I should be able to get us there by midafternoon if we leave first thing in the morning.”

“Sounds like we have a plan,” Merida says. Her gaze lands on the window before looking away. It’s apparent she isn’t excited to go back outside, and I don’t blame her.

“Should we leave them here?” I don’t want them to see what will happen once we reach the center. Pax will have to kill me. But first I somehow have to get the blade from Lucretia.

Tiana and Merida voice their objections. I appreciate the effort, but I don’t want them to watch me die. Nor do I want to worry about them dying on our journey.

“Why don’t we find a way out first. Help Tiana and Merida get

back to the human realm and then you and I can go alone to the center." That sounds like the best idea to me. It's important they're safe and living their best lives. "Please," I add in a small voice.

Paxton takes my hand and shakes his head sadly. "I know what you're trying to do, and I appreciate the effort." He glances at my friends. "They appreciate your need to keep them safe, too, don't you?"

"Not really," Merida says, crossing her arms in frustration, though I sense her hesitancy.

"Not at all." Tiana shakes her head vigorously. "It's probably hard for you to get your head around it, Rory, but I'm a vampire. You need me." She sounds hurt, but mostly determined.

"And I have some magic," Merida adds.

I shouldn't be surprised, but I am and want to hear all about it. "Thanks guys." It warms my heart to witness the way the care.

"Besides, we don't have the time to get them out of here even if there was a way out. Lucretia has sealed us in here and her magic is anything but weak, right?" His gaze falls from my face and back to the map where he traces the path we will follow with his finger.

"Right." I'm beyond sad. This journey isn't going to end well for anyone, least of all me.

We spend the next hour making plans and packing whatever supplies we can find before Paxton tells us to get some sleep. Merida and Tiana take the bed in the one bedroom while Pax takes the floor, leaving me the couch in the living room.

After a couple of hours of tossing and turning, I fall into a fitful sleep…

I'm dreaming. At least I think so. I'm no longer in the hut but the common room in the academy. It's empty except a hunched over fairy who's sweeping the floor the old fashioned way. As I pass by him, he looks up.

“Can you see me?” I ask.

He tilts his head to one side and lets out a crazed cackle before turning away and continuing his work.

“Okay.” I hold up my fingers and see them though they appear faded. Like a ghost.

From down the hall, I hear someone speaking and move toward the sound. The hall and upcoming door is the same one I exited through with Paxton on the night of my eighteenth birthday. Carefully, I step out, making sure the door closes quietly before heading over to the field. Like that night, there is a large group of fairies dressed in various colored uniforms. All are standing at attention and Lucretia is addressing them. Lucretia has a full on army.

Is this a memory, I wonder.

Despite the fact that I want to leave this place, I can’t. Without trying, I glide over to Lucretia until I’m only a few feet away.

“The upper kingdom won’t know what hit them,” she shouts, addressing her army.

They cheer once in unison.

I’m two feet away.

“We will invade with our full force and take no prisoners!”

There’s a crazed ferocity on her face. I can’t look away even when I’m so close I can see the little hairs on her face.

The army roars twice in unison.

“Together, my friends, we will take what is rightfully ours!”

Three cheers from the crowd in unison.

I glance down and see the blade is on Lucretia’s belt. That’s why I’m here. Without knowing how, Werethea has brought me to Lucretia to retrieve the knife. Holding my breath, I reach out. As my fingers brush the hilt, Lucretia’s gaze turns and falls on me. A deadly stare emits from her vivid eyes. She speaks one word and with magic I’m back in the hovel drenched in a cold sweat. Breathing heavily, I clasp

my hands together. Hold it together, I think.

"Aurora?" Paxton's voice cuts through my fear.

I take a deep breath. "Everything's fine. Go back to sleep."

OceanofPDF.com

THE NEXT MORNING, we are up early. Paxton uses his earth and air magic to cloak us, similar to the one used to cloak the hut. Paxton explains his magic and the hut have become a part of the Olclag over the years, but that the creatures within will sense us once we step out of protective barrier surrounding the hut.

I'm terrified to leave but push those feelings down since the fate of the fairy realm rests in my hands. Or more accurately my blood. It must be spilled. There's no time to be afraid or to bemoan my situation. Fate is a freaky fiend and escaping is out of the question.

"Ready?" Paxton asks, taking my hand once we're outside. Off the porch and down the path we go. He's wearing a pack and a small smile. If I didn't know better, I would think we were off on an adventure.

"Yes." But I force us to stop at the edge of the barrier. I can't see it, but I sense it and close my eyes, ordering myself to be strong.

Merida is rattled too. Tiana has an arm around her shoulder, working to comfort her. "I swear if anything gets near you, I'll suck it dry before it has the chance to pounce."

Merida swallows and nods and then the two of them cross the barrier.

"You saw what I did to that caterpillar thing," Tiana continues, this time talking over her shoulder to me. "I have no problem killing the monsters." She is intense and I don't doubt she means it.

According to the information we were provided in the human realm, vampires can live forever and should be avoided at all costs. A stake can hurt them, but not for long. The type of vampire determines the way to kill one and none of those ways are easy. The knowledge gives me a whisper of solace, but not much. Because as kick butt as Tiana now is, she hasn't trained. It helps that she's fearless. She

proved herself when she killed the caterpillar thing, but that isn't the same. "I know you will," I respond, gritting back all of the things I want to say.

She smiles grimly, her focus momentarily shifting to Merida.

With only a slight pause, I step over the mostly invisible barrier surrounding the hut. Immediately, I feel movement beneath my feet. The insects and rustlings of unseen creatures stop. Silence permeates the air. Even the trees grow quiet. Sinister.

Though I have only a little magic left, I pour it into Paxton's cloaking magic. Paxton feels what I've done and squeezes my hand.

"We're going to get through this. I promise." There is so much love in his words and etched across his features.

In that moment, I think about telling him the truth. About what will happen when we reach the center of the Olclag. That I only hope he can get through what has to be done. My job is the easiest of the two. I just have to die. But he has to kill me. If the roles were reversed, I don't think I would have the resolve to go through with it, even knowing what's at stake.

I hope Paxton does.

As we trek through the gray and swampy Olclag, menace lurks all around us. Like a loosening coil on a spring, trying to hold back, but barely able to contain itself. I keep close to Pax while occasionally checking on T and Mer. Merida moves more confidently as each moment passes. I see it in the way she holds herself next to Tiana.

Without incidence, we come to the end of the path and the edge of a forest. Even Paxton is surprised we haven't been accosted by something monstrous yet. He pulls out the map. "We need to pass through here."

"Seems sketchy," Merida says, her voice small as she hugs herself.

"And dark," Tiana adds.

"But you can see in the dark, right?" That's another benefit of

vampirism. Really there are lots of benefits, except one. And I wouldn't be able to tolerate it. She has to drink blood to survive. Gross. No more real food. I think the term, eat to live came from a vampire.

"Of course, but Merida can't." I think she forgot for a moment that she can see in the dark but covers it up with her comment. "Did someone bring a flashlight?"

I think about a light in the darkness to illuminate our way. Magically, a ball of light appears a few feet above my head. It's bright red with shades of pink.

"It matches your wings," Merida says, gratefully.

I glance back, having forgotten about my wings again. Will I ever get used to them? It's doubtful.

"That's because her magic and her wings are connected," Pax says, distracted as he moves to one side searching for the edge of the forest for something. It's then I remember the night he came out of the forest. I was at a party and a drunk student was trying to have his way with me. Foreboding rushes through my heart at the memory followed quickly by appreciation.

I can't help but feel a hint of regret over the situation. The guy—Jesse deserves some payback!

Before I can mull over what I want to do to the guy, a shadowy image materializes. Bare chested, I recognize that it's Jada the unicorn. Except the sickness of the Olclag has changed her in many ways.

"You really do smell yummy," he says, flashing his pointy teeth.

From behind Jada, Paxton pulls out his wand, ready to pounce.

Tiana growls, bending at the waist.

"Wait," I say, holding up a hand. There's something different about Jada this time. I'm not sure how I know, but the feeling is tangible.

Neither Pax or Jada move, and I realize I'm holding them off with

my magic. “Jada,” I say softly, embracing the connection between us.

“I know you now. We’ve met.” Jada changes into the beautiful woman with red hair, a look of confusion muddling her features. “I didn’t recognize you the first time.”

“It’s okay,” I say, and without thinking I reach out and touch her shoulder.

“Don’t,” Paxton says, fighting against my magic.

I shake my head at him as Jada’s magic rushes into me. A cooling balm, it travels along my veins until it reaches my heart. There, Jada’s healing magic swirls, pumping her therapeutic magical elements into me. I pant at the change because it’s strong and immediate. I’m mended in a way I didn’t recognize was broken. I barely comprehend what’s happening before I feel my newly altered magic travel from my heart, down my arm and out through my palm and into Jada.

Confusion and shock changes Jada’s expression as a sparkling aura begins to shine through her pores. In an instant, she is no longer the woman with red hair, but an inky black unicorn with a ruby red horn. She shakes her mane and stomps one foot.

I’m surprised too because I don’t understand how this is happening, but I’m glad. At least I think so. It feels right.

Jada whinny’s and shifts forms into the woman again. “Lucretia’s sickness no longer resides within.” She looks at her hands, which are plump and full of life, the way I saw them when I was with her at Werethea’s party. “Thank you, Aurora.”

I relax my magical hold on Pax and Tiana as I study the unicorn woman. “I don’t know what happened, but my magic is healed too, and I know it’s because of you. I owe you my thanks.” I pull back my hand, but she grabs it and pulls me into a hug, laughing happily.

“You are a gift to us all,” she says, pushing me away from her so that she can look into my eyes. “I will join you on your journey and be of whatever help I can.” She turns her attention to Paxton. “Fairy guardian, you needn’t worry about me any longer. Aurora has driven

all of the disease from me and I am whole and once again in control of myself. Rest assured, Lucretia's malevolent magic no longer affects me." She blinks several times, waiting patiently for Paxton to respond.

He lowers his wand. "Very well, Jada." He sounds like one of Werethea's guardians and for the briefest moment I can see him as he once was. Garbed in golden armor, his wings various shades of silver and gold as a permanent shimmer hovers all around him.

"Aurora, why don't you ride on my back?" Jada shifts into her unicorn form, nudging me lightly.

"Thank you, but I'll walk," I say, patting her neck. She shakes her head but moves back. "I hope I haven't offended you. It's just I prefer to walk on my own." With my magic healed, I sense a strong tugging. Toward what I'm not sure.

"I am not offended, Aurora," Jada says. "Will you introduce me to the others?"

"With pleasure." I introduce Jada to Tiana and Merida. My friends are both more than a little star stuck. It isn't every day one of your childhood fantasies is fulfilled by being in such close proximity to a real life unicorn.

"Can I ride on your back?" I hear Merida ask. Her hands are clasped together like she's meeting her celebrity crush. She bats her eyelashes several times before taking a cautious step toward the beast.

I smile as I move close to Paxton. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me thoroughly, taking my breath away. When he releases my lips, I smirk. "What was that for?"

His fingers still tangled in my hair, he gazes on me with hunger and devotion. "You know I love you, right?"

I hold my breath at his words because while I believe him, it's new to hear him say it so boldly. "Yes." I take his face in my hands, stroking his cheeks with my thumbs as I search his eyes. "And I love you, Pax." I pull him down and kiss him again. This time I take the initiative and deepen the kiss.

A low rumble emits from his throat as he tightens his hold, his hands moving down my back and around my waist.

Tiana clears her throat. “You two aren’t alone you know? And in case you forgot, just about everything in this place wants to eat us.”

Merida giggles.

I untangle myself from Pax. Tiana’s hands are on her hips, but she’s doing her best not to smile. “Sorry about that.” That isn’t true. I’m not sorry. Since I’m going to die soon, I want as much time with Pax and my friends as I can get.

Jada kneels and allows a nervous Merida to climb on her back. I’m grateful because I know she’s safer near the unicorn.

We step into the forest together, Pax and me. My red glowing light rests above Pax’s head, making the thick and dank forest feel even more menacing. Occasionally I see the glowing yellow eyes of mysterious creatures as they track us, but they never leave the protection of the undergrowth. “What are they waiting for?” I whisper to Pax. It’s almost more stressful anticipating their attack. My shoulders strain and my legs quiver with expectation.

“They won’t attack,” Jada says.

I turn back, expecting her to have shifted back into the form of a human, but she’s still in her unicorn form and I slow to walk beside her. “Why not?”

“Because they sense what you did to me and are hopeful you can do the same for all of them.”

I wait for her to say more. After a few long minutes, she continues. “You saw what the Olclag can be. All of the creatures in this place were once good and filled with Werethea’s light and soul. Lucretia poisoned us all and turned us into monsters.”

“So they are fighting against the sickness?” I ask, hoping she won’t reveal what will happen once we get to the center of the Olclag. I don’t know whether she knows my destiny or not and want to keep my friends and my love from the pain as long as possible.

They don't know? Jada's voice is inside my head, tender and filled with kindness.

I shake my head. Then, like I'm speaking to myself, I explain what Werethea did by removing Paxton's memory of her telling him.

It will be difficult for them, especially the guardian. He loves you. That much is clear. In the end, they will understand. She pauses. *You will make sure they understand.* Uneasiness permeates her words and I get why. She doesn't want to return to what she was. Nor does she want to die. My sacrifice means she will never have to succumb to Lucretia's sickness again.

I am sorry for what you must endure, Jada says.

Thank you.

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN OUR GROUPS exits out the other side of the forest, it's late, not that the sky is much different. Gathered in a circle around a magical fire, we eat the remainder of the scones before getting some sleep. Tiana takes first watch.

As she stares out into the night, I can't help watching her. Physically, she hasn't changed much. She's still lean and beautiful. But the way she carries herself is different. No longer worried about mortal and human frailties. She is different in other ways too. There's a lot about her that's the same too. Her kindness. Protectiveness. Even her occasional silliness is there. She's still my best friend and I will miss her. Merida too. They are like sisters to me.

My mind wanders from my friends to my aunties. They are the only parents I've ever known. They were there for me when I skinned my knees trying to skateboard and each time I tried and failed at something. As well as my successes. They were my greatest cheerleaders. Physically as well as emotionally. Every good and strong and courageous part of myself exists because of them. Because of their love for me.

I wish I could tell them that. The last time they saw me, I gave into my dark magic, to all the wicked parts of myself. A wash of shame overwhelms me, and I close my eyes against those that I hurt and all I did to them…

At once, I'm no longer in the Olclag but standing off to the side of Lucretia. She's in her office, speaking with a group of fairies. I somehow know they are her commanders and she is talking war strategies with them. Most of it goes over my head until she mentions my mom and dad.

"Orion, you will capture the king and queen, secure them, and then wait for my instructions. No matter what, I want them alive." An

oily smile lifts her features.

“I thought we were taking no prisoners,” one of the commanders says.

“We aren’t,” she snaps, perturbed he questioned her. “They will witness what I intend to do to this realm before I kill them. Is that clear?”

The fairy agrees.

“Very good.” She stands and walks over to a table covered in an enormous map of the realm. “We will enter here because that is the last place they will expect us.”

I glance over her shoulder and see it’s in the castle and says nursery. A small memory filters through and I realize that’s where I slept when I was a baby. “My bedroom,” I say and then cover my mouth.

Lucretia pauses and turns, her gaze seeming to cut into me, though I know she can’t really see me. Still, she senses I’m there and reaches out a hand. “I will kill them painfully. You can count of that.” The words are directed at me, but her commanders respond as though she is talking to them.

I swallow as wild fear causes my heart to clench. My eyes shut and I wish to be far away, but when I open my eyes, I’m still in the room. And Lucretia is still staring like she can see me.

“That is all for tonight. Get some rest.” She orders them from the room.

Reluctantly they all leave. Some give her curious stares, but none say anything. When they are gone and it’s just the two of us in the room, she pulls out her wand. “I know why you’re here.”

I’m glad she does because I don’t… until I see the blade still at her waist. I’m here for that.

She smiles. “You can’t have it. All this time I thought your curse was exactly what was needed for me to conquer this realm. Turns out,

I was wrong. Werethea is smarter than I gave her credit for." She sniffs before looking away. "But I learn from my mistakes and I swear the only way you will ever get this blade," she lifts it from its case and points it at me, "if is you pry it from my cold, dead hands." Cocking it back, she throws the blade directly at my head.

I gasp, expecting it to connect, but I am back in the Olclag. Tiana is no longer surveilling the night alone. Paxton is seated beside her. They are speaking quietly, and I strain to listen.

"I feel like I've forgotten—"

Paxton is interrupted by a loud rumbling followed by a crash coming from the forest behind us. He and Tiana stand. Pax pulls out his wand. Tiana bares her fangs.

"Get behind me," Pax shouts flying toward me.

Trees buckle and break against the onslaught of whatever is charging toward us. Murky leaves are shaken loose and rain down, blanketing the forest floor.

Tiana is beside Merida and Jada in on all fours, one hoof digging at the ground nervously.

I'm in the air before I realize it. My wings lifting me up off the ground as dark magic stirs in my chest. It's always easier to default to the fear.

"What is it?" I ask, forcing myself to dig for the magic Jada provided.

"I don't know." Pax's voice is shallow as though he forgot how to breathe. "But we should get out of here." He rips his eyes from me and toward the others. "Run," he hollers at Jada, Tiana, and Merida.

The unicorn takes off.

"Aurora, go. I'll hold whatever is coming off, but you need to get out of here. It has to be you that survives." He sounds so sure of himself. But he's wrong.

I purse my lips. "I'm staying Paxton. If you die, then I die with

you."

He rolls his eyes, frustrated. "You are such a drama queen."

"Yeah, well you're a drama king," I huff, but am no longer focusing on him. The thing breaking through the forest has arrived and stops in front of us. It's an enormous tree. The one that almost killed Tiana and Merida. "It's Landoth," I say, surprised.

"Maybe it used to be the troll, but Lucretia's magic has turned him into a monster. He can't be reasoned with." Paxton sends a bolt of magic into the tree.

Landoth roars like a wounded lion when the magic strikes him, charring a black spot into his trunk.

Without a pause, Pax sends another and another.

I can feel the pain radiating off the troll. "Stop," I yell, before Pax pummels Landoth again.

Pax's wand stops mid swing and he looks at me like I'm crazy. "You saw what he did to your friends and what he tried to do to us."

I nod. "That was before…" As with Jada, I feel the bond between Landoth and I. The troll is fighting the sickness. He's fighting against Lucretia's dark magic and what it turned him into. "This time it's different." I carefully fly up to the top of the tree. There is no face, but the limbs quake with restraint as I touch the highest branch. As soon as I do, magic rushes from Landoth and up through my arm and into my heart where there's a heavy change. Strength overwhelms me before I send the magic back out to him.

As soon as the transformed magic touches the tree, it changes from a gloomy trunk with ferocious and gloomy leaves to a lush and exquisite tree before finally shifting into Landoth.

He is surprised and takes a moment to touch his arms and legs and face. "You did it," he says, stunned, but pleased.

"We did it," I reply. Because it was both of us. Somehow, Jada and Landoth have healed and strengthened my magic and in turn I was

able to heal and strengthen them.

"I felt that." He steps forward and drops to one knee. "For your courage, I will go with you on your journey. Whatever you need, I am at your service, Aurora."

I glance back at Paxton who is in a state of astonishment and awe. "We can always use a troll," he says, putting away his wand.

Landoth stands as Jada and the others return.

Quick introductions are made before we set off, deciding it's better not to wait until morning.

Over the course of the next five miles, we come into contact with Carina, the elf who used to be the alligator thing that almost drowned me. At my touch, she is renewed to herself with my magic while she also gives me additional sight. With new eyes, I take in the Olclag, able to see each rock and creature is it should be.

"There is still Snow White, the Hunter, and the dragon, but I can't imagine the vampire queen will make an appearance in the Olclag." Paxton speaks gently as we trail behind our growing band of friends once we are on our way again.

WE ARRIVE at a muddy stream when the Hunter arrives. His name is Christopher and I command the others to stay back while I speak with the vampire. As I take his hand and our magic is swapped, I'm given a vision of him as a young man, before he was turned. If he desires it, I have the power to give him back his mortality. "Is that what you want?" The words come out softly, meant only for him.

Tears fill his eyes and I think he will say yes, but finally he blinks them away and shakes his head. "Thank you for reminding me what it means to serve out of kindness and not because of what it can bring me." He pulls me into a hug, and I think for a moment he intends to drink from me. But just as speedily as he tugs me in, he pushes me away. Then addresses me as well as the group. "It's obvious you are in good hands. I will take my leave as you have given me my purpose,

but I will remain within the Olclag until your journey is done."

Before I can respond, he is gone like a rushing wind. While I watch, a portal appears and Snow White steps through. She looks at me for a long time without a word, then holds out her hand. I'm starstruck. The woman is like a superstar. She's beyond beautiful, but more than that, she radiates power. It's understandable since she is the vampire queen, ruler of all the realms, including the fairy kingdom. "If you need me to step in and help you with your destiny, I will, but it is better to fight for your realm on your own terms and according to the laws and magics surrounding you."

"Th-thank you." I take her hand. Immediately a surge of incredible power rushes along my veins and beats into my heart before it changes slightly and is returned to her.

As the reformed magic flows into her, Snow's eyes widen. I know why. We are both given a vision of Jasmine in a billowy black dress hovering in the air. Her black wings are spread wide and her eyes closed. Behind her is an eclipse. The sun almost completely blocked out by the moon—at least that's how it looks before the moon seems to shatter and dozens of beams of light break through, striking Snow's daughter. The girl opens her eyes and I swear she is looking right as us. Like me, the girl is transformed, though I don't understand how or why. As quick as the revelation appears, it is gone.

"Thank you, Aurora," the vampire queen says, her voice throaty and warm. "The fairy realm will thrive with you as its soul." She turns and steps back through a portal. I can't help but wonder what she was like when she was my age. Probably had it all together and knew exactly what she wanted out of life and how to get it.

When she's gone, I fall to my knees. Not because I'm weak or defeated, but because I am filled beyond measure. Not that long ago, Lucretia took most of my magic, but these amazing beings have given of themselves to help me become what I am meant to be. Because of their sacrifices, those in the fairy realm will be safe. At least that is my hope. My eyes close and I am whisked away again…

No!

But it’s too late.

Lucretia stands at the head of her army as the gateway to the upper kingdom opens. Any second, she and her army will start a war. The upper kingdom will lose. My parents will be captured, tortured, and finally killed. Lucretia will rule the fairy realm until she has a craving for more.

“We must hurry,” I say, coming to myself and rising into the air. My wings spread out like a cape behind me as my friends jump with various states of bewilderment. “Let’s go.”

OceanofPDF.com

"TELL ME AGAIN WHAT HAPPENED," Pax says. We are leading the group as we come upon a waterfall.

I take Paxton's hand and lean into him while going over again what happened between Christopher and I and then Snow White and I.

"There is still the matter of the dragon. He will appear. We must be on guard," he says when I'm finished and then kisses my fingertips.

Tingles spread along my skin as I sink into his touch. Because my end is near. We are minutes away from the center of the fairy realm. I can feel it. The pulling is so strong, it's all I can do not to run. But I know what happens when I reach the center and I'm not ready. Death isn't my friend but an enemy.

I feel the blood drain from my face. What am I doing? Why am I willing to sacrifice everything for this realm I barely know and for a people who don't even like me? Is it magic? Has Werethea put a spell on me? Question after question flashes across my mind until I pull away from Paxton. "I can't," I say, my breath coming in short bursts.

"What?" Concern etches his features, making his glorious face even more handsome.

I reach out and cup his face in my hands. He wraps his arms around my waist as his eyes flick back and forth searching mine for answers I'm too cowardly to share. "The end," I respond, evasively, walking away.

"But once we reach the center of the Olclag, our journey will only just begin."

I nod, not wanting to contradict him and turn away and wiping at my eyes. "Do you love me?" I whisper.

"With all that I am and more." He is behind me and wraps his arms

around me, his face tucked against my cheek.

His touch nearly sends me over the edge. Because I can feel his love and I yearn for him in ways I'm only beginning to understand. Slowly, I turn in his arms and look up into his blue eyes that are so deep and vivid and endlessly loving. "I'm sorry," I say and pull away. Before he can respond, I take off. Running toward my demise.

Paxton yells after me, but when I don't look back, he pursues.

Faster and faster I go until I reach the waterfall. For the briefest moment, I'm confused about where to go next until my wings ascend me up along the edge of the falls. My eyes catch hold of the opening and I fly through. Behind the falls is a cave with a low ceiling. I land and step cautiously inside. The darkness is complete until I use magic to create a light. This time it is a soft pink. Almost as an afterthought I acknowledge that my magic has changed.

I walk quickly, heading further and further into the cave. The remainder of my group is somewhere behind. I can hear the echoes of their feet. When I think I can't go back any farther, the cave opens up to a small glade. In the middle of the clearing is a thick but sagging tree. It's probably five or six feet wide at its base and I guess it's been growing for a thousand years. There is a hole in the trunk, and something is within. Leaves left the tree long ago. The trunk and limbs are gray and stark. I move forward, knowing the pull comes from whatever is within.

Directly in front of the tree, I kneel, not sure what I except to see. Inside the hole is a small and gray-brown creature curled up in a ball. It opens its eyes, hisses and kicks out with its little legs. Though it looks nothing like her, I know the creature is Werethea.

"It's okay," I say and touch one of her withered legs.

Immediately, her thrashing stops and she sighs as all the magic I've collected floods into her.

"Aurora," Paxton calls.

Behind him, I hear the rest of the group, but I don't face them. I

can't. Instead I focus on Werethea. Her change happens in moments. Before my eyes, the withering creature becomes the glorious being that is the original fairy. Werethea. She leaps into the air and twirls, throwing her arms out wide as she giggles.

"What's happening?" Merida asks.

Tiana responds, but I don't hear what she says.

After several moments, Werethea lands and helps me stand, then wraps her arms around me. "You did it," she whispers.

"Because of you." I embrace her back, thinking perhaps I won't have to sacrifice anything. Werethea seems fine. But even as I think the words, her body slowly hardens.

She steps back, a look of peace on her face. "You must die before I am completely gone or the realm with fall."

"I don't have the knife," I say, my voice desperate. "I tried to get it, but Lucretia felt my presence."

"You don't need her permission, nor do you have to be sneaky about it. The blade is yours. You possess the power to call it forth Aurora. It will have no choice but to obey." One of her arms turns gray like ash and falls to the earth in pieces like a claustrophobic rain.

"What is she talking about? What's happening?" Paxton is beside me and I glance at him a moment, begging him with my eyes to help me. But he's in shock and for the first time unsure about what it is he should be doing.

Werethea presses a finger to his forehead and says, "Remember." Then she grabs my arm before her fingers break and fall into an ashy pile. "Call forth the blade, Aurora," she says calmly.

I'm not sure how but do the first thing that comes to mind. "Blade, come to me," I say, holding out a hand like I expect it to drop from the sky.

"Again," she says as her knees disintegrate, and she crumbles, falling onto her back while her calves and feet are still upright.

“Blade,” I shout. “I order you to come to me.” I shake out my arm but still don’t feel anything.

Werethea’s eyes close. She’ll be gone in seconds.

I close my eyes as well and think of the blade. The weight of it in my hands and imagine it leaving Lucretia’s side and sailing through the portal and through the Academy and into the Olclag, passing the forest and the waters, through the waterfall and into the cave until it reaches my hand. With a weighty smack, I feel the blade in my palm and open my eyes, wrapping my fingers around the hilt.

Paxton stares as though seeing me for the first time.

I think I smile as thoughts travels in and out of my head at once.

Like the dragon, Shereneth. He never came to me with his magic so I could heal him. Maybe he’s dead.

Then I think about what needs to happen next. Paxton must kill me now or all is lost. My friends will all die. Everyone in this realm will. “Pax,” I whisper, tears filling my eyes, making it difficult to see him.

He swallows and shakes his head. “I can’t,” he pleads.

Beside me, the wide tree begins to shudder and the top half falls to the ground away from us, leaving just a stump. It’s jagged, but I know that is where I need to lay. The sacrifice must happen there. Without a word, I climb up and send my wings away as I lay down against the pointed edges of the tree.

“What are you doing?” Tiana comes over. She’s ferocious and desperate to reach me. Before she can, Christopher is suddenly there and holds onto her. Tiana fights against him, but the Hunter is much stronger than the newly created vampire.

I don’t ask where the hunter came from, guessing he was tracking us the entire time. A small smile lifts my lips. I’m grateful he’s here.

Without seeing her, I hear Merida crying and Jada consoling her. Landoth and Carina are on the other side of Paxton.

“It must be done,” the troll says solemnly.

Carina agrees.

“You know they’re right. I know you do.” Tears leak from my eyes, but I hold out the knife for him. “Take it. You have to. Otherwise the whole realm will die.” I try to sound brave, but my voice is trembling.

Paxton grasps my hand, still holding the knife. “I don’t want to live without you.”

“I’m sorry, but perhaps it’s better this way.” A vision of the beautiful fairy in the market dances across my vision. He will be happy with her instead of me.

He growls. “No. It will always be you, Aurora.”

More tears drip from my eyes. I shouldn’t be glad to hear him say that, but I am. “We’ll do this together,” I say and pull his hand toward my chest.

Tears streak his face as he puts a booted foot on the edge of the stump for leverage, pressing in so the tip of the blade cuts through my clothes and pierces my skin. I want to cry out, but bite my bottom lip to hold it in.

The ground begins to shake from an earthquake. Above us, the rock cracks with a sound like thunder. Rocks crumble and fall. Carina is hit by a larger one in the shoulder and falls back, but Landoth holds her steady, using his magic to put a barrier between us and the falling rubble.

Another thunderclap and the earth shifts beneath us.

“You must hurry, or we will all die,” Carina cries, holding her arm.

I put my other hand over his. “It’s going to be okay,” I whisper and call forth my magic. “Always remember I love you.”

He closes his eyes and looks away, but together we force the blade deep into my chest.

OceanofPDF.com

ANOTHER THUNDERCLAP ECHOES around the cave as rocks fall more rapidly around us.

"We need to get out of here," Landoth shouts, before vanishing from my view with Carina.

"Go then. I'm not leaving her." Devastation causes Pax's breathing to come out labored as he retrieves the knife. He studies the blood. First on the blade and then blooming from my chest.

It's okay, I think. I'm fine. The words come to mind, but I can't get them out.

Aurora, you are the bravest fairy I've ever known. Jada's voice is inside my head, calm and reassuring.

I want to thank her. She's standing beside Merida. Her arms around Jada's neck and is sobbing uncontrollably.

"Mer," I try to say, but I don't think anything comes out. My body is dying. I can feel the life leeching from me as my blood trickles onto the stump, down the side, and into the ground. My breathing slows. My heart stutters.

"No. No. No," Paxton coos. "Stay with me." He climbs onto the stump and tucks my upper body and head into his lap.

"Pax." My heart stops a moment before starting again. Slowly.

Thump. Thump.

Darkness edges around my vision, but I keep my eyes on Pax. He's so sad. I wish I could reach out and comfort him.

Slowly. Thump.

Darkness closes in, more thickly and I strain to keep my eyes open, but it's so difficult.

Slowly. Th

I'm no longer with my body. At least I don't think so. The pain from my wound is gone. There's nothing at all. Except utter darkness and I'm part of it. I thought when I died everything would go quiet, especially my thoughts. But no. All I can do is think. About my friends and Pax. About my aunties. Even Strata. And Carson. Troy and my new friends, Jada, Landoth, and Carina. Even Werethea, Snow, and Christopher…

She did it, an unknown voice whispers, startling me.

"Who's there?" I speak the words. At least I think I do. My conscious mind searches for the voice, but as far as I can tell, there is nothing to see.

Yes. I wondered for a moment, but she has saved the fairy realm. Werethea nearly lost her entire kingdom. If not for the girl.

"Are you talking about me?" Seems kind of rude since I'm right here, wherever here is. But they continue on as if they can't hear me.

It was a close call. My favorite. Nothing better than drama and this world is thick with it.

Yes! I kind of hoped she would stay dark. The girl would have made an excellent villain.

"Stop it! Hello?" I shout this time… into the nothingness.

Her transformation will be exceptional.

Let's wait a little longer. The boy needs to suffer.

Fine, but let's send her back into the Olclag. The one who killed her has taken her body from off the altar. Soon the group will be back at the hovel. Let her spirit follow.

I hear clapping as though a child is excited to visit Chuck E Cheese. Before I can comment about it, I'm whisked away from the nothingness and back into the Olclag where I drift near my body.

The Olclag is no longer shaking as though it will split in two at any moment. Below me, the mournful group climbs down from the cave and moves somberly from the waterfall to the river with Paxton in the

lead. He is flying with my body in his arms. If what I heard is correct, he will take me and the rest of the group back to the hovel.

For a moment I'm worried about them. The monsters with the Olclag are dangerous. But as we go, the monsters appear, though I can see them as they are. The nasty looking goblins are actually fairy foxes. As they run, they leave a trail of sparkling dust before them.

Demons race along the edges, back and forth alongside the group. With my improved vision, I see them as the fairies they are, or where before they died. Landoth and Carina trail behind Jada, who is carrying Merida and Tiana. They cling to each other while Jada keeps her head down. Merida is crying heavily while Tiana stares out straight ahead, her eyes puffy with a dam of unshed tears.

Paxton sails over the forest with purpose, and I wonder whether the others can still follow. But there's a force of deep blue magic glowering off him, leaving a trail like magical breadcrumbs.

Sensing my friends are safe, I focus on Pax and my body. It's weird to see it lifeless in his arms. My color is ashen instead of the vibrant peachy-white it was.

"Paxton," I say once he is over the forest and the hut is in view. "I'm here."

He glances down at my body, but quickly looks away, blinking back tears. I wonder what he did with the blade but push the thought away. It doesn't matter. Not right now. Then I think about what those voices were saying. About my transformation and the boy suffering. It's obvious they were talking about me and Paxton. Weren't they?

Softly, Paxton lands and walks up the steps, pushing open the door to the hut with his foot. "Let's put you in here," he says, walking into the bedroom. Using magic, he renovates the space from wilted and white-washed to luxurious and opulent. Amethyst walls with shimmering hints of pink and a sparkling chandelier ceiling. The bedding is no longer drab gray but royal blue with golden leaves.

Carefully, he lays my body against a pillow that matches the

bedding.

“Let’s do something about your clothes.” They are bloodied and I’m glad he magics them away. In their place is a long and beautiful dress a few shades lighter than the bedding, except around the collar, which is sweetheart with the sleeves off the shoulder. My hair is down and long and full and clean. There’s a hint of makeup on my lids and my lips are a soft pink. The man has great taste.

“Thank you, Pax,” I whisper softly.

As he adjusts the pillow under my head, the rest of the group crowds in.

“Nice touch,” Carina says.

Jada, who is no longer in her unicorn shape smiles. “If I may, there is one more thing she needs.” With the wave of her horn, a golden crown appears on my head. “There.”

Paxton tries to smile but can only grimace.

“What if I gave her some of my blood?” Tiana pushes her way into the room and moves over to my side. She goes to bite into her wrist, but Merida pushes her hand away.

“It’s too late for that,” she says.

Tiana nods.

“I hate to break up the party,” Landoth says soberly, “but there’s an enormous crack in the Olclag, giving us a way out.” He rubs the back of his enormous neck. “And that means Lucretia is no longer down here.” He glances at Carina and the elf nods. “We are going to follow Lucretia and her army into the upper kingdom. The war is on. That much is obvious. Perhaps it isn’t too late, and we can do something to help.”

“I’ll go too. I can heal the wounded.” She touches my hand. “Until we meet again, Aurora.” Then she and the others leave the room.

Paxton puts an arm on Tiana and Merida’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” he says, shaking his head as fresh tears fall onto his cheeks.

They turn and the three of them hug for a long time, finding solace in each other. My heart hurts at their pain and I wish I could take it away.

“What should we do now?” Merida asks, wiping her eyes.

“I want to fight some bad guys,” Tiana says, flashing some fangs.

“As do I,” Paxton says. He glances at my body. “She would want us to fight.”

I nod vigorously. “Yes. Don’t worry about me,” I say.

“Then let’s fight,” Merida says. “Or, at least help. Maybe Jada will allow me to assist her with the wounded.

“That’s a great idea. Come on.” Paxton ushers my friends from the room. Before closing the door, he studies my body. “I’ll be back, my love.”

OceanofPDF.com

"I KNOW YOU WILL," I say, my spirit floating after him, Merida, and Tiana.

There is an enormous fracture between the Olclag and the Academy just off the hut. It wasn't there when Pax returned my body.

"Through here?" Tiana asks.

"Yes but let me go first." Paxton pulls out his wand and steps through.

"I don't need protection fairy man. I'm a freaking vampire." She shakes her head, though there isn't any kind of force behind her words. "You're next," she says to Merida.

Once her red headed friend is through the fissure, Tiana follows.

I try to go through as well, but as soon as I reach the crack, I'm pulled back so that I'm again in the room where my body is. Loneliness overwhelms me.

"It won't be much longer now." Her voice startles me and I watch her spirit float through the ceiling and into the room.

"Werethea?"

"Hello Aurora." Her smile is kind. She looks well rested and at peace.

"What won't be much longer?" I ask, glad the fairy is with me.

"Look." She points at my body.

In my periphery I see a golden light emanating and turn. The ashen color of my skin changes to light gold with a hint of blush. My lips become a deeper pink, but the biggest change is my hair. No longer basic blond, but a twinkling gold that matches the leaves on my dress.

"You *are* the soul of the fairy realm," Werethea says, clapping her hands softly. "All of my power is now yours."

I hear what she's saying but can't look away from my body.

Werethea's ghost continues. "As the soul of the fairy realm, you are part of the land. With each day, you will feel the connection grow stronger. And Aurora?"

She pauses and I force myself to look at her. "Yes?" She is shimmering and her already ghostly appearance starts to fade.

"Thank you. I know your choice wasn't easy. Go to your love. Paxton Narcissus is the best of the fairies. He was an amazing guardian and though he lost his way in the dark for a while, he found his way back."

I nod as she speaks, knowing all that she says is the truth.

"He is suffering greatly at losing you," Werethea finishes. "It had to be this way." She smiles. "In order for the transformation to be complete. Now go. On your way, be sure to heal the Olclag and all of the creatures within. They have fought, agonized and grieved against Lucretia's wicked sickness for too long. The time has come for them to be whole once again." She rests a hand on my shoulder, but I don't feel it. "Plus, they serve you now. With their help, you can defeat Lucretia and her followers and return peace to the realm."

I take her hand in mine, though it's like I'm holding nothing. "Thank you," I say, feeling my body calling for my spirit to return—yearning for the two to become one. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Werethea. I will do my best to help the realm and live up to your expectations."

She shakes her head, though it's nearly gone. "There are no expectations. Be yourself. This is who you are and what you were meant to be." With that, she is gone.

I stare at the wall and door behind where she appeared a moment ago, hoping she will return, but something inside tells me she won't. It's my turn and while I don't know much about the realm or the fairies, I do have friends who do. They will help me.

Paxton will help me.

For the briefest moment I hover over my body, studying the woman I've become. It's weird to be looking at myself this way. Without insecurity. And though it might seem silly to some, I promise my body I will treat it with compassion and love, above all else. Then, like sliding a glove over a hand, I sink into myself. There's a weight that comes with my newly altered body. A sense of self, sure. But also a sense of all that is required to return the fairy realm to its glorious state once again.

With only a small surge of trepidation, I open my eyes.

All around me are Werethea's guardians, including Roton.

"When did you get here?" I ask, sitting up and resting my feet on the floor.

Roton bows as do the rest of the guards. "A few hours ago, Aurora. We are your guardians now."

As I study them, it comes to me that I know each of their names and strangely, I can see into their hearts. All are here for my protection. All would die for me. That knowledge fills me with a warmth I can't describe. Beyond that, I want nothing more than to protect them too and I would die for them, for every living thing in the realm. Including those in the under kingdom—dead and alive.

Urgency gets me to my feet. "Rise, my friends. We have a lot of work to do."

OceanofPDF.com

WITH A SINGLE THOUGHT, my wings appear at my back. There's a mirror over the dresser and I'm drawn to it, unable to help but admire my wings in the glass. They are enormous and filled with colors of azure, cobalt, and cerulean. Separating the lighter colors are streaks of navy and gold.

My wings beat lightly as though the movement is an afterthought. As I study my reflection, I can't help but wonder if Paxton knew what would happen. Because the dress he put me in matches my wings perfectly. But the crown on my head? It seems like too much and I try to remove it. But it won't budge. Please don't let the crown be a permanent fixture, I think, but know it's just my body's way of reminding me of who and what I am. The Soul of the Realm. What will my parents think? What will my aunties think?

"Let's go," I say, fluttering through the guardians and outside. Above the sky is still murky, but as I fly into the air, I think of the Olclag as a whole and see it renewed.

I turn back to see the hovel and think it whole. In quick succession, I think of the ground around it as well as the path and the trees. The shrubs and the rocks. The weeds and the water. I think of all the creeping things as well as the goblins and the demons.

More quickly than I can comprehend, the Olclag is transformed. The hovel is no longer broken down and dingy, but bright and whole. The trees turn brown and the leaves change to various forms of green. The ground is rich and the cobbled path shimmers gold.

Above, the sky changes from cloud covered to a bright blue and I wonder at how it's done, but not for too long. All around me, the guardians change as well. Their wings no longer silver and gold, but various colors of blue and gold to match my wings. Their armor matches my dress, a cobalt blue with golden leaves.

As I make my way up higher, I'm able to see the waterfall and the river as well as the bog and the weeds. The water is an azure blue while the weeds transform into blooming flowers. Like the rising of the sun, all around the shadows are chased away and replaced by light and replenishment.

Creatures great and small reveal themselves as they shed their sickness and return to the glorious creatures they once were. Goblins return to foxes. Demons are once more fairies…

Including Strata!

I push off with my wings and fly over to her. At first, she's frightened, covering her face in her hands.

"It's okay, Strata."

She peeks at me. "Did you do this?"

I land in front of her and hold out my hand. "Strata, I'm so sorry I got you killed. I'm so sorry for all I did to hurt you." I swallow, hoping she'll forgive me, but knowing it isn't up to me.

"Am I alive again because of you?" She studies her hands, arms, and body.

"Yes," I say, nodding.

"Then all is forgiven."

Relief washes across my veins and I feel my connection to the Olclag grow. All around me is change and it's like the entirety of the realm is thanking me at once. I close my eyes, sinking into the feelings of warmth, kindness, and happiness. That is the greatest feeling. A tremendous joy!

Someone takes my hand and I open my eyes. It's Strata and she's smiling. "Look," she says, directing my gaze to the land around us.

We are surrounded by fairies and foxes. Elves and trolls. Brownies and sprites. As one, they bow. Strata bows too. My guardians stand all around, protecting me though it isn't necessary.

"We are yours to command, Aurora."

“Rise, all of you,” I say, my voice stronger and sounding more sure than I feel.

When they are all standing, I take a deep breath. “As you know,” I begin, turning in a slow circle to address each of them. “Lucretia poisoned the Olclag and the under kingdom. But that ends today. Her tyranny ends today.” I pause a moment, letting my words sink in. Everyone’s eyes are on me, waiting for me to continue and I don’t disappoint. “With your help, we can save the upper kingdom, rid the realm of Lucretia, and either imprison or help those who follow her to see the error of her ways. We can become united once again. Without bloodshed. Without any more killing.”

“We are with you,” Strata says, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes, Aurora. We are one hundred percent with you.” The deep voice is in the back, but fairies four deep part and the dragon Shereneth walks through. One of his wings looks smaller than the other as he makes his way over to me. “I am sorry I couldn’t get to you sooner, but as you know, Paxton gutted me.” He glances around the crowd. “Where is the boy? I want to thank him.”

I smile, reaching out my hand and placing it between the dragon’s eyes. He closes them, letting out a deep sound, almost like the purring of a cat. At my touch, his magic filters into me, spinning through my heart where it completes me in a way I didn’t know I was broken. Shereneth is the final piece, I think, sending his healed magic back into him. He shudders as he becomes whole, including both of his wings.

He steps back, a huge smile on his dragon face. Then leaps into the air, twirling his wings and his tail. “Aurora truly is the soul of the fairy realm. Bless her!” He drops to the ground and it shakes at the weight of him.

“Bless her,” the mass says.

“Let us put an end to the bloodshed once and for all,” I say, knowing we will accomplish our honorable desires. Without waiting

for a response, though it comes in the form of the multitude roaring, cheering, and clapping, I make my way over to the door. The one through which I entered from the fairy academy. Not everyone will fit through the small opening, so I think of removing the whole wall and it is gone in an instant. Then I walk through followed by the group.

As I go down the halls and into the common room before heading toward the grand entrance, the whole fairy academy edifice changes from leathery black demon skin to golden brick. The lights of the chandeliers gleam even brighter as the brownies regain their stamina and shine like they each possess their own little sun. Following a route I can't understand, we arrive at the opening where Lucretia led her army into the upper kingdom.

I glance back.

Behind me are my guardians, wands magically transformed into swords, they faces serious. They are followed by Strata, Shereneth, and hundreds of thousands of others. A smile splays over my lips. "For the fairy realm," I say and step through the opening.

OceanofPDF.com

A RUSH of memories crash into me all at once and I'm momentarily dazed. Back in time, I see my dad in a rocking chair, reading a fairy tale to me as I lay listening against his broad chest.

Then my mom hums lightly as she walks around the room, soothing me to sleep. "I love you, Aurora," she whispers as she lays me in my crib.

Feelings of love swirl into my heart. It permeates every crevice in the room as well as each vein and sinew. Again, I'm healed in a way I didn't know I was broken as feelings of abandonment and worthlessness retreat from my heart.

The memory vanishes and I'm once again in the present where my guardians fight against those who would destroy me. The fairies fighting against my guardians don't stand a chance. They fall.

The scent of blood and death reaches my nose as blood oozes from mortal wounds.

"Stop!" The word leaves my mouth at the same moment I think it.

All around me, the battle is halted.

"No one move," I command.

Beyond the nursery there is still the sounds of war. I close the door, blockading it with magic. Then I fly over to the closest fairy. She is breathing heavily and looks afraid.

"Fear not, young one." She is probably older than me, but after all I've been through and the power I possess, it feels like I've been alive forever. "I'm not going to hurt you." With my first finger, I touch her forehead until all of Lucretia's sickness is rooted from her. I also see her own darkness. It's there because of past hurts. I can't heal those, but I can help her to see the other side and recognize her hurts, while valid, can be healed. But she must be the one to let the healing in.

She smiles. “Thank you.”

“Return to the under kingdom. You will be safe there until this war is over.” I indicate an opening I create since those who are fighting with me are still coming through the first opening.

She looks nervous, but I assure her she will be safe. For the next several minutes, I do that to each of the rest of those in the room. When the nursery is clear, I open the door. The sounds of fighting reach my ears.

I step out.

And repeat the process in the hall. Every room. Then make my way down the stairs. Each time I come to the wounded and hurting, I help them and tell them to hide in the under kingdom.

Once the castle is clear, I head out into the courtyard where I repeat the process. Then head to the outer walls. Lucretia is close. I can feel her. But there is just so much anger. So much death and destruction.

More than once, I am overwhelmed.

Landoth appears as though he sensed my need. “Aurora, welcome back.” He clasps my arm as I clasp his. Magic leaves him, strengthening me before I return it to him.

“Thank you.”

He bows. “My pleasure.”

With Shereneth nearby, I continue on.

Jada is with Merida. They are in one of the gardens healing and caring for the wounded.

When Merida sees me, she lets out a sob and runs to me. “I don’t care how it’s possible, but I’m just glad.” She squeezes me tightly.

At her touch, I see her magic and send some of mine into her to strengthen her.

When she releases me, Jada and I embrace. As our magic heals and strengthens each other, I realize this is how life is meant to be. We are

here to help and heal one another, not tear each other down.

“Where’s Paxton?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she admits. “We lost track of one another.”

“And Tiana?” I look at Merida.

“She was with Paxton,” she responds.

“And Christopher?”

“No idea,” Jada says, making a face. Even as a unicorn, it’s easy to see she finds the vampire Christopher attractive.

“Okay.” I nod and get to work, hoping they are still alive. Once I finish with the fairies there, I move on toward a second, smaller castle located behind the big one. I sense Lucretia is in there and that she has my parents. The dark magic is strongest there.

Shereneth takes off to help Carina and a group near the outer gates. Jada and Merida stay behind in case more wounded arrive. Landoth, Roton and the other guardians accompany me toward the castle.

“There has to be a better way,” I say, exhausted.

“Have you thought about using your wings to spread your magic over the kingdom,” Landoth says as he gives me more of his magic. The troll is fading. Even though I’m returning his magic to him with some of my own, he isn’t like me and can’t go on forever.

“You’re right.” Lifting myself off the ground, I rise until we are face to face and lean in to give him a kiss on the cheek. “There has never been a finer troll.”

Landoth blushes and smiles. “Well I don’t know about that.” He steps back and crosses his arm looking embarrassed.

“I do,” I say and fly high into the sky. My fear of heights has evaporated, and I focus on healing the fairies and all things in the upper kingdom. Soaring through the air, I send my magic out and over those still fighting. Like a blur, I see Christopher funning away. He looks up when some of my magic reaches him. I wave. “Thank you for

your help," I shout.

He waves back and hurries on. I briefly wonder where he is going, but don't have time to consider him further. I need to heal my realm and do so quickly. As I go, more magic lands on several fairies fighting each other. As soon as they notice, they stop. "Return to your homes in peace," I say for all to hear and continue on. Faster and faster, I make my way over the whole of the realm so that my magic touches everything—except the smaller castle.

When I return the guardians surround me in a cloud of blue.

"We've assessed the situation," Roton begins. "Lucretia has your mom and dad in there as well as Tiana and Paxton." Her right eye twitches as she speaks.

"Are they alive?" I can barely get the question out.

"As far as we can tell, Aurora. We can't see them but used our magic and know they are on the upper level in one of the bedrooms." Roton's blade changes into her wand before it becomes a bow and arrow. "I can kill her off from a distance, if you will allow it."

"No," I say as I start my descent. In my mind, I work through what I will do once I am face to face with my aunt, Lucretia. And more than that, what will happen when I see my parents. Nervousness flits across my stomach. "I want to talk to my aunt. Let's try to be civilized." I land in front of the shiny double doors and knock. They are sleek and black, the same as the rest of the castle. The material isn't demon skin. Of that, I'm sure. But I wonder whether Lucretia changed the color or if this is how it's always been.

When no one answers, I shove the door open, but pause at a sound from behind me. Shereneth appears, his wings beating languidly against the sky. On his back is Landoth and Carina. Below him and a little further away is Jada. Merida is on her back, holding on for dear life as the unicorn heads toward me. A smile cracks across my face as gratitude fills my soul.

Before Shereneth lands, a portal opens, and Snow White as well as

Troy appears through the portal.

“I felt your change,” Snow says when I look at her in question.

“And I had to see for myself,” Troy adds, hugging me. “You’re freaking amazing, Rory.”

I hug him back. “Thank you for coming. It means everything to me.” Tears line my eyes. Because this strange man has my best interests at heart, even if he was wrong about Paxton and me. He cared. And his showing up proves he still does. That’s how deep friendships are cultivated.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” He taps the end of my nose. “Even if you are the all powerful Oz… or Soul… or whatever.” His smile grows and I can’t help but smile with him. He’s trying to help me refocus and it works.

I explain what Roton and the others told me about where Lucretia, Tiana, and Paxton are. We all contribute to forming a plan. It isn’t brilliant. Heck, it really isn’t even good, but it’s all we’ve got in such a short amount of time.

The plan is simple. We will divide and conquer. The vampire queen and Troy will wait outside one of the windows. Shereneth, Carina, and Landoth will take the other window. When I give the magical signal, they will either portal or bust into the room. My guardians and I will go up the stairs.

The plan is too tame for some, especially Landoth and Shereneth, and they voice their concerns in hushed whispers. But I explain I want to talk to Lucretia first. They don’t like it, but all reluctantly agree.

Once all but my guards and I are outside, the rest of us proceed across the enormous entryway to the stairs. Without effort, I lift into the air as do the others. With Roton in the lead, we make our way up to the second floor and down the hall to the room where Lucretia is holding the hostages. The door is slightly open, and I hear my wicked aunt talking. When I’m close enough to the door, I land along with my guards just outside and wait.

Taking care, I peek inside the room. Lucretia is pacing in front of two individuals whom I know are my parents. Seated to the right of her with their backs to the windows are Maleficent and Sam. They are scowling at my parents and seem perfectly content with what's going to happen. To the right of my parents and nearest the door are Tiana and Paxton. Both are on the floor, unconscious. Blood flows from a wound on Paxton's temple.

Before I think, I push through the door. "Lucretia," I shout, my wings lifting me from the ground.

OceanofPDF.com

THE CEILINGS ARE PROBABLY twenty feet high and covered in art. But there's plenty of room to use my wings and I do.

She turns as a spark of fear crosses her features. Quickly, she recovers. "So it's true. You've become the Soul of the fairy realm." Her staff materializes in one hand as she reaches for the blade. The fear returns and her mouth falls open. "How?"

"It was mine to command," I say, my voice soft, knowing I can call it forth if I need it, but I hope I don't.

Without warning, she sends a lightning bolt of magic toward me. Before it strikes, I command a barrier around myself and those of my company. As I do, the power within me soars large like my wings and I realize just how much I possess. There is no need for my guardians or Shereneth and the others. If I wanted to, I could end Lucretia with only a thought. With that knowledge comes calmness and I roll my shoulders back. "Lucretia your reign of terror is over. You will do no more harm." Lifting one hand, I think about encircling Lucretia in a ring of magical fire. Almost instantly, it surrounds her. The flames not burning anything but keeping her within.

She uses her magic to strike against it, but the magic melds into my own, and I use her own magic against her to strengthen the circle. "It's no use. You are done."

"No!" Lucretia steps back, her staff disappearing as she heaves deep breaths, like a child winding up to throw a serious temper tantrum.

Behind Lucretia is Maleficent and Sam. They are on their feet and slowly inching their way around the room to the door. I know they are just followers, but sometimes that's even worse. Momentarily turning from Lucretia, I focus on Sam and Maleficent. "You are free to go, but you are not unrestricted," I say, and place a peacock blue cuff on their

left wrists.

They are horrified by the cuff and make a point of letting me know.

“What is this? We can still get away,” Sam says, arrogant and a little frightened.

“Yeah, we are free,” Maleficent says, but I see the horror on her features as well.

“You are free in the sense that you can go wherever you want. However, you are also required to do two hundred hours of community service.” I speak in terms I know from the human realm. When I see they are confused, I try again. “You must make an effort to give aid, help, assist, or work for the fairies of this realm in some capacity for two hundred hours. Once that’s complete, the cuff will come off, but if you haven’t finished the service in the next sixty days starting today, the number of hours required will double. Then you will have one hundred and twenty days to complete your newly appointed service hours. If you don’t, the amount of time will double again and so on. Do you understand?” My gaze flits back and forth between the young fairies. As with those in the Olclag, I see there is good in them and I hope they will take the opportunity to build on that instead of the festering evil that is also with them.

Both fairies look at each other before looking back at me. Sam seems like she wants to say something but doesn’t as Maleficent takes a threatening step toward me.

Roton blocks her, resting the edge of her blade on Maleficent’s chest. “Aurora is the Soul of this realm. Without her, you would be dead. The punishment she has offered is beyond generous. I suggest you and Samantha leave now, before she changes her mind.” Danger radiates from Roton. Her voice is steely and while I believe the consequences given fits their crimes, it’s also very mild and I will add on more punishments to back up Roton.

“I am sorry for any part I contributed to encourage your

viciousness, Maleficent and Sam. That is why your consequences are easy. Go in peace. Be of help to those in this realm. Do good."

"Easy?" Sam smirks. "Thank you," she says as she and Maleficent bow. But she isn't genuine. Neither of them are and I hope Paxton will be okay with the punishment. Maleficent is his sister. More than anything, I want them to change. But if they don't? I'll have no choice except to deal with them more harshly.

Roton escorts them from the room before closing the door and locking it. She's all about my safety.

I open the window where Shereneth is waiting with Carina and Jada. "Everything is under control, but…" I pause working to get the pain from my chest. I have a whole realm to think about now, but I'm beyond worried about Tiana and especially Paxton. "Jada, can you check on Paxton and Tiana, please?" I possess all of the magics, but I don't know anything about healing and Jada does. It's her magic. I glance at Lucretia. She's watching—all of us and pacing like a caged tiger. But she doesn't say a word and I'm grateful. Because now that I have Lucretia captured, I don't know what to do about her. Killing her isn't an option. At least I don't want to do that. And I feel like I shouldn't. I'm guessing the fairy realm has prisons, but I don't think keeping Lucretia there would be appropriate.

"Of course," Jada says and hurries over to them.

Hesitantly, I glance at my parents. They are bound and gagged, but their eyes speak volumes. Surprise. Gratitude. And, love. They don't appear to be wounded though and I'm glad of that.

"Aurora, might I speak to you alone," Snow asks, appearing in my line of vision and blocking out my parents.

"Sure." I lead the way over to the other side of the enormous suite and next to an oversized fireplace. Nervousness crackles along my wings. Because Snow is the vampire queen. She is queen over all the realms, including mine. Whatever she needs, I'd do well to give it to her. "What's up?" I ask, sounding like the eighteen year old teenager

that I am.

She smiles kindly. “I wondered if you had a plan for where you intended to keep Lucretia?”

I glance down at my hands, surprised she was thinking along the same line as me. “Not yet.” The words come out slightly mumbled. I may be the Soul of the realm, but that doesn’t mean I’m not still me. And right now, I’m nervous and confused.

“Well, I have a solution, if you’re willing.”

“You do?” I am relieved and look at her, unable to help the smile that spreads over my face. “What is it?”

“In Sharra, there is a place where we keep vampires and other creatures of the seven realms who don’t follow the laws and must be imprisoned, including murderers and worse.”

I can’t imagine what’s worse than murder, but only nod.

Snow continues, “If you would like, I can take Lucretia to Sharra and lock her away within the prison. You needn’t fear she will escape. No one can.” She smiles as well.

My heart swells with gratitude at the rightness. “That is exactly where she belongs,” I say, wanting to hug the vampire queen, but holding back.

She must sense my desire because she pulls me into a hug. “You remind me so much of my daughter. I hope she turns out as amazing as you, Aurora.” The words come out softly and tears prick against the backs of my eyes.

I think about the girl, Jasmine who was at the party Werethea held. “I’m sure she’ll turn out even better,” I say back.

“Thank you.” She releases me. “I will leave immediately,” she adds and goes over to Troy.

They speak a moment before he comes over to me. I haven’t really spoken to him. He pulls me into a hug. “You are amazing,” he says kindly. “You and Paxton are great together. I’m sorry I doubted the

two of you," he adds, studying me.

"You're pretty amazing yourself." I smack him on the chest lightly.

He kisses my cheek. "Tiana is awake, but she needs blood. I'm going to take her to Sharra, if that's okay with you."

I glance behind him at Tiana. When our eyes meet, she runs over to me. "I'm so glad you're okay." Her surprise and elation are obvious.

I squeeze her tightly. "And I'm glad you're okay." I look at her. "Do you want to go to Sharra instead of New York or elsewhere?"

She glances at Troy before rolling her eyes. "I have no desire to go to New York anymore. Sharra will be for the best, but we will see each other soon, right?"

"You better believe it, T." I hug her again. "I still owe you a flight."

"Yeah you do." She doesn't seem as excited as she was.

"It'll be fun," I singsong.

"We will see." She hugs me again and moves over to Snow.

"You'll take good care of her?" I ask, hugging Troy again. I consider the dragon boy a friend and hope he feels the same way.

"I will." He gives me a salute before going over to Snow and Tiana. The three of them take Lucretia through a portal and disappear faster than I expect. I'm glad Lucretia is gone though. The tension eases considerably without her in the room.

Landoth, Carina, and Shereneth take their leave after advising me they intend to help the upper kingdom's guards get things back in order. I thank them and promise them we will have dinner together soon within the Olclag. Now that I'm the Soul, the place where I was once so scared to be feels exactly right. And the members of the seven magics who supported Werethea before she left? They feel like my family. Our connection is strong and will remain that way for as long as I am the Soul. I need them to help me too and teach me what they know.

Jada leaves next, informing me Paxton is okay and should regain

consciousness soon. She is going to help the wounded fairies. I hug her and tell her about dinner as well.

Which leaves five.

Paxton, who looks completely healed, stands and is watching me with such awe and love that I want to run and bury my face in his chest. But Merida is speaking with my parents. Though I have vague memories of them, it's like they are strangers.

Carefully, I move over to them, grateful their restraints are removed. My mom is crying. My father examines me with swollen eyes.

"Hi," I say as I get closer. Nervousness causes my mouth to get dry and I swallow.

Paxton steps between my parents and me. His face filled with emotion. I know mine is too. My love, I think, but we don't speak. Not yet but when we do there will me a lot to say.

Instead he introduces me to my parents. "King Stefan. Queen Danina, may I present to you your daughter, Aurora."

"It's nice to meet you," I say quietly. Nervously. Because I can't help but worry they might not like me.

"Aurora." My mom comes forward first and wraps me into a hug.

I send my wings away and hug her back, enjoying the sweet vanilla scent which spawns another memory. Of the morning before Lucretia cursed me. My mom is singing as she dresses me. Then lifts me into her arms. "You will make the best queen of the upper kingdom my dear Rory."

I gasp at the memory. "You called me Rory," I say, searching her face that is so like my own.

"I did," she says and laughs and wipes at her tears.

"We both did," my dad adds, hugging the two of us.

Our visit is short, but that's because we have a lot of work still to do. The upper kingdom and the lower kingdom are in complete

turmoil. But I can fix it. I know I can. With the help of my parents and my friends.

Before my mom and dad leave, my mom insists on having dinner together that night. She asks Paxton to help her set the plan in motion.

He seems surprised and I know why. He was exiled from the upper kingdom because of his parents. What they did was against the laws of the upper kingdom.

"Mom. Dad." The words are unfamiliar on my lips.

They turn. "Paxton is my true love. We will be together forever, him and I." I pause, letting the news sink in.

My father blusters. "But I just got you back," he says.

I smile. "I'm not going anywhere. The fairy realm is my home." As I speak, I think of my aunties, Fae, Vera, and Macey. They are my family too. I need to make amends to them. "But the law that fairies of different magics can't…"

"Say no more," my father interrupts.

I sense Roton, who I forgot was still here since she and the rest of the guardians were silent in a corner of the room, tense, and I hold up a hand so my father can finish.

"As of this moment, that law is no more." He smiles at me, and I return it. Then he looks at Paxton. "I always wanted a son."

Paxton laughs heartily, his eyes holding mine.

I nod. "See you soon."

"Yes, you will."

Then it's just Merida and me (and the guardians). She's seated on the windowsill, staring out at what, I'm not sure. "Hey, Mer. You okay?"

She doesn't respond, just looks at me for a long moment. Finally, she says, "And I thought I was the weird one."

I laugh, seeing again the magic within her. But there's more. This time as I look at her, I see the outline of a bear. "You think you're

weirder than me?" I laugh harder.

"I did before all of this." She waves her hands around the room, though it looks fairly normal now that everyone except my guardians are gone. "Now, I'll have no problem telling you…" Her voice trails off.

"What? That you're a bear in a human's body." I wink, taking her hands and pulling her to standing.

"How do you know?" she asks, gasping.

"I can see it now," I say, hugging her. It was Carina's sight that allowed me to see Merida's truth.

She hugs me back. Then looks at me. "I'm sure my family is worried sick about me. But when I get back, we are moving to the moors of Sharra where we can practice our magic freely." There's a desperate happiness in her. "I hope you'll come and see me."

I didn't know there were moors in Sharra, but my guess is Snow created them for Merida's family. "Mer, you're my best friend. I'm going to visit you and Tiana as often as I can. And you're welcome here anytime as well."

"Thank you." Merida hugs her tightly again. Then looks down at her ripped and dirty clothes. "Do you know how to get me back to my family?"

I'm about to say no when the magic to open a portal appears in my mind. "I do, but first, let's get you cleaned up." In my mind I think of Merida wearing an emerald dress with mint trim and that her fiery red hair is clean and untangled. Then I imagine matching shoes and open my eyes. Merida looks just as I imagined.

"I look much better, but a dress?" She wrinkles her nose.

I laugh. "Right," I say and make her dress into a shirt and add jeans.

"Better," she says.

With another thought, I open the portal to the human realm and

her front lawn. She steps through. As it's about to close, I step through as well.

Roton shouts my name, but I close the portal before she can follow.

Merida takes my hand. "You going to see your aunties?"

"Yes, I need to ask their forgiveness." I glance down at our hands as a wave of nostalgia washes over me. Merida, Tiana, and I have been friends since we were kids and we will be friends for life. That will never change.

"Don't worry," she says. "They love you. They will forgive you. I'm sure of it."

OceanofPDF.com

FROM MERIDA'S LAWN, I stare at the house I was raised in. What do I say to them? Apologize sure, but that doesn't seem like enough. I tighten my hands into fists and roll my shoulders back, determined to do what I have to. But before I can get up the courage, Mr. Beazley and his little chihuahua round the corner.

He looks me up and down, a scowl on his face. "Kids and their cosplay." He shakes his head and it looks like his chihuahua does too.

I glance down at my dress and smirk. "I like it," I say.

His chihuahua barks. With my newfound sight, I'm able to see that the dog thinks he's a rottweiler and the man feels insignificant and is desperately lonely. Thinking quickly, I send a little magic into the man, filling him with hope and confidence. He jolts as the feeling enters him. His eyes get immediately brighter, and he picks up the pace.

"You're right. The dress is very lovely. Have a nice day," he says, tilting his hat and continues on his way.

"Thanks. You too." I take a deep breath and blow it out. Then cross the street and walk up to my door. Instead of going in, I knock.

There is talking within before the door unlocks. Fae, Vera, and Macey are there just like always. Wearing their same dresses and aprons.

"Mind if I come in?" I ask anxious.

Vera looks down her nose at me as though I am poop on a shoe.

Fae smacks her on the arm with a dish towel. "Of course you can, dear." She moves out of the way. They all do.

Nervous, I rub my hands together. "I'm sorry about what happened in the fairy realm," I begin.

"Well come in and have a seat. We just finished making strawberry

tartlets.

Covering a smile, I follow them into the kitchen and sit at the counter while they fuss around, getting me a plate, a tartlet, some whipped cream, and a fork. When it's in front of me, they stand back and watch, anxious.

"Go on then, try it," Vera says. She's smiling and I see they all are.

My heart warms at how loving these women are. Without a doubt I can tell they've already forgiven me. "Okay." I pick up the fork, and cut a piece, determined to eat every last bit, even if it doesn't taste good. It's the least I can do after all they've done for me. But when I chew, something amazing happens. My taste buds start to sing. "It's so good," I say, trying not to sound surprised.

"Really?" Fae asks. "Because I shredded the cold butter and cut that into the flour to make it more flaky.

"And I handpicked the strawberries, but I was worried they were too ripe," Macey adds.

Vera went on. "I added just a hint of lemon and almond extract to the cream too."

They are smiling expectantly.

"Seriously, this is the best thing I've ever eaten." I take another bite.

The three of them clap and smile, patting each other on the back.

"We did it," Fae says, happily.

Vera and Macey respond as they study their recipe.

I watch them with an overwhelming sense of contentment. When I'm finished, I push my plate away. "Thank you," I say, but the words are for so much more than the food.

"You're welcome," Fae says, touching my hand.

"Not just for the tart, which was incredible, but for the last eighteen years. For all the three of you did for me. You three are the best in the world." I walk over and hug them as tears stream down my

face.

My aunties sniffle and fuss and we talk for the better part of the night as I share all that happened since I sent them away. When it's nearing midnight, I ask them if they will return to the fairy kingdom.

They look at each other.

"Perhaps, dear," Fae says.

"We've been away a long time," Vera adds.

"The fairy kingdom has changed a lot," Macey says.

"Yes, and so have we." Vera wipes her hands on her apron. "But I have missed my magic." She pulls out her wand.

The others do too, though they don't use them.

We talk some more, and I tell them about the party my mom and dad are throwing.

Frazzled, they quickly agree and change. We use a portal back to the fairy kingdom.

When we arrive inside the castle, I pause, unsure where to go. Vera takes the lead. She looks amazing with her black hair up in a bun. Regal. Her shamrock green dress is long as are her sleeves. Behind her trails a seafoam green cape. The other two have changed as well. Fae and Macey's dresses are similar in style, but Fae's dress is artic blue with a navy cape while Macey's dress is a lovely shade of plum while her cape is iris. Their wings are out, matching their dresses exquisitely.

For several moments, they fuss and fluff each other until every collar is straightened and every hair is in place.

"Are you going to wear that?" Vera asks.

"I guess I should change." I scrunch my nose and think of a new dress. One with small cap sleeves and a V neck. The bodice is tight against my waist and the color of rosewood. From just below my waist, the long skirt fans out with several tiers in rosewood, daisy, and pearl. As my magic courses through my veins, I also think of my wings

the same color. Immediately, they appear.

My aunties gasp.

"You are so very lovely," Macey says, and the others join in, sharing their admiration.

After thanking them and hugging again, we walk down the hall and toward the banquet room. When we arrive, it's to see most everyone is there, including Shereneth, Jada, Carina, and Landoth as well as my mom and dad. Even Snow, her husband, and their young daughter is there. Troy isn't, which saddens me. And neither is Tiana or Merida. But it's still great to see those that came.

Roton and my guardians notice me immediately. Relief washes over them and I feel bad for leaving the realm without them. I have a feeling I won't get away with that again. "Everything is okay," I mouth.

Roton nods, but her features are grim as she and the others move to stand beside me.

My father, the king stands and clinks on his glass. In moments the room is silent. "Now that Aurora has arrived, let the festivities begin," the king says, giving me a very fatherly smile.

AS THE PARTY WINDS DOWN, Paxton makes eye contact before he gets up from his seat next to my father and heads out outdoors. I excuse myself and follow him. My heart pounds in my throat with excitement and nervousness. I don't think he's changed his mind about me, but I can't help feeling that maybe he might.

There is a cobbled outdoor area with chairs and tables. Beyond that is a garden and I head out there, admiring the flowers as I go. When I see him, my breath hitches in my throat and I stop to admire him. Dressed in an indigo suit that matches the streak in his dark hair. The fit is perfection, allowing me to admire his broad shoulders, slim waist, and the thickness of his muscled thighs. His wings are put away and I do the same with mine before making my way over to him. He

hears me and turns, studying me with a look I hope I never grow accustomed to. A combination of love and hunger.

"Aurora." My name on his lips is throaty and warm.

"Hi," I say, feeling shy. "I'm alive," I add, and smile.

His face turns serious. "Did you know what would happen?"

"No," I say when I'm directly in front of him. So close, I can see the sparkle in his eyes. "That was the point, I think. We had to be willing to sacrifice everything for the realm, including our love and our lives."

He reaches out to touch me but pauses. "And I'm not dreaming?" There is a hint of fear. At the look my heart breaks a little. Because I'm sorry he had to suffer.

I move into the heat of his hand and he caresses my face. "If you are, then so am I." The words come out softly and I close my eyes.

His lips find mine as he presses my mouth open, kissing me deeply. I wrap my arms around his waist, and he folds me into his arms.

Too soon our lips part. Breathless, I gaze into his eyes, hoping he sees I want more of that. A lot more.

"That night in the forest in the human realm. The night when that boy was hurting you…" He pauses and I feel my eyes get wide. "You're glad we met?" I sense his hesitation. "You still love me then?" he adds.

"First of all, you've just reminded me of some unfinished business." I close my eyes and imagine that jerk of a guy. Then with my magic, I send him a serious case of poison ivy. When I'm sure he's got it, I smile and open my eyes.

Paxton watches me with an amused expression on his face. "What did you just do?"

"Gave the guy a serious rash. And it's *everywhere.*" I smirk, hoping he isn't offended.

Paxton bursts out laughing, and I join in. "He deserves that and more, my love."

I nod but allow myself to get serious again. “Paxton, *you* are my truest love. My one and only. If you’ll let me, I’ll love you forever and always.” My hands cup his face. He tilts down and kisses my palms, sending a shiver of desire across my skin.

“Marry me,” he says. “Since the day I met you, I’ve loved you.”

“Then I will marry you. The sooner the better.” My arms circle his neck and I pull him down so I can kiss him again.

A growl escapes his throat and we spend the next several minutes wrapped up in each other. Every touch, every caress more hungry and needy than the one before.

There is a loud boom and we are both startled, our lips parting as we study the darkness. An explosion of light fills the sky.

Relieved, I watch the sparkling red, pink, and blue lights. “Fireworks,” I say, shuddering.

“You think your mom and dad would approve if we did it now?” his voice whispers in my ear.

I face him. There’s a frisky grin on his face and I know what he’s implying.

“If you don’t ask them, I will,” I respond, enjoying our teasing banter.

He kisses me again as more fireworks light up the night. Then he takes my hand and places it over his heart. “Aurora, my dearest truest love, let’s get married and then spend the rest of the night and forever making love and creating baby fairies. Deal?” He watches me like a tiger surveys his prey.

I inhale a ravenous breath as my eyes rake down his body before returning to his face and I give him my biggest smile, eager to get started. “Deal.”

OceanofPDF.com

ALICE IN DEMONLAND

OceanofPDF.com

IN DEMONLAND, the weak died. And the strong? Well, they didn't necessarily live either. Down here, even the weak were stronger than any human. That we could be killed was saying something. It had to do with our fathers. They were the greatest of all the demons. Beyond vile and wicked and willing to destroy their offspring at any cost—

"Alice, are you listening?" Peter's words cut through my thoughts.

I snapped my head in his direction. "Of course," I said, facing front once again.

Snickers filtered through the quiet and punched me in the gut. I was a warrior trainee and should be focused. My life literally depended on it.

"Good. Now, as I was saying…" Peter started up again. I tried to listen but found myself tuning him out once again.

We were in one of the enormous training rooms deep below Wonderland, Arizona, in our compound. It was a realm unto itself and was called Demonland. Aptly named because of what we did and where we came from.

Peter sauntered in between all of the trainees, me included, as he spoke, his hands behind his back. As he went, he would push out a trainee's foot, so his stance was precisely hips-width apart or adjust the way one of us was holding our weapon. But it was hard to concentrate.

Any moment, we would play my favorite game. Slaying menial demons. And I was antsy, ready to start. Peter, our trainer, was one of the greatest Dark Moth warriors ever to walk the Earth, and he didn't seem to care that I was sick of instruction and itching to fight. He continued on and on about the demon order and how things began in the Demon Realm. As though where we lived was any better. Not in the slightest. Though the room was cool, sweat trailed down the

center of my back and pooled between my breasts.

The worst part about Peter's speech was I'd heard it at least a dozen times over the years. He needed to shut up already so I could slay me some demons.

"You know of the seven deadly sins?" Peter asked as though determined to try my patience. His eyes focused on mine.

I swallowed, forcing my mind to listen. "Yes," I said as well as the rest of the trainees. They were as antsy as me. I could sense it. We were like the coil of a spring desperate to break free.

"Well, not only are they scary stories told in Sunday School, but they are also living, breathing demon royalty."

Blah. Blah. Blah, I thought, but he wasn't kidding. Unfortunately, some of those demons also happened to be our parents.

"The demons you'll be fighting today are menials." Peter pointed at the cage on the other side of the large instruction room. The pen had been fortified by troll magic, and every time a demon tried to slip between the metal bars, their nasty bodies were electrocuted.

A hundred of them growled and gnashed their teeth. The foolish ones threw themselves against the rods, making the air reek of burning demon hair and flesh. Not a pleasant scent when they already smelled like rotting eggs mixed with decaying corpses. They didn't look much better, resembling oversized sewer rats with leprosy. Their skin appeared to be peeling off and oozed snot-looking liquid.

"They're fast and devious," Peter went on. "Killing them is easy if you can catch them. Don't use your weapons unless you're sure you have a clean shot, and avoid using your demon powers altogether. Otherwise, you'll wind up killing one of the other trainees. Got it?" Peter gave me a direct look. "Alice, what did I just say?"

I forced myself not to roll my eyes. Peter was a great Dark Moth, but his father had been a Pride demon, which meant he had an inordinately high opinion of himself.

"Be careful. The menials are tricky. Don't use our demon powers,

but stick to our weapons." My weapon of choice was a katana, but I also kept a small dagger in my right boot and a 9mm in a holster under my shirt.

"Very good." His light gray eyes that exactly matched the rest of the Dark Moth trainees studied me. I was an oddity in many ways, but the most prominent was my eye color, which was a vivid blue.

"Queen of Hearts," the guy on my right whisper-coughed.

Everyone around him snickered.

"Quiet!" Peter's angry voice boomed. Even the demons stopped chattering. "There will be no name-calling. Use your energy on slaying the demons, and for Hell's sakes, please focus." The tension in the room shot up. "This isn't a game…" he began and then trailed off as a giant smile filled his face, replacing the anger. "What am I saying? Of course, it is." He clapped his hands.

The half dozen trainees around me joined in, cheering, hooting, and hollering excitedly. Because it was a game. One our father's started thousands of years ago.

The demonic rules of our demon fathers were simple: Bed a woman. Wait until after their half-demon child was born. Kill the human mother. Once the child reached the age of maturity, which was eighteen, the real fun began. At least according to the demon sire. They would hunt their offspring and wouldn't stop until the child, and everyone the half-demon cared about was dead.

"It's so awesome," said no one ever, including me. I wasn't going to let some filthy demon hunt me down in its twisted game. Instead, I intended to take the fight to him. Well, in a manner of speaking. The other trainees knew at least something about their demon parent. They found out by the color of the marks on the backs of their hands once their abilities manifested. If their demon parent were Pride, like Peter's, then the marks would become purple. Greed was gold. Those from a Lust demon had their marks turn pink. Envy was green. Gluttony demons produced orange markings. Wrath became red. And,

Sloth half-demons had their markings turn blue. The marks on the backs of my hands had been black since the day I was born. They hadn't changed colors, even when my abilities manifested.

It was yet another odd thing about me.

All Dark Moth trainees wanted to see our demon parent dead. Killing them was how we proved ourselves, how we became full-fledged warriors. Most half-demons, called Moths, were born without any extra powers. Those like me were the elite. Born with power equivalent to that of our demon sire. If we survived the deadly battle with the demon, then we became Dark Moth warriors. Our destiny was to fight for those Moths without the marks. We would become their protectors, their light in the darkness. That was what the Dark Moth Society did. It was why we were all in the compound preparing to kill as many menial demons as possible.

Practice for the real thing.

"And the winner gets a night off above ground," Peter said, crossing his arms.

"Oh yeah. Watch out, Wonderland, here I come," Steven said.

Peter chuckled. Walked over to the cage. Unlocked the padlock. "Get ready. In three. Two. One." He jerked open the enclosure. Menials flooded out, stepping on and clawing each other to get at us.

I ran forward, pulling my katana from its sheath and driving it at the leading menial. Before it connected, the demon darted to the right and landed on top of Pamela, pulling her hair and digging his claws into her face.

"Hold still, you writhing little rat." I brought my blade down across the demon's neck, slicing it in two. Green blood spattered my face and got all over Pamela before it turned into a pile of dark ash.

Neither of us was fazed. "Thanks, Alice." She spun, pulling an arrow from her quiver and sinking it into the stomach of the nearest demon. "Blue," she shouted.

I went after two demons, cutting one of the Menials in half while

sinking the blade from my boot into the eye of another. “Red and pink. That’s three for me.”

The others were counting, too, even though Wrythe, the ruler of our society, would decide the winner.

Eric and Wendy worked together, which wasn’t surprising given they were a couple. First, Eric would bait the demons, and Wendy would slaughter them. Then they would switch it up. I wondered if they fought together, hoping for a tie so they both would be able to go above ground.

I didn’t care whether I went into Wonderland or not. My goal wasn’t to have fun. All that mattered was I got plenty of practice so that when I met my demon father, I would be ready.

Still, it was great practice, and I quickly took out five more.

“Alice, save some for the rest of us.”

“Not a chance, Georgia.” I smirked. The girl was greedy, but then she was the half-demon offspring of Greed.

“Tell me something, Alice. If you win, what do you intend to do with your prize?” Georgia asked, slicing off the head of another demon.

“Enjoy it,” I responded, killing three more in quick progression.

She used her double-edged axe to kill another two demons. “Guess I better make sure you don’t win.”

“If you think you can.” I sliced through two more at once and stabbed another in the stomach. Then I spun around and cut through two before noticing four of the demons on Gilbert. He fell to one knee as one of the demons bit off his ear.

Gilbert screamed as deep red blood dripped from the wound.

I aimed and tossed the knife from my boot at the demon. The blade sunk deep between its beady eyes. The demon fell off, taking another of them with it to the ground. I ran forward and sliced through both.

“It’s over,” Peter’s loud voice boomed. “Do we have our winner?”

He glanced over at Wrythe, who'd come in without my knowledge. Our king nodded.

"We do. Bring the trainees forward," Wrythe commanded.

OceanofPDF.com

I ADVANCED TOWARD HIM, as did the others, except Gilbert, who was getting examined by the doctor. Heathcliff was a scientist as well as the Society's physician. I'd heard he worked for years in Massachusetts at one of the colleges with his father, a vampire called Adam Henry. At the college, Heathcliff created supernatural formulas and used his discoveries to help those in the human realm as well as supernaturals like me. We were lucky to have him.

Lined up, Wrythe walked down the line. As he went, we each took a knee, placing a fist over our hearts. Then, he rested a hand on each of our shoulders before moving on, even waiting until Gilbert could join us and did the same for him.

I looked on in awe. The king was an ominous man. Describing him did him no justice. He stood nearly seven feet tall, the same as every other male warrior. His eyes shone with intellect, and he had long ebony hair. Though his eyes and hair color matched every other Dark Moth, on him, it was as though every feature, every muscle, and sinew had lined up flawlessly. In truth, he was nearly too gorgeous to look at.

His markings were deep red, the color of the Wrath demon. He possessed an exceedingly strong note of anger. It seemed to boil through him like a living creature just beneath his skin. Being near him was intimidating. It was apparent in the way he held his shoulders that Wrythe knew he was meant to be king. That he was right where he belonged. I wondered what that felt like. To know without a doubt where you fit in.

Once he'd walked the line twice, Wrythe stopped in front of Eric. "Rise, trainee."

Eric stood, keeping his eyes on the ground.

"You fought like a champion this evening. You will be a fine

warrior." He patted Eric on the shoulder.

Then his gaze fell to Pamela. "Stand."

Pam rolled her shoulders as she straightened. Every female Moth was a foot shorter than the males, so she tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. I internally rolled my eyes. "Your Highness," she said.

"It is apparent you were sired by a Pride demon." He touched her arm. "You'll have much to overcome. Take care to school your prideful thoughts lest they get the better of you."

A small sigh escaped her lips before she checked herself and nodded.

He gave her a grim smile. "Still, there is hope. You fought well."

He spoke a few words to each of the other trainees until he reached me. "Hello, Alice." He held out his hand to help me stand even though I didn't need it. For the longest moment, he studied me. I worried I'd done something wrong. Then he said, "You aren't like the rest of them." He flipped over my hand so he could get a better look at the markings on my wrists. "Haven't you reached maturity?"

"I have. When I'm fighting, I feel the demon's power, but my markings haven't changed color," I said, feeling small, especially since I wasn't quite as tall as the other female trainees. The oddities were plentiful.

Peter came to stand beside the king. "Between the lack of color on her markings and her eyes, we aren't sure which demon is her sire," he said as though he were studying a new species.

Wrythe leaned in so close I could smell the spicy scent of his aftershave. "I've seen rare cases where the demon's genetics are revealed through eye color, which would make her sire a Pride demon." He lowered his head and moved even closer as though he might kiss me.

I couldn't help but notice the fullness of his lips and was suddenly embarrassed. My eyes wanted to cross, but I held his gaze, hoping he would be able to give a solid answer. Perhaps my demon sire was a

Sloth, but there were certain times that my eyes would change from blue-green to green-blue, so did that make my sire a Greed demon then?

“The other trainers and I have discussed it and can’t say for certain. She doesn’t fight like a Sloth demon. Her movements are too quick and calculating,” Peter went on.

“You’re right. She doesn’t move like a Sloth warrior. I would guess Wrath by her aggressiveness.” He seemed satisfied with that guess.

“We’ve considered Greed as well, but she doesn’t display a Greed demon’s appetites.” Peter continued to study me, clasping his hands in front of him.

“I would also agree with that assessment based on what I’ve seen tonight.” Wrythe straightened. “You’re a mystery, Alice Blackburn.” He crossed his arms in front of his bulky chest, causing his rippling muscles to flex under his black tee shirt. “And you’re also tonight’s winner. Congratulations.” He clapped, and the others joined in even though I could tell they weren’t thrilled.

“Thank you, Your Highness.” I bowed at the waist, locking eyes on his inky combat boots.

“What do you intend to do tonight?” he asked.

“Um,” I glanced at the other trainees. “Would you mind if I invited everyone to go up into Wonderland with me?”

The king’s brows scrunched together. “Most definitely not a Greed demon sire and much too beautiful as well.” He contemplated me.

My face heated under his scrutiny, and I wanted to hide.

“That wasn’t the agreement,” Peter chimed in, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to try.

“It’s true. But,” Wrythe paused and smiled a large, genuine smile, making him even more gorgeous. “I like your style, Alice Blackburn.” He walked to the exit, where he pushed open the door. “Yes, I think that would be an excellent idea.” He gave Peter a pointed look. “Go

with them. They deserve the break."

Peter nodded. "Of course, sire."

"Besides, I believe it's Eric's birthday?" the king added.

Eric lifted his head a bit higher. "It is."

"Well, then it's more than settled. Be sure to eat some cake for me too," Wrythe said and left.

OceanofPDF.com

BIRTHDAYS WEREN'T EXACTLY happy for us Moths, especially when it was our eighteenth like Eric's. That was because the demon parent officially began its hunt to kill their offspring on this day. The Dark Moth Society's ruler knew what today meant. For that reason, I was surprised that Wrythe had agreed to let him go above ground.

When I asked Wrythe to let everyone go, it was because I'd forgotten Eric's birthday. I'd been too excited about winning.

Now, though…

It was well known that the demon sire rarely came after his offspring on their actual birthday. That would be too easy. And the demons hunted us for sport. It was amusing to them. They'd discovered eons ago that they could do it, so they did. We were nothing more than their entertainment.

They impregnated human women without their knowledge, forced them to carry the Moth child to term, and once born, terminated the mother. It was heartless, cruel, and evil. But it was all we knew.

Usually, the demon would allow the Moth to worry and fret a week or two, even sometimes killing those close to the Moth first. Or he might enter their dreams, showing them how he intended to kill them. I'd heard of one sire who'd taken over the body of a half demon's fiancé only so he could torture her, bring her low and break her mentally before slaughtering her.

"I've changed my mind. I don't think we should go," I said to Wendy while I watched her apply her makeup. We were in our shared bedroom, and I was sitting on my bed. There were no posters on the walls. Barely anything sat atop the dresser, and no fancy bedding with extra pillows. Basically, there was no frou-frou. It was like what I imagined a military barracks would be in the human realm. Beds, a dresser, and four plain walls. Not that I minded. The accommodations

were better than my living arrangements before the Dark Moths took me in.

Wendy looked pretty in heels, skinny jeans, and a red silk halter-top. She'd curled her dark hair, and it lay against her creamy skin in a halo of soft curls. For makeup, she'd done smoky eyes in dark gray and black and then applied red lipstick that matched her top as well as her markings.

During dinner, the others had talked excitedly about what they wanted to do while above ground. The plan was to go to a club called The Mad Hatter. It was rumored to be the party place for all Warriors with drinks and dancing and fun. Not that any of us had much experience with the meaning of that word. We'd been training within the compound since we were twelve, and for most of us, it was the only home we cared to remember.

"Of course we're going to go, Ali—" she paused and took in my outfit.

I had on dark jeans, my old black combat boots, and a black tank top. After my shower, I'd brushed out my hair and put some mousse in it, figuring I'd let it air dry. My makeup consisted of nothing unless I counted the lotion I applied.

"Is that what you're wearing?" She wrinkled her nose like I smelled terrible.

I glanced down, sniffing slightly. "Yeah." Soap scent filled my nose.

She shook her head. "You're lucky you have those weird eyes. At least they provide a pop of color." She grabbed her bag, added a small dagger to the contents, and then sealed it shut.

"I seriously doubt they'll let you bring a weapon into the club." Of course, I didn't tell her about the knife hidden in my boot.

She laughed, retrieving it from her bag. "Old habits die hard." She set it on the tall oak dresser we shared and headed toward the door.

"With Eric's birthday, I don't think it's—" I tried again.

Wendy held up her hand, cutting me off. “Look, I know you’re the Queen of Hearts and that you don’t care about the rest of us.” She went over to her wooden jewelry box, found a necklace, and put it on. “Not really, anyway. But Eric is my boyfriend. Tonight is his birthday. And since you won the challenge, you have to come.” She stomped one of her healed feet as her markings glowed deep red. “So get off your butt, and let’s go.”

“Fine.” I hated it when the others called me Queen of Hearts, probably because the nickname fit. But not the way they thought.

That was my biggest secret: my heart overflowed with emotions and feelings. I cared too much. More than I should. I fought to protect my heart because caring hurt more than they could know.

As we walked down the hall, we met Pam and Georgia. They both looked great as well. Georgia in a bright yellow sundress and Pam in a plum poplin top and white pants.

We turned the corner and opened the door to the guys’ hallway. They were waiting by the elevator, all dressed in variations of the same outfit. Jeans and button-up shirts. Eric wore green, Gilbert had on orange, Steve looked nice in blue, and Leif wore pink.

Eric’s eyes lit up as soon as he saw Wendy.

“You look gorgeous,” he said, hugging her and kissing her neck.

“Thanks.”

The rest of us tried to pretend we were invisible while they proceeded to passionately make out.

Finally, Steve had enough. “Let’s go.”

“We can’t yet. We need to wait for Peter.” I faced the door that led to the teachers’ quarters just as Peter appeared with the key that would unlock the elevator and take us up. Up out of Demonland and into the real world, the one where we were hunted like animals.

Usually, Peter wore all black. Tonight he had on faded jeans and a purple tee shirt. He’d showered and pulled his long black hair back

with a tie at the nape of his neck.

“You clean up nice,” Pamela said, sidling closer to him.

“So do you,” he responded with appreciation, though he kept his distance.

His words surprised all of us. He took in our shocked faces and chuckled. “What? I’m not allowed to have fun? I need to stick to babysitter duties?”

I hadn’t thought about that. To me, Peter was a teacher, someone way out of my league, but he was probably only a few years older than the rest of us.

“Oh no. You should definitely have some fun,” Pam said, giving him a sultry smile.

“How about I find a happy medium.” He went over to the elevator covered by a wrought iron gate and opened it with a squeal that set my ears on fire. Then he took the strange circular-shaped key he carried, inserted it into the keyhole just below the button with an up arrow, and turned it to the right.

A motor kicked on, and after several long moments, the doors pinged open. Silently, we road up. It seemed to take an hour but was probably closer to five minutes. When the door opened again, we stepped out into a parking garage.

“Welcome to Wonderland, Arizona. Population 17, 275,” Peter said, tucking the key into his pocket.

I was the last one out and gulped down the dry, hot air. It took my breath away. Even at eleven o’clock at night, the heat was stifling. “So, where’s this club?” I asked, longing to turn around and go back.

“What’s the matter, Queen of Hearts? Can’t take a little heat?” Leif lightly punched me in the arm.

He was trying to be cute and flirty. It wasn’t working. I punched him back, not so lightly. “I just want to get this *fun* over with.” My nerves tingled, and I was on edge.

Peter faced us. “Huddle up,” he said, sounding like the coach in a football game.

When we all faced him, he said, “There are three rules. One: Watch out for each other. If you see a trainee in trouble, help them out. Two: Don’t use your abilities on non-Moths. Leave the humans alone. And three: If we lose one another, this is our meeting spot.” He gave each of us a severe glare, gauging how well we were listening. “We won’t return to the compound until we have everyone. Got it?”

“Got it, boss,” Steve said.

“Keep your eyes peeled. Check out your surroundings. If something looks out of place, let me know.”

I gave Peter a mental snort. Didn’t he realize it all looked out of place to us? I didn’t know for sure, but I was pretty positive none of us had been above ground in at least a year.

OceanofPDF.com

SEVERAL BLOCKS before we reached the club, I could feel the music. It radiated from the ground and caused it to shake. Old movie posters of *Avengers, Hunger Games*, and *The Duff* lined a bus stop. We walked past a *Barnes and Noble*, a store with a weird apple sign, and a grocery store called Winegar's before turning into an alley.

"Stay close," Peter said as though the homeless littering the concrete walls could hurt us.

A man held out his hand. "Spare a dollar?" he asked.

I touched Peter's arm. "Do you have a dollar I can give him?"

He chuckled and kept walking. Apparently, he had no intention of giving the guy any money. "You have been out of touch with the real world for way too long. There should be a class that teaches you how to live out here. You won't be down in the compound forever."

True, but only if we don't die, I thought as we rounded the corner.

It was evident which building housed the club. A long line of people stood waiting to get in. Steve headed toward the end of the line.

"Stick together," Peter said, grabbing him by the shirt. He walked up to the bouncer. The big guy took off his sunglasses even though it was way too dark to be wearing them in the first place. Peter and the guy talked for a few seconds before the guy put his shades back on. Then proceeded to unhook the velvet rope and let us walk in.

Those still waiting shouted obscenities and grumbled. Someone even threw an empty can. I heard it coming and caught it in mid-air, then turned, searching the crowd for the culprit. No one came forward, which was probably for the best, so I tossed the can in the trash and walked inside.

The temperature immediately went from stuffy hot to positively

chilly. A light mist sprayed the room, giving it a smoky quality. It caused the colorful ceiling lights to linger in the air. Bodies writhed and moved on the dance floor to the beat of some kind of electro-techno music.

Eric and Wendy found us a couple of tables, and the rest of the group were seated. A waitress came over and took their orders after checking ID's. As far as I knew, Peter was the only one old enough to drink, but he wasn't at the table.

Not that it really mattered whether we were old enough anyway. The demon DNA we possessed made it, so alcohol metabolized and burned up before we were affected. It was the same with drugs, or so I was told. Our DNA had benefits too. We healed fast and rarely got sick. When we were wounded, though, we just had to suffer through the pain.

I didn't sit but stood a little ways off, checking the surroundings. That niggling of being watched still lingered, and I worked to figure out why.

Peter was suddenly at my side. "Why don't you go over and hang out with them?"

"I… In a minute." It was hard to explain how little I fit in. "Why aren't you over there?" I asked, turning his question back on him.

"Well, I'm the teacher. Not an equal or an ally, but a superior. Going over there will only make them uncomfortable." He crossed his hands behind his back.

"I guess that makes sense." We weren't friends, though I'm sure he had some.

Eric and Wendy got up and began dancing, their bodies twining together like two pieces of the same rope. Eric leaned in and kissed her cheek, causing Wendy to giggle. Leif flirted with the waitress when she brought back the drinks. Steve and Gilbert were speaking to a couple of girls at the next table. Georgia and Pam chatted and laughed, swaying to the music. It was sweet seeing them laughing,

enjoying themselves, and doing something besides training.

A small part of me felt envious.

“But you should totally get over there,” Peter continued. “I mean, I know what they call y—” He didn’t finish.

I glanced up at him. “Peter, what is it?” I followed his gaze.

A man was walking along the outskirts of the club. Like a cougar, he hunted for something. *Or someone,* I thought and immediately froze. He looked like the actor from a movie we’d just watched about an alien superhero. *Thor*, my mind said.

He was tall, with bulging muscles straining against an expensive suit. The man had long blond hair that he let hang free, and he wore a ring that glittered against the lights on his left middle finger.

Who are you hunting?

Before I finished thinking about the question, I knew the answer. He was an Envy demon, which meant he was here for Eric.

“Peter, he’s a demon.”

“I know.” He faced me. “Calmly go over to the group and tell them to head back to our spot.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going after it.” His dark eyes shimmered with anticipation. “Do as I say.”

I jumped into action, walking too quickly. When I realized it, I slowed my pace, keeping my heart rate even. Just in case the demon was listening.

“Alice, glad you could join us,” Leif said, reaching out to hug me.

I sidestepped him and went over to Wendy and Eric.

“Alice, what is it?” Eric gave me a questioning glance.

“He’s here. Your demon sire.” I figured it was best to get straight to the point.

“No, he can’t be,” Wendy said, but I smelled the immediate fear on

her.

“It’s true. We need to go. Peter wants us to meet at the garage. Help me gather the others.”

“No, if he’s here for me, I have to stay and fight. I can’t put anyone else in danger.” As Eric spoke, he looked at Wendy, and I saw the raw love he had for her.

I reached out and touched Eric’s arm. “That’s honorable, and I know that’s what we’ve been trained to do, but you aren’t prepared. You have no weapons. We should do as Peter said. Regroup, and then we can help you go after the demon.”

“Dammit.” He slammed his fist into the table, causing it to crack.

“What’s wrong,” Leif asked, standing.

“Envy demon. He’s here for Eric. We need to take off.” I searched the perimeter for the demon and quickly found him. He had his slimy arm around a tall, blonde woman. They were talking. She started to head toward the exit when the demon looked directly at me. His dark eyes seemed to pierce through my body. Then he smiled. If I hadn’t known what he was, I might’ve been taken in by his easy manner and charm. Instead, I grabbed Leif’s arm and shoved him toward the exit. “Hurry.”

Without effort, the demon jumped on a table, scaring the supermodel and the others around her. His nails grew long, like pointed claws.

People began to scream.

We pushed toward the exit. I searched for Peter as I moved, wondering where he’d gone. Before I found him, the demon leaped from the table he stood on and onto the table our group had been sitting at only moments before. He picked up a drink and chugged it down. Then threw the glass into the mirror behind the bar, causing it to shatter. More people screamed.

Several of the bouncers headed toward the demon.

His smile grew bigger.

“This is my favorite part,” I heard him say. It wasn’t that he spoke loudly but that his words seemed to pierce my insides. The table split in two, but he was prepared and landed gracefully.

I shuddered with fear but also with exhilaration. I’d never seen a royal demon up close. Sure, I’d seen plenty of Dark Moths, and it was true that we all possessed the same powers as our demon sire, but we looked human.

Demons could look human too, and the one after Eric did, though that wasn't his true form.

I watched in disgust as he tore through the bouncers like they were made of nothing more than paper.

“Alice,” Leif yelled.

Everyone was at the exit, and they were waving me over. But I didn’t feel right about leaving those in the club to die.

I took the knife from my boot and ran toward the Envy demon. My pulse quickened. I was impatient to fight. But before I reached him, someone pulled me back.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Peter hissed in my ear.

“Protecting the humans,” I said, keeping my focus on the demon.

“No. Get out.”

“I won’t,” I said.

The demon noticed us and stood, though he didn’t come over. “I won’t fight you, girl. I’m here for the one called Eric.” He slashed through a bouncer and shoved anyone in his way until he was directly in front of Peter and me. So close, he appeared to be over eight feet. “Besides, your sire would kill me if I laid a finger on you.” He pointed one of his claws in my face. “But oh, I’m tempted. You are luscious.” His voice was gravelly, not quite garbled, but it sounded like English was not his first language. “As for you,” he turned to Peter. “I can lay as many fingers on you as I want.” His clawed hand reached out to

grab Peter's neck.

Without thinking, I cut off the demon's hand.

He roared, bringing his bloodied wrist into his chest. "Evil child. I look forward to the day when your sire comes after you. I'll be an enthusiastic spectator for your death."

"Who is he?" I shot back, desperate for answers.

He gnashed his teeth, held out his arm, and I watched his sleek, clawed hand regrow before my eyes. "Tell Eric I'm coming for him." He cackled gleefully. "Let the games begin." He jumped into the air. It looked like he would go through the roof, but he vanished.

OceanofPDF.com

"ALICE BLACKBURN, WHAT YOU JUST DID…." Peter stopped and shook his head. "It was irresponsible, careless, and one of the most heroic deeds I've ever seen." He pulled me into a quick hug.

Beyond shocked, I didn't respond. Just stood there. As trainees, physical contact wasn't a regular occurrence, especially between trainers and their students.

"Let's go find the others. They can't be far," he said, releasing me

I nodded, a numb euphoria coursing through my veins. I wasn't ready to be done.

We exited the club and blended with the crowd. Swirling red and blue lights filled the sky. Police cars, a fire truck, and an ambulance had arrived on the scene. Crews helped those who'd been wounded while the police went inside.

"Where are they?" I asked Peter, searching the crowd for the rest of our group.

"I'm guessing they went back to our meet-up spot. Let's go."

Before we'd gone two feet, the air changed. Overhead it was like spilled ink over white paper, and thick darkness descended. It roared past the Spanish-styled buildings, blocking out the stars and the three-quarter moon.

"What's happening?" I'd put my knife back in my boot, but I itched to have it in my hand once again.

"It's the demon. He's called the menials who serve him. The hunt is on."

Peter was right. The impenetrable darkness wasn't just the blackness of a starless night but hordes of rat-like menial demons. They brought the pungent stench of sulfur and decaying flesh with them.

“And me without my sword,” I said sarcastically.

Peter chuckled. “You’re such a warrior.” He searched our surroundings. “We need some cover.”

“Can the humans see the menials?” I asked, hurrying after Peter as I passed by the people. They didn’t seem afraid but milled around like the menials weren’t there.

“They can probably feel their presence, but no, not unless the demons want them to. Come on.” Peter took off running. “We need to get away from everyone,” he shouted as he ran directly into the menials.

I followed, grabbing the knife from my boot as a dozen rats swooped in front of me. I gutted one and punched another as I tried car doors along the street. Finally, I found an old beater and dove in, slamming a demon in the door when it shut.

The rats were everywhere, so thick I couldn’t see anything else, not even Peter. *Where are you?* I hoped he was okay.

The passenger side door opened, and a guy got in.

“What the— Get out,” I shouted. He’d scared me, and I’d nearly stabbed him in the throat.

He pushed my hand away, careful to avoid the pointy end of the knife. “You realize they can get into the car if they want. You aren’t safe in here.” As he spoke, one of the menials slammed against the windshield. Shattered glass went everywhere and bit into my face, neck, and arms.

I ignored them as the guy grabbed the little demon by the neck with both hands and twisted until there was a pop. It immediately turned to dark ash. “One down, a million to go.” He smirked and reached through the glass, grabbing another.

The move surprised me. He surprised me. Who the crap was he? It was apparent he knew about the demons and also had abilities. Not to mention he’d been well trained, but he didn’t look like a Dark Moth.

With one demon dead, a dozen more started through. I cut through them and was quickly covered in demon goo.

“Take my hand,” the guy said, holding it out.

“No way.” I didn’t know the guy. I preferred to take my chances with the rats.

“Okay, but I’m out.” He opened the door and disappeared into the sea of demons, fighting and punching as he went.

In moments, it became apparent he was wise to leave. The menials had me pinned against the seat and were biting and clawing at my skin. “Get off of me.” I stabbed one in the neck and wrung another’s. Demon ash covered me and combined with the blood from the places where I’d been bitten.

I growled as one of them pulled my hair while another bit my cheek. My knife was snatched from my hand, and a demon sank its rotten teeth into my flesh. “That’s it.” In the past, I could count on one hand the number of times I used my demon powers. In truth, they were scary, and I preferred to use my weapons. But with a dozen demons pinning me inside the car, I had no choice. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, feeling for the strength. At once, the power raced along my veins, changing the color of my blood to black as it swelled.

Continuing to focus, I kept my eyes closed as the menials squealed in pain. Ash soaked me like rain in a thunderstorm. When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to see a cobalt light emanating off my skin and pushing outward. Every demon that came in contact with it was instantly incinerated.

Though I’d learned in school about the power each Dark Moth possessed, seeing it come alive was utterly different. I felt formidable and unstoppable and, if I were honest, a little out of control. But I wasn’t going to question it, not right them. Blood dripped from my cheek and onto my hand as I pushed the door open and climbed out.

Humans were wandering around, still dazed from what’d happened

in the club. One of the medical professionals came over and asked if I needed help. The shield that surrounded me and kept the demons at bay didn't faze him, or maybe he couldn't see it because he walked right through it.

"I'm fine," I said and took off, heading in the direction of the parking garage.

OceanofPDF.com

THE MENIALS FOLLOWED and continued to attack my cobalt shield without regard for their own lives. I hoped my powers would hold until I reached the others.

Pushing faster, I ran down the alley, past the grocery store and the bus stop. The guy who'd been in my car was in the middle of at least twenty menials, battling for his life. But it looked like he had the upper hand. He held a sword in each hand, mowing through them like they weren't there. Demon blood spattered against everything, soaking it in freckled goo.

The guy's eyes found mine, and he smirked before refocusing on the menials. It looked like the guy was having fun. *Crazy*. I shook my head, moving past him and into the parking garage. If he were a Dark Moth warrior, he would know where the entrance was and how to get himself to safety. If he wasn't, it didn't matter if he knew or not. No one but a Dark Moth who'd been deemed worthy could enter.

The elevator was on the bottom level. I scampered to the edge of the concrete wall and peered over as shouts and screams reached my ears from below. Those were my people, and they were losing. Flinging my legs over the edge, I jumped off and sailed down the five floors. My feet struck the floor with a heavy thud, and I felt my bones jar a moment.

"Alice." Leif noticed me first. He was covered in ash and had a significant scratch on one cheek. "It's here," was all he said, but I knew who he meant.

The Envy demon. I saw it at once as well as a few dozen menials. There were also six other demons, more significant than the menials but not as big as the royal. By the looks of them, they were trackers or mid-level demons.

Each stood four feet tall with skin that glistened like oily green

snakes. Their eyes were small and beady. They had two slits for a nose and a large mouth full of black, razor-sharp teeth. Their tails were lined with spikes, like thorns on the stem of a rose.

Peter fought with two of them while Steven, Leif, and the others battled the menials.

Except for Wendy. The Envy demon had Eric cornered, and she was fighting four trackers on her own, slashing through them, trying to reach her boyfriend. The markings on her hands were lit up bright red.

Wrath, I thought, impressed by her ferocity.

As I watched the scene unfold, I realized that the only Moths in real peril were Peter and Eric. The menials and mid-level demons weren't delivering lethal blows. It looked more like they were toying with them, keeping the trainees occupied while the Envy demon went after Eric.

A quick appraisal told me Peter had his demons under control, but Eric had suddenly vanished. I ran over, using my shield to get past the trackers. They shrieked as my shield fried their skin.

"Alice," Wendy cried, sounding relieved I was there to help.

The Envy demon turned when Wendy spoke my name. His face changed into something, not at all human. He had the same sharp black teeth, like the trackers, but they were much larger. His mouth took up most of his face.

It was with shocked sadness that I saw a hand dangling from the demon's teeth. "Alice Blackburn," it hissed, pitching the rest of Eric's appendage into his mouth. It crunched down, grinding the bones as he chewed.

Wendy screamed from behind me, and I guessed she'd seen what I had.

The remains of Eric sagged in the demon's clawed hands. His head was still intact, and his eyes were open but lifeless. It looked like Eric had died in the middle of a scream.

“No,” I whispered, unable to believe what I was seeing. It wasn’t that the rest of the trainees and I were close, but they were all the family I had. Seeing Eric killed in such a gruesome way infuriated me. I ran forward, my power still burning around me, and dove for the demon’s neck.

The Envy demon dropped Eric and tried to swat me aside, but I grabbed hold of his fingers and twisted, listening to the bones break. At the same time, I sent my elbow into his windpipe. He gasped as I spun in the air, moving my hands to his mouth where I took hold of his upper and lower jaws, ripping them apart. There was no pain when his teeth dug into my fingers. I felt nothing but white-hot rage as I tore him apart.

My demon power was doing its work as well, and the smell of sizzling demon flesh filled my nose. Green blood covered me like I’d bathed in it. As the demon went down, his voice hissed inside my head: *You’re stronger than the others. Seven times seven. But that means when your sire comes after you, the pain you’ll endure will be seven times seven. Remember that, Alice Blackburn.*

“Who is my sire?” I shook at how close I was to the answer. The demon’s body turned to ash. With the Envy demon gone, the lower demons vanished as well. I guessed they’d gone back to the Demon Realm where they’d come from.

“How did she do that?” Leif asked, his voice filled with awe. He was breathing heavily and appeared to be in shock.

“I thought Dark Moths could only kill a greater demon after they’d killed their sire,” Steven added. One of his arms dangled at an odd angle. It would heal on its own, though.

“Does that mean the Envy demon was her dear old dad as well as Eric’s?” Pam asked. The gash in her thigh soaked through her pant leg.

“Did you see that shield around her?” Georgia wiped some blood from her eye on her shirt. “It was incredible.”

I didn't want to listen to anymore. Killing the Envy demon felt good, right, but that didn't mean he'd been my sire. The demon had said seven times seven. Which demon was that?

I didn't have the answers, but at least my years of training had finally come to mean something. I'd experienced what destroying an upper-level demon felt like. And I knew without question my destiny. I would rid the world of every last one of the nightmarish demons.

Armed with that knowledge, I turned my attention to Wendy, worried about what she might do. She'd gone over to what was left of Eric and had his head in her hands. Sobs tore through her.

"I'm so sorry, Wendy," I murmured. For some reason, I felt responsible for his death.

She shook her head. "I can't believe it. He's gone. No. No. No." She was on the verge of a breakdown. I didn't know what to do.

Thankfully Peter took over as my powers subsided and finally vanished, leaving me tired.

OceanofPDF.com

THE RIDE DOWN in the elevator was beyond somber. Wendy cried quietly against Peter. Leif and Steven carried Eric's remains. I stood in the front, near the doors. Between the stench of death and the Envy demon's blood as well as the ash, it was hard to breathe.

When the door pinged open, I stepped out.

"Take Eric's remains down to the infirmary. Heathcliff will know what to do," Peter said as he practically carried Wendy.

"Yes, sir." Steven and Leif headed toward the hospital wing.

"Leif? Let Heathcliff know I'll be down in a few minutes."

"You got it."

Georgia and Pam quietly turned toward the dorms.

"Alice, you coming?" Pam asked.

"In a minute."

"Go on," Peter urged. "I've got Wendy." He gave me a once over. "Get cleaned up."

I nodded dully. "Okay." I entered my room after Pam. As I walked past the bed, a part of me longed to fall on it and sleep for a week. But that would be gross since I was covered in dead demons. So I edged into the bathroom, closing the door.

After I showered and dressed, there was a knock on the door. "Alice, it's Peter."

"Is Wendy okay?" I opened the door.

"Yes, Heathcliff gave her something to help her sleep, but that's not why I'm here." He was changed and cleaned up as well.

"Oh?"

"It's Wrythe. He wants to speak with you."

My heart jumped into my throat. "Why?" I threw my towel into

the hamper on top of my dirty clothes before sitting on my bed. There I tugged on my black boots that matched the rest of my outfit.

“I’m guessing he wants to know what happened tonight,” Peter said, but I sensed there was more.

“So what do I tell him?” I grabbed my leather jacket and threw it on.

“The truth, of course.” Peter smiled and put an arm around my shoulder as we went down the hall together. “He isn’t as scary as he seems.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.” I gave him a sideways glance. Wrythe wasn’t a Moth I would ever want to cross in a dark alley. He made me more nervous than the demon I killed tonight.

“Wrythe has been around a long time. He’s killed more royal demons than anyone. He knows how to protect regular Moths as well as the rest of our kind. So don’t shut him out. Tell him everything.”

We came to the door that led to Wrythe’s private chambers. Peter knocked.

“Enter,” Wrythe commanded.

“Remember what I said.”

“I will,” I replied as my knees began to quake.

The door swung open, and a butler waved me inside.

The room was filled with expensive and extravagant things, but I couldn’t focus on them once my gaze landed on the king.

“Hello, Alice.” Wrythe sat on an oversized leather couch. He wore a pair of board shorts, flip-flops, and a tee-shirt. He didn’t look like the leader of the most dangerous league of assassins the world had ever not known about.

I bowed, keeping my eyes trained on my boots. “Hello, sir.”

“Have a seat.”

I scoped the room and took the leather chair that matched the couch across from him.

“Would you like a drink?” He indicated a decanter and glasses on the coffee table between us.

“No, thanks.”

“So you want to get right to it?” He sat up and leaned forward. “Very well. Tell me what happened tonight.

For the next ten minutes, I explained everything. Well, nearly everything, just as Peter told me to. When I finished, Wrythe picked up one of the glasses and poured himself a drink. “Do you think the Envy demon was your sire?” he asked after taking a long sip.

It was the moment of truth. Did I confess what the demon had said about the seven times seven? It felt like nothing and too big a secret at the same time. I needed to research and mull it over. I respected Wrythe as the leader of our society, but I didn’t trust him. I didn’t even know him. I shrugged. “I don’t know. It seems likely given the fact I was able to kill him, doesn’t it?” I wanted answers.

Wrythe leaned back. “Our kind has existed for nearly as long as man has walked the Earth. As soon as demons realized what they could do, they began the awful game of creating and then killing their half-breed offspring. There’s no rhyme or reason to it. As with most evil in the world, there doesn’t have to be.” He took another drink of whatever was in his glass before setting it back down. “I was one of the first to be born with the markings.” He turned his hands, so they faced me, and I could see his marks. They were still red, the mark of Wrath, but they’d faded over the years. “I first realized I had powers about a week after I turned eighteen. There was no society back then. I didn’t even know other Moths existed. My demon came after me with a vengeance I’d never seen. He was hungry for my murder. When my powers manifested, it was a complete surprise to him as much as it was to me, which was how I was able to beat him.” He clasped his hands together.

I crossed one leg over the other and waited for him to continue. His story was one I’d heard before I could read or write, but never

from his own mouth.

“Over the centuries, others like me started to find each other. Instead of being chickens in a coup full of more chickens awaiting the inevitable fox to come and kill us, we finally became our own breed of fox, and we could kill just as easily.”

“Why do you think certain Moths began to receive the markings and powers?” That was a question none of my teachers could ever answer definitively. Our histories were full of theories and ideas, but nothing concrete.

“I believe it’s because life always finds a way to go on. We’d been nothing more than prey. Playthings to be toyed with and consumed, but our will to survive caused us to evolve.”

I liked that philosophy. *Life finds a way…*

“Perhaps you’re our latest evolution, Alice. A Dark Moth that can kill any demon.” His eyes glittered in the overbearing lights.

Tell him what you know, my mind shouted. “Maybe you’re right,” was all I said.

“Alice?” He came over to my chair. “You can tru—”

There was a sharp knock on the door.

Wrythe straightened. “Enter.”

Two warriors came in. Between them slumped the guy who jumped into the car I’d been trying to steal.

OceanofPDF.com

"WHO IS THIS?" Wrythe asked, a bit of amusement in his voice.

"We found him in the parking garage near the elevator," one of the warriors said.

Wrythe checked the backs of the guy's hands. "He has no marks. Why would you think to bring him down here?"

"He had this blade on him, not to mention all of the demon blood." The other warrior produced a sword that had the marks of the Dark Moth on them.

I felt compelled to add the information I had as well. "He was also able to see the demons. And he told me they would be able to get through the car… Maybe he's a regular Moth who knows how to fight?"

Wrythe smiled. "I believe you might be right." He went back over to the couch. "Boys, take him to Heathcliff."

As they carried him out the door, Wrythe said, "Alice, I'm making this boy your responsibility. Once he's healed, find out his story. Discover what you can about him, and then bring me the answers. Understand?"

I shivered internally, even though I didn't know why. But I wanted to decline. Instead, I reacted like a good little soldier. "Yes, your highness."

"Good girl, now get going. Your mission starts now. Don't leave his side until I instruct otherwise." He went to the door and held it open, waiting for me to leave.

"Very well." I followed after the warriors and held open the double doors to the hospital wing so they could carry the wounded man inside.

"Heathcliff!" one of the warriors shouted. "We have another

wounded."

The physician was sitting at his desk looking into a microscope. At his name, he jumped with surprise and let out a very unmanly yelp. "Isaac. Neeko." He brushed his graying hair out of his face. "Who have you brought me?"

"We think he's a regular Moth, but he's wounded and unconscious."

"Well, get him on the table so I can have a look."

They got him up, laying him on his back.

The room was clean and sterile. Everything in its place. The walls, ceiling, and floor were stark white. Lights blazed so brightly, it looked like daytime. Rows of glass cupboards lined the wall on the left. I saw a heart, an ear, and the head of an unknown creature before I looked away. The back wall held two doors, and in between was Heathcliff's workstation. Built in the shape of a T, it had three computer monitors, a microscope, and other machines I wasn't sure about. On the wall above the workstation were four rows of bookshelves filled with old books behind glass doors. To the right was a sink, more cupboards, another table, and some machines. In the center of the room was a stainless steel table on wheels. Below it was a drain.

The room terrified me.

"Does he have a name?" Heathcliff asked, his gaze landing on me.

"I don't know," I said.

"Fine." Heathcliff took a pair of shears from one of his drawers. "Everyone can go. I have work to do." He shooed the warriors from the room. "You too, Alice."

"Wrythe ordered me to remain by his side," I said, swallowing down the lump in my throat.

Heathcliff raised his thick, graying eyebrows. "Very well then. You can be my assistant." He handed me the scissors. "Cut the boy's shirt at the center and straight up." He went to a jar and removed some

gauze. “Hurry. I need to assess his injuries and see what kind of damage is under there.”

I went over to the table. The guy’s black shirt was soaked in demon blood and some of his own. I tried not to touch it as I cut into his shirt.

He looked like a Moth with deep black hair, tanned skin, tall and muscled. His eyes were closed, but I had a feeling when they were open, they’d be gray too. The same as everyone else’s.

Not me, though, I thought.

“Hustle, Alice,” Heathcliff urged.

“Right.” I finished cutting and parted the shirt. There was a large gash across his incredibly toned abs. It was bleeding though it had slowed. He had more minor scrapes, welts, and teeth marks all over his torso, arms, neck, and face, similar to mine.

I’d tried to bind my fingers after my shower, but they were still bleeding.

“Good green goodness. What happened to you all?” He pressed the gauze to the guy’s wound and then turned to me. As he pulled the bandages from my fingers, I told him about the Envy demon as well as the menials.

“Sounds scary,” he said, leading me over to the large sink and turning on the water. “Why didn’t you say something about these wounds?”

“I forgot,” I said, shrugging.

He mumbled something incoherent as he squirted something that smelled like antiseptic into my hands before moving back to the guy bleeding on the table. “Wash up. Use that towel beside the sink to dry your hands. It’s clean.”

I rubbed my hands together, forcing myself not to wince. The liquid stung as it hit the places where the demon teeth went in. Fresh blood poured from my fingers as I removed the hardened, old stuff.

“Good.” He returned and quickly bandaged my hands. “Put on a pair of gloves so you can help me attend to this guy. This looks like the work of a tracker. Its claws got him good.”

“Claws did that?”

“Afraid so.” As he spoke, he dabbed at the wound with something that smelled of lemons and alcohol. Once I had my gloves in place, he handed the wad of gauze to me. “Carefully clean away as much blood as you can while I hook him up to a saline drip and give him some blood. He’ll need both.”

I wiped at the blood until the gauze was soaked. Grabbed another and continued until the area was as clean as I could get it.

Then Heathcliff pushed me out of the way. “I’ll need to sew him closed to assist with his healing.” He held a needle and thread in one hand and a clean swatch of gauze in the other. “This is going to hurt him. Since anesthetic won’t help, I’ll need you to hold his hands, so he doesn’t get in my way.”

“How? Where—” I wasn’t sure where to hold him down, and touching him in his current state seemed too personal.

He shook his head. “Our instructors really need to work on giving you trainees some medical skills.” He pushed me toward the guy’s head. “Stand above him. Lean over and take his arms, and hold them tight until I’m finished.”

“Fine,” I said, thinking Heathcliff was right about some medical training. I grabbed the guy’s arms. His biceps were thick, but I pressed down as best I could.

“Here we go.” Heathcliff stuck the needle into the guy’s skin.

The guy groaned in pain and tried to roll away.

“Keep him steady,” Heathcliff snapped.

I tightened my grip as Heathcliff fished the needle back through the skin.

The guy groaned again, one leg kicked.

“Do not let him move.”

I leaned over the guy, pressing my elbows into his shoulders, watching his face.

As Heathcliff stuck his needle in once again, the guy moaned. And his eyes opened.

“What the hell are you doing?” His eyes caught hold of mine. I glanced away, but not without first seeing that his eyes weren’t gray, and they weren’t like mine either. They were bright green.

“Don’t move. You’ve got a nasty cut, and I’m trying to patch you up, uh—what’s your name, kid?” Heathcliff stuck the needle that resembled a fishhook through his skin.

“Ahhhh, damn, that hurts.” The guy shuddered.

I glanced down at him, trying not to stare, but I couldn’t help myself.

“I’m Kade. Kade Everett,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Well, Mr. Everett. My name is Heathcliff Henry, but you can call me Doc.” He pulled the thread all the way through.

“Good to meet you, I guess,” Kade said, blowing out a steadying breath.

“We’ll see if you still feel that way when I’m finished sewing up all of your wounds.” Doc winked. “The woman holding you down is Alice.”

“Hi Alice,” he said, tracing my face with his eyes.

Embarrassment rushed through me. “Hello.” I looked away, watching Heathcliff work and hoping he’d finish quickly.

“This is going to hurt. Be strong and hold still,” Heathcliff continued.

OceanofPDF.com

FOR THE NEXT THIRTY MINUTES, Heathcliff sewed up the gash on Kade's torso. Then got to work on the smaller ones.

I was impressed with how still and quiet Kade was. I felt his jaw clench and unclench several times, but he didn't let out another sound.

Finally, Doc straightened. He rolled his shoulders, cracking his back. "Done."

The tension in Kade slowly relaxed. I removed my elbows and arms from him.

He rubbed them gingerly. "You're strong."

"Sorry," I muttered but didn't really mean it.

Kade could tell. "Uh-huh."

With the wounds cleaned, they were already healing, as were my fingers.

"I'm going to keep you in the sickbay overnight." Heathcliff helped Kade sit up as he spoke. "I'll need to check the wound tomorrow, but you should be pretty close to back to normal in a couple of days."

Kade stood but kept himself bent over. I had a feeling it had to do with the fifty or so stitches in his abdomen.

Heathcliff took one of Kade's arms, and I took the other. We slowly walked him to one of the small rooms at the back of Doc's office. The doctor pushed a button, and the door slid open. There were two twin-sized beds with a small dresser near the footboard of each. Opposite the entrance was a tiny bathroom. "There are clothes in the dressers. Help Kade get some clothes on."

"What, we're going to be roomies?" Kade glanced down at me.

I literally felt my heart stop. "I guess so."

"Oh, I get it. So you're my PO."

“PO?” I asked, confused. I had no idea what it could mean.

“Parole Officer,” he said, carefully sitting on the edge of the bed. “You’re going to keep me out of trouble, make sure I mind my manners, that sort of thing.”

I chuckled lamely. “Something like that unless you just want to tell me everything there is to know about you now.” I crossed my arms, hoping he would.

“Cool,” he said

“I supposed a shower is out of the question?” I asked, eyeing his disgusting clothes and working to ignore the scent.

“You are more than welcome to give me a sponge bath.” He raised his eyes, hopeful.

I would’ve smacked him, except he was hurt everywhere. Instead, I rolled my eyes. “Not happening.

“Yeah, but he’s going to need your help.” Heathcliff opened the door and started laughing. “Good luck with that.”

I nearly died of embarrassment. “Thanks.”

As Doc was about to leave, I said, “Can I borrow those shears I used to cut open his shirt?”

“Sure thing.” Heathcliff left a moment and then came back. “Do I want to know what you’re going to do with these?”

I took the scissors. “Yeah, I’m going to cut off his clothes.”

“Good plan,” he said and left, letting the door slide closed.

“Ohhhhhh, you’re putting the moves on me now?” Kade smiled, showing off his sensual mouth.

I was mesmerized by his lips. They seemed to call to me, which totally ticked me off. “No, but your clothes do need to be incinerated.”

He glanced down. “Do what you must.”

“Whatever,” I snorted, coming at him with the scissors.

He held up his hands and then winced. “Ouch.”

I set down the scissors and helped him remove the shirt. It came off easily since it was already cut in half. Then I threw it in the corner, knowing what I had to do next. “Now, your pants.”

“Go ahead.” He smirked, and I was mortified.

“Thanks.” I knelt in front of him and grabbed the bottom edge of one leg. “Hold still,” I said, quickly glancing at his face. I’d removed my gloves after helping Heathcliff but now wished I’d kept them on. Carefully, I cut straight up the middle, trying to avoid getting dirty. When I reached the waist, I paused and removed his belt before cutting through. “Now, the other one.”

“Try to go easy on me,” he said.

I snorted. “Don’t you wish?” Nervously, I cut the other side all the way up, careful to avoid his boxers. Kade was all muscles and warmth and strength. Amongst all the blood and gore still on him was a light scent of cinnamon. His pants fell in pieces to the floor.

I stood there, unable to figure out what to do next.

“Take a picture. It lasts longer,” he said, shocking me into a standing position.

“Shut—” I began but stopped.

His eyes seemed to glow in the dim light of the room. “Up.”

He leaned down and kissed me lightly on the mouth. The move wasn’t anything big or grand, but his lips against mine sent a rush of emotions through me, and I would swear there was a spark. It was as though I’d been in darkness, and suddenly the lights within me flickered on. I gasped and fell back.

There was shock on Kade’s face for a moment before he glanced away. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” He held out his hand. I ignored it. “Can you assist me into the bathroom? I want to get cleaned up.”

“You can manage just fine on your own.” I went over to the other bed and sat, watching him struggle. When he was inside the

bathroom, I joined him, putting down the toilet seat. “Sit.” While he did, I grabbed a washcloth and ran it under hot water. “Let me get your back.”

“Go easy on me. I’m not at one hundred percent.”

I ignored him and quickly scrubbed off as much of the blood and dirt as I could see.

“Don’t forget to get behind my ears,” he joked.

Wounded or not, he deserved it when I punched him. He winced and chuckled as I threw the washcloth at him.

“Finish cleaning up yourself,” I said and walked out.

OceanofPDF.com

PAM UNLOCKED the door to our room and pushed it open. She appeared haggard and quickly fell onto her bed, crossing her hands over her face.

“Are you okay?” I asked, even though I knew she wasn’t. Neither was I. Images of Eric’s hand dangling from the demon’s mouth kept driving their way into my dreams.

Attending Eric’s funeral had been difficult. I’d seen enough television to know that while they were somber, they were supposed to celebrate the life of the person who’d died. Unfortunately, we had nothing to celebrate. His whole life had been about training to kill his demon sire or be killed. The latter happened. It was all too common in our world, and I hated it.

But as children, once we were found and plucked from whichever foster home we’d been living in at the time, we were brought to the Dark Moth compound and trained from morning until night every single day. There were rarely field trips or birthday parties. We primarily focused on not dying. Our sole purpose for living was to bring down our demon parent and hopefully save several hundreds or thousands of regular Moths in the process.

If we lived, it was to serve.

If we died as Eric had, there was no celebration. His life was just over.

“I’m fine.” Pam sniffled and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Or as fine as I can be knowing I turn eighteen in three days.” She paused, sitting up and removing her shoes. “Because what we saw —what happened to Eric—that’s going to be me soon.” She unzipped her black dress and pulled it over her head. “I’m not ready to die yet. I haven’t done anything.” Tears streamed down her face along with her mascara.

I understood exactly what she meant. My birthday was coming up too. “You’re not going to die. I won’t let you,” I said.

Pam smiled, but it was full of cruelty. “I appreciate your courageous words, Alice. But no one believes you slayed that demon because of skill. It was a fluke. You’re no more ready than any of the rest of us.”

She wasn’t wrong.

I kept quiet as she pulled on her gray training pants and matching gray shirt. Then put on her black combat boots. “How did you produce such a powerful shield?”

The rest of the Dark Moth’s had demon power too, but it wasn’t quite so all-encompassing as mine. I pulled off my black dress and tossed it on the floor, kicking my low heels on top of it. “I really am not sure,” I said and meant it. Sure, I knew how to call forth my powers, but without doubt and for whatever reason, mine were stronger than the other trainees.

“Whatever,” she said, slamming the door shut behind her, and she was gone.

I went over to my bed and lay down. I wasn’t trying to be complicated or keep a skill from my fellow trainees. In all truth, I’d tried to make myself produce the shield several times since that fateful night, but I hadn’t been able to make it happen.

There was a knock at the door. “Alice? Are you in there? We need to train.”

It was Kade.

We’d spent every moment together over the last three days. I’d even slept in the sickbay with him. Coming to my room to dress and undress for the funeral and using the bathroom had been my only alone time.

He was a nice enough guy, but it felt like Wrythe was punishing me for some reason. Had I done something wrong? I wanted to ask him the question on more than one occasion, but there hadn’t been an

opportunity.

“Give me a minute.” I jumped off my bed and quickly dressed in a black training outfit. Laced and tied my boots and then went to the door, opening it. “Hi, Kade.”

He was dressed from head to toe in black, like me. Yet on him, it looked stylish.

“You ready?” he asked, appraising me.

“Sure.” I shut the door and walked beside him down the hall.

“How was the funeral?” He gave me a sidelong glance.

I shook my head. “Depressing.” Kade hadn’t been invited. Wrythe and the others didn’t trust him. Kade said he was a Moth who secretly trained on his own and that even though he didn’t possess any demon power, he’d killed his demon sire. He claimed to have grown up in Wonderland, gone to school, and held a job, just like the humans who dwelt above ground.

He also claimed to be twenty-five though it was hard to tell. For all I knew, he could’ve been ninety. Moths stopped aging once we reached maturity, which was eighteen. For most, it was the year of our death as well.

I was tired and restless at the same time. If I were going to die in a few weeks, I wanted to really live first, like so many of the humans I’d seen in television shows, movies, and in the books I’d read. Second, I wanted an experience that had nothing to do with demons or Dark Moths. “Tell me something about you,” I whispered.

He raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

I shrugged. “Anything… A story. Tell me what you did for a living. What was your job?”

He laughed. “It wasn’t all that interesting. I was a mechanic.”

I pondered the word. “You fixed cars?”

“Cars. Boats. Motorcycles. If it’s got an engine, I can fix it.”

“Did you go to school to learn your craft?”

“Not any further than high school. My foster dad was cool, though. He taught me about engines, how they work, how to make them go again.”

“It sounds like you enjoy your job.”

He shrugged. “Sure. It isn’t glamorous, and I have permanent grease stains on my hands and under my nails.” He held out his hands to let me see. “But it pays the bills and keeps me busy.”

We’d reached the training room. The door slid open, and we walked through. Pamela was in the corner shooting arrows into several different targets.

“How did you get mixed up in our fight the other night?” I walked over and selected a katana.

He picked up one of the long swords. “I was there in the club when it all went down.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, even greasy mechanics like to go out once in a while.” He swung the sword with expert skill.

“And you saw the demon?” I’d asked him to tell me about that night more than once already, but something didn’t sit right about his answer.

Kade tossed the blade back and forth between both hands. “As I said, it wasn’t until the demon began fighting the bouncers that I realized what was happening.”

“Why didn’t you try to help?” Doing so seemed as natural as breathing. At least to me.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s that it is better to stay out of it.” He went to the center of the room so we’d have plenty of space to spar. “Ready?”

I picked up another, smaller sword and found a spot to stand a few feet in front of him. “Always.”

Kade leaned in, but at the last second, dove into me, knocking me

to the ground.

“What the hell? Get off me!” I shoved him hard, sending him away.

He winced but stood, holding something in his hand. “Sorry. Your roommate shot an arrow our way.” He held it out for me to see.

I scrambled to my feet. Pam was an excellent shot, which meant she sent the arrow at us on purpose. Furious, I stomped over to her. “Do you have a problem? Trying to kill us?”

Her eyes were blurry with tears. “Sorry, Alice. It was an accident. The arrow got away from me.”

I didn’t believe her.

Neither did Kade. “Accident, my ass.”

That was my thinking, but I didn’t want to believe it.

Kade placed the arrow in Pam’s hand. “Be careful, Moth,” he whispered.

“Or what?” She shoved him.

He was aggravated but didn’t answer. He just walked away.

I followed. “How’s your injury,” I asked. It didn’t seem to bother him as much anymore.

Kade lifted his shirt. The skin where the large cut had been was nearly healed and puckered pink. In a few days, that would be gone as well. “Better,” he said, putting his shirt back down.

“Good.” My cheeks warmed, and I looked away.

Kade tapped me on the shoulder with the edge of his sword. “So you don’t have to take it easy on me today.”

I faced him again. “About time,” I said.

We sparred for an hour. I finally got the better of him and had him on his back. My knees were on either side of his chest and my blades at his neck. “What are you really?”

Kade was breathing heavily, and so was I. “I told you already.” He

leaned up.

At his nearness, I stood, working to get my restless heart under control.

He jumped up and slid his sword into the wooden case with the rest of the training swords. Then plopped onto the mat, patting a space beside him.

I put away my swords but didn't sit. "I don't believe you're a regular Moth."

He crossed his legs, resting his elbows on his knees. "Well, you might be right about that," he said, his voice soft.

"Vague much? Why won't you tell me?" I spread my legs out until I dropped into the splits and stretched, laying my upper body on the mat.

Kade's eyes went wide, and I blushed.

The bell rang, indicating dinner.

OceanofPDF.com

KADE WAS QUIET, witty, and had a serious love of tacos. If we had eggs and toast for breakfast, he stuck the eggs on the toast and wrapped it like a taco before eating it. Whatever meat and veggies we were served for dinner were stuffed between two halves of a roll and eaten like a taco. For snacks, he put cucumber into a tortilla or shrimp or tomatoes or corn. It was crazy and strangely endearing.

He was also very regimented. Each morning he woke, stretched, and took a cold shower. Heathcliff had us stay in the sickbay for only one night, and then we were moved to a standard dorm room. It was in the trainers' hall closest to the exit.

I figured I would tire of being in such close proximity to a person for so long, but instead, I grew to like his silly stories and the way his voice lilted on certain words. Sure, he'd answered the basic questions, but while he didn't lie, he hadn't given me the whole truth either.

Kade could fight better than anyone, especially as he continued to heal. Peter sparred with him a couple of times, and I could tell he let Peter win. It was the same with weapons training and hand-to-hand combat. Kade held back. I wondered why, but each time I tried to bring it up, he changed the subject.

I knew the feeling about holding back. Not once had I fully freed my demon power. It surged within, like boiling black lava waiting to erupt, just below the surface. Sometimes antsy to get out, but I kept it in check.

Over dinner on the third night, I finally blurted all of the questions Wrythe wanted to be answered at once. "How did you know about Demonland? What do you want? Why are you here?" He'd already said he wasn't a Dark Moth. That was evident since he had no marks, but he held more power than many trainees and even Peter.

Kade offered me a secret smile. "What do you think I want?" He

bit into his chicken fried steak.

I dropped my fork. The man was infuriating. “Were you friends with a Dark Moth, and he or she told you about this place?” I sipped my water.

He rolled his eyes playfully. “No.”

He was vague about everything, except the personal stuff, like where he worked.

“You stole the Dark Moth blade after killing the owner?” He didn’t seem like the type, but what did I know?

“No.” He was offended.

I picked up a roll and took a bite. “Don’t you want to return home? Aren’t there people who must be missing you?” He wouldn’t be free to leave Demonland until he answered our questions since the compound was supposed to be secret.

He used his fork to cut into his cherry tart. “There’s no one,” he finally said after he swallowed.

I sensed sadness in his voice and realized that I knew very little about him even after several days together. “What about your job? Don’t you need to go to work?”

He shrugged before shoveling the tart into his mouth.

It was apparent he didn’t want to talk about it, but I couldn’t be put off so easily. “What’s the name of the place where you work?”

Pam and Georgia had been talking, but at my question, they stopped and focused their attention on Kade.

Steve and Gilbert also quieted.

The attention didn’t seem to affect Kade, though. He kept chewing, swallowed, took a long drink of his water, and then looked at me. “The Caterpillar’s Place.”

“That’s a silly name.” I dunked my roll in gravy before taking a small bite.

“Well, that’s Wonderland for you.” He reached over and picked up

my tart. “You gonna eat this?” Without waiting for a response, he stuffed half of it in his mouth.

I shook my head. I wasn’t fond of the fruit, but he could’ve waited for me to give him permission. “Not now.”

“Oh, come on. I know you don’t like cherries.”

It was true. Cherries made me queasy. “Still,” I said, pushing the dessert plate toward him. “Where are your manners?”

Kade finished off the other half. Picked up his cloth napkin and dabbed each side of his lips. “I have them when I need them.”

With my fork, I pushed around the green beans still on my dinner plate, desperate to get him to answer my questions.

When he swallowed, he went on, “In this life, you have to take what you want and damn the consequences.”

His words shocked me, and I gasped. It felt like something had changed within him. “Really?” I tilted my head, feeling my eyes squint as I studied him for answers.

“Very few humans and even fewer demons will wait for you to ask for what you want. They will take without remorse.” He chugged the rest of his water before slamming down the glass.

I didn’t like that. “I don’t believe you,” I said. But I’d lived with humans until I was twelve. They had been some of the vilest people.

“It doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. That’s the truth, and you’d do well to listen.” He stacked his dessert plate and mine on top of his dinner plate, tossed his napkin over them, and stood. “I’m done. You ready?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not finished.” I stabbed a bean and put it in my mouth. It was cold and didn’t taste very good, but I wasn’t going to be bossed. His strange attitude was annoying.

“Fine. I’ll see you later then.” And with that, he walked away.

We weren’t supposed to be apart, but I didn’t care. I watched as Kade put his dishes on the conveyor belt and prepared to leave the

dining room.

Wrythe walked in. When he saw Kade, the King stopped. “You, come with me.” He then found me and bid me follow as well.

“Great.”

OceanofPDF.com

I CAUGHT UP WITH KADE. He gave me a severe look before turning his attention to Wrythe's back. I continued to stare up at him, unable to believe the strange and varied emotions coursing through my body. That Wrythe asked to see us wasn't a good sign. Either he intended to get to the bottom of the Kade conundrum or kill him. I hoped for the first. As for me, well, it was possible Wrythe could exile me for not doing my job. I'd been given an order but still hadn't accomplished it.

Kade wasn't as tall as the other males but was head and shoulders taller than me. "What do you think he wants?" I whispered.

Kade gave me a sad smile. "We'll know soon enough, won't we?"

Wrythe walked to the elevator we'd ridden to go up into Wonderland a few nights ago. Once we were inside, he pulled a key from his pocket. Stuck it into the keyhole and turned. Instead of going up, we went down. I hadn't known there was anything below us. We were so far down already.

"Where are we going?" I asked nervously, my dinner turning sour in my stomach.

Wrythe didn't answer, and my heart sped up. Fear was an emotion I'd schooled myself to control, but at our King's strange conduct, I was afraid.

The elevator stopped, and the door slid open.

"Stay close." Wrythe glanced over his shoulder, making sure I heard him.

"Okay."

The air was chilly, and I could see my breath. Wind ghosted past, causing the edges of my hair to tickle my neck. Our footsteps echoed, making it obvious we were surrounded by rock. It was dark too. No light guided our way. My demon power shuddered to life, and I could

see well enough to know we walked along a concrete path.

Metal doors lined the hallway, but I had no desire to know what was being held behind them.

When we reached the end of the hall, we turned left and continued down another hall with more doors, precisely like the first. It was our fourth left turn that I realized something was off. We should've come full circle, but we hadn't. Though the halls looked the same, they felt different. The air was thinner.

On the seventh turn, Wrythe came to a stop at a dead end. At first, it appeared to be nothing more than a rock wall until he placed his hand upon it. Then it ignited red, and the outline of a door appeared. He leaned his body weight against it, and the door swung in. "After you," he said, stepping to the side once it fully opened.

A new kind of terror sank like a weight onto my heart. I had no idea what was about to happen. But, whatever it was, it would end badly. Of that, I was sure. But I went in after Kade because Wrythe had ordered it.

The room we entered was dimly lit. Then thousands of candles sparked to life. They sat on darkened candelabras thick with hardened wax. More candles lined shelves and rested on every flat surface. The walls were covered in what appeared to be sheer white curtains.

In front of us stood six figures dressed in covered robes, each dressed to match six of the seven deadly royalty demons. A large hood swallowed their faces, making it impossible to tell who was underneath, though I believed I had an idea. They were my instructors, each one representing the demon who had been their sire. The one in the purple hood lifted his head, and Peter's face came into view. The others followed. Wrythe took his place in the center. He'd put on a red robe.

Without meaning to, I stepped closer to Kade, which made no sense. I'd known the men and women in the robes since I'd first come to the compound at the age of twelve. I should be less afraid of them,

but I wasn't. My body sought out Kade's comfort.

"Kade Everett. You have been summoned," Wrythe said.

"For what purpose? I've played by your rules and have done as you've asked by allowing the girl to keep a close eye on me, though you know it wasn't necessary."

He gave me a quick look, and I glared. He hadn't *allowed* me to do anything. Not only that, but what did he mean that they *knew*. Was his identity not a mystery to them?

"I've given you no cause for concern," he went on, his voice confident and steady.

"This is true, Wrythe. He has been nothing but respectable," Peter said.

"Yes, but we're no closer to knowing what he wants. He's told the girl nothing about his true heritage or why he is here," the trainer Lily said. Her gray eyes cut to me. They felt like knives against my soul. "Unless the girl has developed feelings for the boy and no longer is on our side."

How dare she? Why would she say such a thing?

"Fine, I'll answer your questions now, if that will make you happy." Kade took another step toward the seven before glancing back at me.

"It's too late for that," Wrythe growled. "You must face the Trial of Three. If you return, then we will listen."

OceanofPDF.com

MY HEAD SHOT up at that. I'd read about the Trial of Three. They would test the Moth physically, emotionally, and spiritually to discover a Moth's true purpose.

"Highness, it would serve your Society better if you did not make me do this."

Had I misheard, or did Kade sound sad?

"He dares to speak to us with such arrogance?" Gillian, the Greed warrior, demanded.

"We should kill him and end this charade. It doesn't matter what he wants. The fact remains that he should not be down here. He has no right. And we cannot have him in our midst any longer." The Lady Edith, sired by Envy and devastated at the loss of Eric, spoke severely.

"You can try, but I promise you will not succeed." Kade bowed low as though he were humbled, but he so obviously wasn't.

What the hell was he? In an instant, I knew it didn't matter. I could not allow them to kill Kade. "No!" I shouted. "Don't kill him." Somehow I was drawn to the man and desperate to have my questions answered. I placed my body between Kade and the Society.

"Alice," Wrythe demanded. "It is not your place to come between the Society and our decision."

"Perhaps we should send her back up. She's still young." That was Peter who spoke.

Wrythe shook his head. "Perhaps…"

"I'm not going anywhere without Kade." I had no idea what had gotten into me, but something deep inside demanded I fight for him the way he'd fought against those demons the other night.

"Give her the trials as well," Sabrina said. "We've long said she

should face them in order to discover the truth of her sire and her true path. It will help her prepare." The Dark Moth sounded smug.

"We swore never to force the trials on a trainee. She won't be able to handle the weight of the experience," Peter said.

But I felt Wrythe considering it. He believed it would be a good idea, and so did I, even if the thought terrified me. "It's all right, Your Highness. I volunteer to face the trials."

Kade glanced over at me. "We will face them together, Alice Blackburn," he said, giving me a wisp of a smile.

I nodded as knots turned my insides. But it was the right thing to do. I felt it.

"Then it's settled." Wrythe walked over to a slab of flat granite rock covered in candles and pushed them aside, knocking them to the floor. They clattered before flickering and burning out. "Alice, come and lie down."

As I did, he walked over to another granite slab. They were side by side. Once the candles had been removed, Wrythe motioned to Kade. "Lie down."

"I will. But know this. It would be better for everyone if I simply tell you what I want."

Fury flashed across Wrythe's face. "Are you frightened, cherub?"

"You know I am not," he said, raising his head.

Wrythe faced the Society. "What say you?"

"The trials," they responded in unison.

Kade shook his head. "As you wish."

Wrythe stood back, and Edith moved between the two stone slabs. "Take each other's hands," she said.

I held out mine, and Kade took it, giving it a slight squeeze. Whatever was about to happen, I wasn't going to like it. I could feel that truth in my bones. They seemed to tremble with my fear, clattering noisily. Edith produced a golden cord and bound Kade's

wrist with mine.

Then she spoke words I didn't understand, like a poem. I was suddenly tired. Too tired to keep my eyes open. So I closed them, thinking I could rest until the time came to start the trials.

And that's when I saw him, the white rabbit with eyes the color of Kade's. He pulled a watch from his white vest pocket.

"I'm late." Then he dashed through the tall grass. I was no longer deep underground but in a lush field. Surprised, I hopped off the stone, quickly searching for the Society but seeing none of them. The slab Kade had laid on was gone, too.

So I went after the rabbit, following him until he reached the other side of the enormous field where he jumped into a hole.

"Wait," I called. When I reached the opening, I fell to my knees and peered inside. "Hello? Rabbit!"

He didn't answer, so I did the most logical thing I could think of at the time. I climbed in after him.

OceanofPDF.com

THICK, dry roots protruded from every direction within the dirty hole. I watched the rabbit hop in, under, and around them, dodging expertly. For a full-sized person, the terrain rendered itself much more difficult. I clawed my way after him, scraping my hands. Oozing blood from my fingers made the roots slick. “Rabbit,” I called, irritated he wasn’t waiting.

It was challenging to get a sense of direction. When I’d gone into the hole, I’d been heading down, but now it felt like I was going perpendicular to the ground. At the end of the tunnel shone a bright light. The rabbit stopped and sniffed the air. Then he pulled his watch out of his pocket. “Must hurry.” He turned and acknowledged me. “Stop dawdling, Alice.”

My irritation rose. He knew my name? I had several choice words for the rabbit, but I held my tongue, utilizing my energy to tear at the blasted roots. Occasionally a chunk of soft dirt would fall into my hair or rain on my hands. The earth smelled strange, like sulfur and overly ripened apples. “Where are you leading me?” I asked as he exited the tunnel and leaned against a rather large elm tree in the distance. He opened his pocket watch, then gave me an irritated glare.

“It won’t matter if you don’t hustle,” he said, obviously exasperated.

I huffed. “I’m going as quickly as I can.” When I reached the end of the tunnel, I exited and stood to my full height, glancing up. The whole sky was ablaze with orange, yellow, and red. It was gloriously peculiar. The landscape was just as bizarre. Giant mushrooms were interspersed with even bigger trees. Their colors were like that of a color wheel. Some had black stripes, while others were spotted. Tangled white foliage covered the ground and climbed up the mushroom stems as well as the tree trunks. Large gold flowers

blossomed randomly. The ground consisted of a substance similar to clay, and I wondered how anything grew amongst the dry cracks.

"About time." The rabbit pushed off the tree that wasn't actually a tree but the stem of an odd plant and started forward. With each step, the foliage receded, creating a path.

I followed but kept a hesitant pace as I debated the strangeness of my situation. A few moments ago, I'd been lying on a slab bound to Kade. Yet I'd just climbed out of a rabbit hole, and as I scanned the strange landscape, verified he was nowhere to be found. Thinking about the gorgeous man with green eyes caused my heart to flutter. He was chock full of secrets, and none of them made sense. Like the fact that he fought the way, a Dark Moth warrior would, yet didn't have the marks on his hands. Then there were his eyes. They were green instead of gray. He had carried a Dark Moth blade, yet he hadn't been trained by them. For those reasons and more, the Society elders had demanded he face the Trial of Three, or be killed.

Kade had agreed.

But why?

I had a feeling killing him wouldn't be easy.

According to the books I'd been required to study, the trials were meant to test the emotional, spiritual, and physical faculties. Some didn't survive. In fact, many died, the trials proving too difficult. But if one completed the trials, a trainee's true nature was supposed to be revealed.

Kade suggested he could tell them what they wanted, but the Society wouldn't hear it. I still wanted to know what he was and had a feeling the Society had known all along.

From the short time I'd spent with the man, I highly doubted he was a demon. But he wasn't a Dark Moth either. The trials were a good idea. I'd agreed to go through them as well to hopefully find out who'd sired me. Whether my demon father was a Greed, Wrath, Sloth, Gluttony, Pride, Lust, or Envy demon. But as I glanced around, I

wondered if something had gone horribly wrong with the trials. I guessed my body was still lying upon the stone while I dreamed. But that didn't make sense either. I pinched my arm and felt my nerve endings respond to the pain. "Feels real enough."

"Alice, we don't want to be late," the rabbit said, rummaging me out of my thoughts.

"Where are we going?" I asked the question but guessed I wouldn't get an answer, the same as last time.

The rabbit rechecked his watch and hopped along the path. I silently followed, studying my surroundings, wondering if I could use something as a weapon if I had to.

We passed through more mushrooms and trees. They seemed to be getting thicker. A quick look at the sky proved my point. I couldn't see past the gnarled branches. Darkness permeated, and it became quiet like death had decided to take a break. I sped up, realizing I could only just make out the rabbit in the distance. He'd hopped far ahead, and fog swirled around the space between us.

"Hang on." I jogged until I reached the edge of the thicket. The rabbit had just hopped onto a treacherously long bridge. It appeared to be made of wooden planks and rope and didn't look very sturdy. Normally I'd cross without a second thought, but as I peered over the edge, something strange overtook me. Or, left me. I felt only one thing. Terror. Like the fog blanketing the landscape, the emotion infiltrated every crevice of my being. Unable to shake the horror building inside me, I forced myself to step on the first plank. The whole bridge wobbled, and I screamed, scampering back. "Rabbit, wait."

"We're almost there. Keep going." His voice sounded from far away as though he were already on the other side.

I took a deep breath, focused on slowing my fearful heart. Then took a step back onto the bridge. This time, when it wobbled, I took hold of the ropes on either side, hanging on for dear life. When I

reached what felt like the midway point, a brisk wind picked up, causing the bridge to sway. Tendrils of hair blew across my eyes and into my mouth. “I can’t do this,” I said, my teeth chattering. My knees quaked, and the muscles in my stomach clenched with unease. Had I not been filled with so much fear, I might have been angry. I knew the feelings I was having were unfounded, yet I couldn’t make them go away. If anything, they were getting worse. And then I knew. My fears were a product of the trials. But even knowing didn’t erase the feelings. They continued to buzz within my body and wouldn’t stop.

“Let go,” the rabbit shouted. This time his voice seemed to come from below the bridge.

I glanced back the way I’d come and then forward. A faceless figure appeared. It hovered about twenty feet in front of me, blocking my path across. Smoke gray robes covered the being, snaking around him in the wind, making it difficult to see anything beyond. My panic grew stronger. “I can’t,” I said hoarsely.

“You can, and you must,” came the rabbit’s reply.

“Ugh.” I didn’t know what to do.

The figure floated toward me at a slow but menacing pace.

I couldn’t do this. “I’m going back,” I said and turned around on the rickety bridge. Why had I decided to follow the rabbit anyway? I took one step, followed by another and another, but with each step came the realization I wasn’t going back. In fact, I couldn’t even see the place I’d come from any longer. Another faceless figure sailed onto the bridge, its fingers made of bones, as it reached out to me.

“Please, Alice. If you don’t want to become like those creatures on the bridge, let go,” the rabbit shouted.

The wind became fiercer as though it were trying to convince me to listen to the rabbit too. My options were limited. I couldn’t go back, and I couldn’t go forward. The wraiths were closing in. My only choice required listening to the damned rabbit and doing something totally out of character—giving up control. “Fine.” I released the

ropes. Immediately, the wind turned into a hurricane, which picked me up and flung me over the side.

OceanofPDF.com

I WAS FALLING… or floating… or both. It felt like both, especially since I wasn't picking up speed. My descent meandered through the thick mist that smelled of deep earth and decaying worms, and when I finally landed, it was like landing on soft pillows.

By the time I stood upright, the mist had dissipated, giving me a clear view of my surroundings, which consisted of very little. Ruddy rocks that looked like giant anthills protruded from the ground and sides of the chasm. In the center of the room stood a compilation of black pillars shaped into an oversized throne. It was shiny yet crude and dark. Jagged edges pierced the air, its points glistened in the non-light. Sitting on the throne was a being, elegant and cold. He radiated evil. It rolled off him in droves. But, in a strange way, he was beautiful. *A beautiful monster,* my mind said. And it was true. He looked more or less like a man with dark hair and skin so white it could've been snow. He reminded me of a demon who'd taken on human form. Dressed head to toe in red, he stood out against the dark rock. Worst of all were his eyes. The way he studied me, inquisitive, his blue eyes exactly the same color as mine.

The white rabbit hopped into my line of sight and approached the man. "See, my liege. I did as you asked and brought her." He bowed slightly. The rabbit looked ridiculous in a charming way. His vest nearly matched the color of his fur, except his collar, which was red like the monster's suit.

The being turned his gaze onto the rabbit. "You did very well, Bleach. Thank you. You may go." He dismissed the rabbit with the wave of his hand. I couldn't help but notice his fingers. They appeared to be mostly bone and very little flesh.

Bleach wriggled his nose, causing his whiskers to bounce around. "Good. Good." He took his watch from his pocket and checked the

time before glancing at me. “Very good.” The rabbit hopped away, disappearing behind the throne.

“Now it’s just you and me, Alice.” The pretend man grinned, his lips shaping a smile with oily clarity.

“Who are you? How do you know me?” Something told me I didn’t want to know the answers to my questions. Even as I had the thought, my body lost its strength, and I crumpled to the ground. It happened in an instant, and I had no control, like a puppet without strings. “I don’t want to be here.” The words came out softly.

“Oh, but you do.” The ground came up around me, bending me into a sitting position facing the man. “You see, Alice Blackburn, I have your answers.” He steepled his fingers in front of his face and waited.

“No.” That was all I could utter because speaking proved difficult. I’d lost nearly all power over my body. Fear is an emotion, one that is all in the mind. But it’s a weakness that can strangle a person physically, and I was feeling the effects. It was so strong all I could think was that I wished I’d never been born.

“Don’t play coy. I sense you’ve already guessed the answer—at least to a degree.” One side of his thin, red lips lifted.

I closed my eyes and wished I could cover my ears, desperate to disappear. “Who are you?” I finally struggled out.

“A decent first question, but I must admit I’m a little disappointed.”

I cracked open one eye and saw he’d left his perch on the throne and stood in front of me. Had I the faculties, I would’ve screamed. As it was, I pushed against the chair that held me fast.

“Still, I’ll answer. My name is Deckland Friche.” He smiled, his putrid breath burning my nose. “Better known as the Devil. I am the ruler over all demons.” As he spoke, the ruddy chasm around us vanished and was replaced by millions upon millions of demons, their bodies twisted and hairy, an evil kaleidoscope of claws and teeth. An

incomprehensible force of pain washed over me. Like an ocean wave, it struck my body. My mind wanted to explode at the idea that I stood in front of the Devil himself—the most powerful demon known to exist. But I couldn't get further than that. My mind seemed to be shutting down.

"What do you think?" He lifted his arms, sweeping them from side to side. "The world will be ours. Not just the Demon Realm, but all of the realms. After eons, we deserve it. No more living in the shadows or sleeping in the dirt." His smile grew. "Of course, you'll need to die first. That's a given."

My bottom lip quivered. I clamped down on it with my teeth, desperate not to let him see I was afraid.

"But first," he continued. "Let's have a little fun." He snapped his fingers, and a large metal cage appeared beside the throne.

The demons around the room cackled and gnashed their teeth at the sight of the metal enclosure but didn't come forward, seemingly trapped behind an invisible barrier.

The cage was made of tarnished silver. It hung from a long chain that was attached to something above I couldn't see. Green sparks swirled around the bars like an electric current. But that was nothing compared to what the cage contained. And I sucked in a breath. "Wendy? Is that you?" For the second time, I questioned whether this was real or just in my mind. Was I awake?

The Dark Moth trainee looked up at the sound of her name. Blood dripped from a gash on the side of her head, running between her eyes and down her nose and cheeks. "Alice." She shook the bars. "Help me." Her marks flashed red as she tried to pull apart the bars. They wouldn't budge. Not even the power of her wrath could break them.

My capabilities returned at the sight of Wendy. I pushed out of the chair with little effort and scrambled forward to help, breaking the lock. But before I could open it, Wendy vanished.

"Over here, Alice. Look what we have." The Devil indicated a point

behind me as he moved toward it.

I turned, following him with my eyes. All of the trainees hung upside down by their ankles, including Wendy. Except for Eric, who'd died. Of course. Their legs were held together by thick chains that went up into the endless gray sky and kept going until I couldn't see them any longer. "What are you—"

"It's simple, Alice. You must choose which of them you're going to save?" He gave Wendy a little push so that her body began to swing, then he moved on.

Wendy cried softly, but I saw her frustration too. She ached to get at him.

"I know they call you the Queen of Hearts," the Devil said. "And I respect your decision not to get attached to anyone. It's smart. It's what I'd do in your situation." He grinned as a beautiful woman in a red dress appeared in front of him. He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately before letting go, spinning her away from him. She giggled before she burst into fiery pieces.

I stood there, shocked. What had he done? Who was she?

The Devil faced me. "If you allow yourself to let go, you will see we are alike, you and I. And we can take what we want when we want it." He tucked his hands into his front pockets like he was just sharing a story about the weather.

"I'm nothing like you," I said, gritting my teeth.

"Right." He gave me a look that said he disagreed. "But hey, the situation I've placed before you should be easy since you really don't care about any of them."

"I won't choose," I growled.

As I spoke, six royal demons appeared, surrounding me. They were in their proper forms—large, slimy, hairy creatures that oozed with open sores. I glanced from one to another, turning slowly, studying each of them. "What's this?"

The Devil laughed, and the demons joined in.

“These are the demon sires of your companions.” He indicated the dangling trainees. “For each one you kill, that trainee gets to live.”

My heart picked up speed. I felt physically ill. I couldn’t fight all of these demons. There were too many. I wasn’t strong enough. My throat felt dry.

“Rules,” the Devil went on.

The room erupted with raucous laughter. Tracker demons shouted obscenities as well as other things.

“Break the rules,” one of them said.

“We don’t need them,” another added.

“No rules.”

“Bloody stupid.”

The Devil’s smile grew. “My trackers have a point. But…” He tapped his chin. “For you, there are rules. Number one. You have twenty-four hours to kill each demon. If you fail, the Dark Moth trainee will die. Rule number two…” He trailed off.

“But you can’t kill the Dark Moth trainees until they turn eighteen. That’s *your* one and only rule. It’s been that way for thousands of years. You can’t change that.” I wanted to gloat, to grin like a Cheshire cat, but I couldn’t.

The Devil raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Is that so?” He addressed the gallery of demons. “Alice is telling me, the first and oldest demon, what my one rule is. Isn’t she cute?”

They cackled, their jubilation so loud it hurt my ears.

My paralyzing fright rose. He had probably crafted the one rule the demons possessed regarding the creation of Dark Moths.

The Devil wiped his eyes. “Oh, Alice. You’re a funny girl.”

I swallowed.

“I put the rule into play, and now I’m removing it.” He shrugged casually. “They are all nearly eighteen anyway. And it isn’t like

anyone is going to miss them." He came forward and touched my shoulder.

Immense depression seeped through my skin and into my bones. It seemed to eat away at my insides. "I-I'll miss them," I said. "And I won't let them die."

"Ohhhh, did you hear that?" He spoke to the group. "She's fiery. I like it."

I didn't know what to say.

"Your time starts now." He snapped his fingers.

Poof.

I was back on the stone slab deep below in Demonland.

OceanofPDF.com

I GASPED, surprised, opening my eyes. “What the hell?”

Wrythe came over and helped me stand. “What is it, Alice? You’ve only been lying there a few minutes.”

“Impossible.” I glanced at the faces of the Society members, then over at the slab where Kade was supposed to be. “Where is he? Did he already pass his test?”

“He’s gone,” Wrythe said, his face a mask of malice. “What happened, Alice?”

“I—” I wasn’t sure. Had I only been dreaming?

“It’s okay, dear.” One of the female Society members came over. She smelled like stale booze and tainted blood.

“I don’t think it is.” I went to the door. “I need to find the other trainees.”

“Wait,” Wrythe said.

But I opened the door and ran and ran and didn’t stop until I reached the workout room, hoping against hope they would be there training. But they weren’t. “Dammit. They aren’t here. It was real.”

“Alice!” Wrythe rushed into the room. He glanced around, seemingly feeling the emptiness like I did.

I froze. “Your highness.” I bowed my head.

“Tell me what you saw while in the trial.” He came forward until we were toe to toe. The man was so tall and so big and so freaking handsome.

My shoulders slumped. “It’s… painful.”

His features softened. “I have a feeling you know why the trainees are gone?”

“I think so,” I said. Then told him about following the rabbit,

meeting the Devil, and what he said.

"You spoke with him?" It was strange, the look on his face, almost as though he was awed by what I'd done.

His expression bothered me. Being near the Devil had been painful, and I wanted to enlighten him, but I didn't know how to explain the magnitude of the powerlessness I felt in the demon's presence. It'd been beyond frightening, and the trepidation still lingered.

"Yes." I pushed past him, unable to fight the need to find and slaughter those six demons. "And my—" I almost said *friends*, but that wasn't true. They were people I'd known for years. We'd trained together, lived together, and eaten together. They were the closest things I had to family. But I hadn't let them in. Not really. They knew my favorite weapons and moves, but I hadn't let them know who I was. Hell, if I thought about it, I doubted I knew. "He's got them, and he's going to kill them unless I kill their demon sires." I went over to the weapons rack and grabbed what I needed—a katana, a gun, and several knives. I tucked them into their spots, the blade on my back, the pistol in its holster, and knives hidden everywhere.

Wrythe rose to his full seven feet and crossed his arms. "If the damn Devil can break his one and only rule, then I'm going with you."

That surprised me, but I didn't have time to thoroughly consider it. "Are you sure? You're the King. I have a feeling some won't appreciate you putting yourself in jeopardy."

"She's right." Peter walked in. "Whatever you're planning to do, I don't think it's a good idea." He gave me a once over. "You don't look too good."

I snorted. "Thanks." I started for the door, but Peter grabbed my shoulder.

"What's going on?"

I didn't want to have to explain myself again.

Wrythe seemed to sense my frustration. "Get your gear. I'm

ordering you to come with us. I'll explain on the way," Wrythe said as he loaded up on weapons.

"Yes, Sire." Peter didn't seem convinced, but he wasn't one to question the King. So he grabbed two katana swords, a double set of Colt 911's, corresponding ammo, and several knives.

I watched quietly, unable to say anything while I waited. The reason was simple. I was freaking out. What the hell was I doing? I went to the door and stopped. My eyes found Peter's then Wrythe's before settling on the floor. A drop of blood stained the surface, its coloring no longer bright red but burgundy. At that moment, I knew blood would be spilled, probably my own, and most likely at least some of the trainees. How could I save them all? I didn't know whether I had the stamina and necessary power.

"Alice?" Wrythe asked.

"I have no clue where to begin," I blurted. Desperation and gloom closed in, weighing me down.

Wrythe grabbed my shoulders, spinning me to face him. "Let's go up into Wonderland. Above ground, there aren't protective wards keeping demons out like we have down here, and I have a feeling that the moment the demons can sense you, they will come for you. We won't need to go looking for them."

I nodded, swallowing nervously. That made sense. Besides, I didn't have any other ideas. "Are you positive you want to come?"

Wrythe cracked a smile. "Of course I am. It's been a while since I was in the thick of an actual battle, but I'm ready." He looked over at Peter. "You?"

"Hell yeah." The warrior's eyes sparked with anticipation.

"Well, then lead the way," Wrythe said.

OceanofPDF.com

KADE

I climbed off the stone slab. The room was empty except for me. Nervous about Alice's whereabouts, I exited and went searching for her. It was apparent the spell hadn't worked, and they'd left me to rot. I couldn't blame them. The Dark Moths had been fighting a losing battle for thousands of years. Unbeknownst to them, I'd been tasked with joining in their war against the demon sires many years ago. At least until I could come for Alice.

It was my calling to save as many Moths as possible. And I understood why the Society had insisted I complete their Trial of Three, but it would've saved a lot of time had they just allowed me to come clean and tell them what I wanted. They knew what I was, but they didn't know why I was there.

Of course, I'd lied to all of them at first. Told them what they wanted to hear. It'd been the best move at the time. I'd needed to get close to Alice. Our destinies were entwined, but the Society members had easily discovered that I didn't belong in their compound.

I knocked on her bedroom door. "Alice. Are you in there?" I waited several moments without a response. Something was wrong. The training center was ghostly quiet. I went back to the training room and grabbed a couple of swords.

As I rode the elevator topside, I thought about the night Eric died. It pained me that I hadn't been able to save him. Poor kid. But Alice had taken care of his demon sire, destroying him almost too easily. The girl was even more impressive than I was told she would be. That was good in a horrible, terrible way. The Moths would need Alice to defeat the demons and their ever-growing numbers, but it was more than that. The Moths would require her to make a difficult choice if they wanted to survive as a species.

As soon as I got above ground, I went to my car. Parked only a hundred feet from the elevator leading into the Dark Moth's secret compound, the car was a two thousand fifteen Ford Thunderbird. Smoky blue-green with a metallic sheen, it had twenty-two-inch rims and an engine that roared like the king of the jungle. I took my cell from the glove box—it still had one bar—and checked my messages.

Bill, my boss, had called twice. The second time was to fire me. "Damn." I'd also received a call from Arvid, asking if I was up for a party this weekend. He and I worked together at The Caterpillar's Place.

I sent him a quick text telling him I was busy. My fingers flew over the letters a little too quickly. As soon as I recognized it, I slowed down. It was a habit, something I'd been doing for decades. That was at least one thing I hadn't lied about. I had assimilated into the human world, including the purchase of property, jobs, and sometimes friends.

None of that mattered now. My human integration had all been done with one goal in mind: Find Alice, and help her realize her destiny. After that, it didn't matter.

Of course, the Trial of Three hadn't affected me. It couldn't. The magic used in the spell had been created for Moth's, and I wasn't one of them. But I'd no doubt Alice was dealing with hers. And I had a feeling she was probably in a bad way.

"Hello, Kade. I wondered when you'd turn up."

I tensed, but only for a second. It was good he'd come. We needed a chat.

I sighed heavily. "I'm hungry. Get in." I'd tossed one of the swords onto the passenger seat and now put it and my other sword in the back.

Deckland Friche, better known as the Devil, got in. "Where are we going?"

I ignored him, backing out of the garage. "I need tacos."

“Oh, there’s this great place on the corner of Bandersnatch and Billings that has the best carne asada—”

“I know the place.” I gritted my teeth, irritated. Dealing with the devil was a necessary evil. “Now, why don’t you tell me what you’ve done to Alice?”

He sat back, resting his hands on his knees. Deckland wore a powder blue suit with a white shirt and matching shoes. He looked like a douche from the seventies. Even had his hair slicked back with gel. “She’s working on her first trial, of course.”

I waited for him to go on. Instead, he turned up the stereo. “Does she know who you are?” I asked.

Deckland winked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” He changed the stations until he found something he liked. It was the latest pop song. Made me want to wear earplugs.

The sun blared down, heating the car. I turned on the air conditioner. It was a little after one in the afternoon. I guessed it was either Friday or Saturday. The streets were mostly clear, which meant probably Friday. “Yes, I would. It would be nice to know how much she knows.”

He tapped his hand on his knee in time with the music. “If you’re talking about her destiny, she has no clue. The Trials require she be tested physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I’d say I’m doing her a favor, not giving her more than that.”

“Tell me what you did, dammit.” I gripped the steering wheel until I left handprints.

He sighed heavily. “She must slay each of the other six trainees’ demon sires over the next six days, one every twenty-four hours. If she fails, the trainee dies.” He shrugged. “Simple.”

“Are you sure she can handle that?” I knew she wasn’t like the others. Not even close. But that was a lot.

The Devil chuckled. “You saw the way she handled the Envy demon. I was too easy on her. This trial might be too easy for her.

Perhaps I should've tied one of her hands behind her back."

I growled, slamming a hand on the steering wheel. "She doesn't know what she's capable of." My teeth ground together. It felt like they would turn to powder. "If she dies, you'll die. Did you forget that? Or are you narcissistic enough to believe it's impossible? Because I assure you, it isn't. You can be killed. Hell, I could kill you now."

"Tut. Tut, Kade. Don't make threats unless you intend to back them up." He turned in his seat, glaring. Waiting for me to make a move.

"I hate that I have to deal with you and your kind." The words tore from my chest. They'd been buried deep, deep down for a long time, but it was the truth. I'd come to accept what my destiny was, but that didn't mean I had to like it. Although each time I thought of Alice's blue eyes and quick wit, I believed my life to be a little better. Half demon or not, she was special.

Deckland chuckled knowingly. "Well, the feeling is mutual."

When we arrived at the restaurant, I turned off my car and got out. "I think I've said all I have to say to you. Why don't you go?" I slammed the door, not waiting for his answer.

Deckland got out. "Don't make me miss out on these tacos." He glanced in the direction of the restaurant, took a deep breath, and sighed. "Fine." He snapped his fingers and vanished.

OceanofPDF.com

ALICE

We sat at a small, round table, the top covered in glazed Aztec tiles. Peter, Wrythe, and I hadn't made it far from the compound before the men felt the need to stop for food. They claimed to be starving, which was verified by how they inhaled the chips and salsa the waitress brought a few moments ago. I felt nauseous. The smells wafting from the kitchen made it worse.

But there was nothing to do except to wait.

I squirmed in my seat impatiently as guilt ate away at my conscience. While they sat and snacked, time slipped away, marching me that much closer to being the reason one of the trainees would die. "Maybe we should go." I leaned forward and spoke in a soft voice. I doubted either of them heard, but my voice quivered.

Both men stopped shoveling chips and salsa into their faces. Wrythe looked at me earnestly before speaking. "We are in the right place, Alice. Like I said, anywhere works. They'll be coming for you."

"Yes, you said that, but it's been an hour, and we still haven't seen one."

"Patience, Alice. It won't be too much longer." Peter picked up a chip and held it out for me to take. "Why don't you have one? They're delicious."

I scrunched my lips in disdain. "Pass."

"You need to keep up your strength. When we run into a demon, you'll need it." Wrythe gave me a stern look. One I'd typically be intimidated by.

I gave him a tiny smile. "I know."

"And we're here for you," he continued, patting my hand. Warmth from his skin radiated into me, giving me strength. He seemed

different outside of the compound. Less intimidating. “Those demons don’t stand a chance. We won’t let another trainee die because of them.” His gaze softened.

“Thank you.” I appreciated the sentiment. And I was grateful he and Peter had my back. They were both great warriors. It was strange. As I watched him eat and chat with Peter about mundane things, it occurred to me that he was so much more than just a king. He was a man with needs, wants, and freaking *feelings* of his own. The idea was eye-opening. I wondered if he had a wife and children. Those thoughts sent my mind whirling, and I wondered what was possible for me. I’d never considered anything past killing my sire. There hadn’t been time to think beyond that. But I considered it now. What did becoming a warrior really mean? Could I have love? Was motherhood a possibility for me? The idea sent excited nervousness up and down my spine. Followed by paralyzing anxiety. I needed to stop. I needed to focus.

Movement in the parking lot outside caught my attention. I looked more closely and realized Kade was out there standing beside a gorgeous car. But that wasn’t what held my attention. It was the person he spoke to. The Devil himself.

“What the crazy, crazy hell?” I darted for the door even though I had no idea what I would do. That damned devil would die. And if I killed him, then my fellow trainees would surely be safe. The Devil vanished before I reached them. “Kade,” I shouted, running toward him. “What the hell are you doing here? Why were you talking to,” I paused and looked around, then continued softly, “the Devil?”

Kade was still standing beside his car, and his face twisted into a surprised smile at the sight of me. “Alice. You’re just the person I was looking for.”

I noticed how his green eyes lit up with genuine happiness, but I wasn’t deterred from my questioning. “Do you know who that was you were with?”

He nodded solemnly. “Yes. Of course. Listen, Alice, we need to

talk."

Betrayal and anger furrowed out of me. Was he a demon? "You're damn right we do. I want to know what is going on." I crossed my arms, furious and confused.

"It isn't what you think, but I believe I'm partially to blame, and —" He held out his hands as though pleading for me to listen.

I shook my head, planted my feet, and waited for him to go on.

"Alice." Wrythe and Peter shouted together, coming over to me. Their features were priceless, a combination of perplexity, worry, and irritation.

Before I had the opportunity to explain, an enormous demon reminiscent of a hairless cat appeared directly behind Kade. "Alice," the demon hissed. "Are you ready to die?" His eyes shone liquid blue, making it obvious he was a Sloth demon. Steven's sire.

I debated my options as I stepped around Kade, moving forward and sizing up the demon. Sloth demons tended to move more slowly than the others. I would use that to my advantage. Their biggest strength, aside from size, was their cunning. They were good at planning several moves in advance.

I took a moment to ponder the situation. We were in a parking lot, surrounded by cars. The street wasn't too busy, but there were customers in the restaurant and people nearby. It was apparent by the screaming and shouting that could be heard. Obviously, the demon was arrogant enough to reveal himself to everyone.

As I debated what to do, some people came out of the restaurant and their apartment. Many had their smartphones out and were recording the whole scenario. Others got into their cars and drove away, which was what everyone should do.

"Leave," I shouted in the direction of the crazy people sticking around to record the monster for their social media. I was thinking the Sloth Demon showed himself out of arrogance, but maybe he was just an idiot. Not that it mattered. These people needed to run away. "Get

the hell out of here. Now."

Some of them had the gall to laugh.

"Stupid!"

The demon growled, and I returned my focus.

Wrythe appeared at my side.

I jumped up on the hood of Kade's car.

"Alice, be careful," Kade shouted. "Where's your weapon?"

The Sloth Demon laughed. "You're so cute when you're trying to be a warrior, Alice. If only I could take you and keep you as my pet. Put you in my pocket and play with you when I want." He glanced down at himself. "I don't have a pocket, but I'll eat you up and keep you there." He patted his stomach.

Drool dripped from his mouth and landed on Kade's car with a sizzle.

"There goes the car. Damn." Kade blew out a breath as he reached into his car and grabbed his weapons.

The demon grabbed the car by the tires and lifted it. As the car rose, I used the momentum to dive over the demon's head, stabbing a blade in each of its eyes before flipping and landing on the ground behind him. The demon screeched in pain, tossing the car through the restaurant windows. Glass shattered in all directions. People screamed and scattered.

Now they run, I thought.

There was an explosion, probably in the restaurant's kitchen. Flames shot out of the flue on the roof, and smoke billowed. Wrythe, Peter, and Kade, made quick work of the demon. He turned to ash before I had a chance to catch my breath. It was very anticlimactic and a little disappointing, if I were totally honest.

"Next time, I get the kill shot," I shouted.

Kade rolled his eyes.

Wrythe and Peter were clapping each other on the back.

Someone was crying, and I bent over, looking under one of the cars closest to me. A woman had her leg caught under the tire.

“Hang on.” I rolled the car forward.

She scooted out from under the car and stood. Though she limped, she was able to walk away and did so without so much as a thank you.

I glanced around at all of the damage. The parking lot looked like a war zone. Kade was helping an elderly couple from the building. The fire spread rapidly, engulfing what was left of the stucco building just as Kade and the others escaped.

Peter and Wrythe ran to Wrythe’s giant black Hummer and were yelling at me to hurry.

“Chill, I—” I needed to speak with Kade. “Kade, come on,” I said. At the same time, there was another explosion.

The Hummer’s passenger window came down. “We need to go before the police get here,” Peter yelled.

Sirens wailed in the distance. They were minutes away. I ran over to my swords and lifted them from the demon ash before running toward the vehicle.

“Let’s go.” Kade ran past me, taking my arm. I went with him, sliding into the Hummer’s backseat and buckling my seatbelt. As the Hummer peeled out of the parking lot, I glanced at the back of Wrythe’s and Peter’s heads, then toward Kade. As warriors, they were awesome. I had a feeling that we could be unstoppable. Hell, I doubted I was even needed.

Wythe glanced at me through the rearview mirror. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Oh?” I highly doubted he had a clue.

“We couldn’t have killed that demon without you,” he went on. “The knives to the eyes….” He shook his head. “Brilliant.”

“Thank you,” I said, grinding my teeth. “But I get to kill the next

one. This is my trial."

Peter turned in his seat to face me. "Alice is right," he said, shaking his head. "We don't want her to fail on a technicality."

Kade nodded, though he seemed surly. I guessed it was because of his totaled car. "Yeah, from now on, we'll let you do all of the ass-kickings. The three of us will be nothing more than the clean-up crew."

"Thanks." That meant a lot.

OceanofPDF.com

I STEPPED out of the shower and dried off. It felt good to get the Sloth Demon ash off me. My room felt empty without Pam and the others. I hoped they were okay. It wasn't like I talked to them much or anything, but the other girls talked to each other, and I missed the noise. But it was more than that. I missed them too.

After braiding my hair and dressing in black camo pants, black boots, and a matching tank, I went to the hospital wing to speak with Heathcliff, but Doc wasn't there. The hospital was as empty as the rest of the compound. Fighting down a lump of depression, I headed to the cafeteria. I still wasn't hungry, but it was probably best that I get something in my belly.

I pushed open the swinging doors. The smell of oregano and nutmeg met my nose, and my mouth watered.

Cook had made lasagna.

I loved lasagna.

My footsteps quickened. Until I realized the cafeteria was empty and I was completely alone. All was quiet except for the occasional banging of pans in the kitchen. There wasn't a single warrior or teacher, or trainee in sight. That was my fault. Although since the Sloth demon was killed, the trainee, Steven, should've been returned.

I remembered Wrythe had said the compound was protected by spells, and I wondered how the Devil got them all out in the first place, but maybe he was immune. I needed to ask Wythe.

I sighed, my excitement over the prospect of eating lasagna diminishing. There was still so much to do. Five more to kill.

Before I could leave, Cook came out with a plate filled with extra-wide steaming noodles swimming in cheese and red sauce, a side of bread, and asparagus spears as well as a glass of water. "Eat. It's your

favorite," she said.

I tried to smile, grateful the woman was so intuitive. "Thanks, Cook." Her real name was Frances, but everyone called her Cook. She had that look about her—slightly round through the middle, short graying hair, and a stark white apron with black ruffles along the hem. Her marks were the color of gluttony, but they were nearly faded to nothing.

She patted me on the head. "Finish it, and you'll get a slice of my chocolate mousse cake.

I nodded, sitting at the nearest table and going in for a bite. Once she was satisfied I intended to eat, she went back into the kitchen.

I took another bite, chewing slowly. Cook's chocolate mousse cake was the best thing ever, but it was doubtful I'd finish all the food in front of me.

"Hey, Alice. I hoped I'd find you here." Kade sat in the chair across the table from me.

"Hi." I couldn't help but study him. He'd showered too, and the edges of his hair were still wet. It also seemed as though the cinnamon scent that radiated off him was more potent than usual.

"That looks good." He eyed my food.

"It is, but I'm not sharing." The guy could get his own damn food.

He didn't move. Just watched me eat, his green eyes never leaving my face. "Go ahead and ask," he said.

I set down my fork. "What?"

"About the Devil. You wanted to know why he was with me."

"Yes." I still wanted to know.

"Then ask your question."

I watched his lips move, wishing I wasn't so in tune with everything about him. "Are you a demon?"

"Absolutely not." He blew out his breath, running a hand through his wet hair. "Not even close." He shuddered.

“Then why were you with him?” I pushed my food aside and leaned toward him. Like *a moth to a flame,* I thought morbidly.

“He knows who you are and what you’re supposed to accomplish. I wanted to make sure he knew I was aware of that,” Kade said.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. “Do you know who my sire is?”

“I do, yes,” he said and winked.

“Then tell me.” Frustration oozed out of me.

He glanced down at my plate of food. “Do you mind if I have a bite?”

“Sure, after you tell me who my freaking sire is.” It was apparent he was procrastinating.

Who is this guy?

Kade looked away. “It isn’t my place to tell,” he said. “I would be breaking all kinds of laws if I did.”

“Whose laws? What do you mean?” My frustration built. “I don’t know about you, but I’m still going through the Trial of Three. And the first one requires I kill all of the Dark Moth trainee demon sires. And if I don’t kill them, the trainees die.” I slammed my fist down. “So I’m not in the mood for anything but answers. If you know who my sire is, tell me.” Fury burned through my body. I needed answers, a place to start.

He studied me intently, and I guessed he had an internal debate going on.

“Please.” I touched his hand, immediately feeling that strange shock I’d felt when he kissed me. It was obvious he felt it too.

He let out a heavy breath. “All right. I’ll tell you what I know. But not now. First, there’s something I need to do. Meet me in my room tonight. Okay?” He took my fork and stabbed a giant piece of lasagna before shoving it into his mouth. “Mmmmm. Damn, that’s good. Frances knows how to cook.” He smiled. “Ten o'clock.”

“Where are you staying?” I snuck a look at his breathtaking eyes.

“Guest bedroom at the end of the boys’ dorms. Knock three times, like this.” He showed me on the table.

“So stealthy.” I couldn’t help the sarcasm that bit into my words.

He came around the table and bent, so his face became parallel with mine. At his sudden closeness, my heart beat faster. He smelled good enough to eat. “Ten o’clock.” His breath tickled my lips, and I smelled the lasagna on him.

I had an overwhelming urge to kiss him. I swallowed. “I’ll be there.”

“Good.” He brushed his thumb against my bottom lip. “See you soon, Alice.”

When he was gone, I rolled back my shoulders, trying to ease the tension. The man made me forget everything, and that wasn’t good. I got up from the table and went to my room, where I promptly lay down and fell asleep.

OceanofPDF.com

AT PRECISELY TEN O'CLOCK, I arrived in front of Kade's door. It was closed, and I reached out to knock but stopped. Kade had said he would answer my questions. That meant I would finally find out which demon was my sire. It seemed almost unreal. After nearly eighteen years, I would know why the marks on my hands hadn't changed color, why my eyes were blue instead of gray, and why I was able to kill a greater demon without having killed my sire first. Finally, I would understand.

Those thoughts filled me with anticipation but dread as well. I'd had nightmares about it while I slept earlier, not that it mattered. But I did worry that I might not want to hear what Kade had to say.

The door whipped open. "Alice, you going to stand out here all night, or did you want to come in?"

My eyes got wide. Kade had on gray camo pants but no shirt. My eyes couldn't help but linger on his muscled arms and shoulders. His chest was hairless, except a dark line that started at his belly button and disappeared down below the waist of his pants. "Okay." I stepped inside and moved so he could close the door, clutching my hands together.

The room was sparse, nothing more than a bed, a nightstand, and a chest of drawers, same as my room.

Kade went over to the bed and sat, then patted a spot next to him. "Come here."

I crossed my arms over my chest, nervous. "I think I'll stay right where I am, thanks."

"Why?" He licked his lips. "Afraid I'll bite?"

My heart rate spiked. I was shaky, a bundle of nerves. "Try it, and it'll be the last thing you ever do."

Kade laughed. “Sit down. Let’s talk. I won’t do anything bite-related until you have your answers.”

I would’ve believed him had he put on a shirt, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want him to know the effect he had on me. I didn’t want to seem weak. I was the Queen of Hearts, after all. “Good.” I sat, staying as far from him as possible.

My seat choice caused him to laugh harder, but only for a moment. His face became serious. “I’m ready to tell you whatever you wish to know. Ask me your questions.”

I pushed my arms farther around myself. Looked down at my pants. Swallowed. “Which demon is my sire?” I waited for the answer, unable to look at him. But when he still hadn’t responded after several long seconds, I peeked.

A ripple of movement rushed over his skin, like an electrical current, glowing in the dim light. “Your sire is the Devil himself.” As he spoke, his eyes glowed bright green.

“That’s impossible. He isn’t one of the seven deadly sins.” Before I realized it, I was off the bed, and my back was pressed against the door. “You’re lying,” I whispered, my voice pleading. It couldn’t be true because if I was the devil’s daughter, then what kind of monster did that make me?

His expression turned sad. “I’m afraid not, Alice.”

Desperation surged through me, sucking away all my strength. “I was taught about the demons and why they do what they do. Never once has a Moth or Dark Moth ever been sired by the Devil. Not once in all the millennia.” I slid to the floor. Leaned my head back and closed my eyes. And I knew he spoke the truth. It was the only thing that made sense. “So why me? Why now?”

“It’s simple, Alice. Even the vilest of creatures have a desire to leave behind a legacy.”

A burst of bitter laughter escaped my throat. “But he’s going to kill me anyway. So why bother?”

“In the animal world, lions, bears, even dogs are known to kill their young. In nearly every case, it’s because the child was defective in some way, either sick or deformed. The Devil will try to kill you, but I can promise you there is a part of him that wants you to live, to prove yourself to him.”

I opened my eyes in time to see him look away. “There’s more,” I said. It wasn’t a question. I sensed he had much more to say.

Kade ground his teeth together before speaking. “We’re talking about the oldest monster in the world. Of course, there’s more. We could spend weeks talking about them, and I still wouldn’t have told you everything. For now, it’s enough to know that the Devil is your father.”

“I need to go.” I tried to stand, flustered, scared, and wishing he hadn’t told me the truth. “This is too much.” Tears pressed against the backs of my eyes, and I wasn’t a crier. Never!

“Hey. Hey. It’s going to be fine. I’ve got you.” Kade was suddenly beside me.

When I didn’t respond, he lifted me into his arms and took me over to his bed. At his nearness, all of the fight went out of me. With Kade by my side, maybe everything would be okay. I needed him desperately to tell me everything would be fine.

Kade straightened. “I’m going to the kitchen to get you a glass of water. I’ll be—”

“No,” I grabbed his arm. “Don’t go.” I pulled until he sat beside me.

“I’ll be back in a few. Promise.” He gave me a sad smile.

I sat up. Caught and held his gaze. “Kiss me.” I knew my request was out of character and surprising. One of Kade’s eyebrows rose in confirmation. But that didn’t change the way I felt. I wanted his lips on mine. I wanted to forget what he’d just told me. Slowly, my fingers moved along his forearms and slowly trailed up his biceps, to his shoulders and neck, and finally cupped his face. “Please.” I tugged

him down.

Urgent hunger replaced the worry on his features. “You sure?” he asked, sitting beside me.

I nodded. “Yes,” I said, moving in so I could feel his breath on my face.

He came closer, leaning down until our lips met. At the touch, there was a spark. I saw it as well as felt it. The shock reached into my heart, melting away the locks and chains surrounding it. I whimpered as my insides warmed and expanded as though my feelings required my heart to grow to handle them. Kade deepened the kiss, pressing my lips open. I urged him closer, clinging to his shoulders as I got on my knees. Kade cupped my face, his hands heating my skin.

Never in my life had I believed I could feel the way I did at that moment. Later, when I recalled the experience, I would believe Kade, and I had fused. I couldn’t find where I ended, and he began. It was the most amazing, intoxicating experience of my life, and I didn’t want it to end. *Kade,* my mind whispered.

I know. I feel it too.

I gasped, my eyes opening, searching his for an answer. He heard my thoughts, and I’d heard his.

Abruptly, Kade pulled away. “I can’t do this,” he said, standing, his arms crossed.

“Why?” I was confused and heartbroken. It was as though when he pulled away from me that he took my heart with him. I wanted to cry out at the pain I felt with him gone. “Kade.”

A wild look shone in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let that happen.” He yanked open the door and left without a backward glance.

I sat up, stunned. “Kade,” I whispered softly. Tears fell, wetting my cheeks. I had no idea whether Kade knew what he’d done to me. Or maybe he didn’t care how much he’d just hurt me. The love and warmth, and happiness I’d felt a moment ago were replaced with

darkness.

And I wanted to hate Kade.

In the early morning hours, I stopped crying and made myself a promise. I would forget about Kade and focus on the first trial. There were still five more demons to kill. Six, if I counted my sire. After that, the damned Devil would die and do so painfully, especially if I had any say in the outcome.

OceanofPDF.com

ALICE FIGHTS DEMONLAND

OceanofPDF.com

“SHALL I call you Alice the Demon Hunter?” The Wrath demon tried to make small talk as he circled me slowly, his heavy body leaving footprints in the cracked ground as he searched for an opening.

“Call me whatever you want for the next few minutes as long as I get to call you dead when we’re finished.” I followed him with my body, keeping my katana in front of me. This demon would be my fifth in as many days. Who knew killing royal demons would become almost mundane?

We were several miles outside the city of Wonderland, in the middle of the desert. I’d decided that if the demons were going to track me, it’d be better to fight them in a place where humans couldn’t get hurt or see and record what was happening, like the fight at the Mexican restaurant. That battle had made front page news. Local government agencies began poking around, asking questions the Dark Moth Society didn’t want to have to answer. Wrythe made an executive decision to have Heathcliff, our resident doctor, create an elixir. We put it in the water supply to remove all memories of demons from the humans’ minds. Brief confusion had ensued, but humans believed only what they wanted to believe. And giant demons walking the Earth were more than most people could handle.

“I knew you had a mouth on you, but I hadn’t appreciated it would be so bloodthirsty. Show some respect for your master,” he said, sending spittle into the air between us.

I watched it land and sizzle. Then snorted at his bluster. He wasn’t my master any more than the Devil was.

So far, this match had been the easiest of all. It didn’t matter that he was a Wrath demon, supposedly the most aggressive. Within minutes after the battle began, the demon became so frustrated, he shed his human husk and now stood over ten feet tall. Two great ram

horns shot from his skull and curled three feet in the air, red as blood. He looked like a zombie bull; his body sparsely covered in patches of black fur. The skin puckered and was leaking pus. His eyes were empty sockets and his mouth was filled with rotting teeth. The worst part was his smell, like over-ripened fruit and the decaying flesh of a menial rat. Sweetly putrid and utterly nauseating. My stomach rolled, but I steeled myself. This monster wouldn't get the satisfaction of seeing me lose my breakfast.

I rolled my shoulders and readjusted my sword. I'd already chopped off one of his legs. Black blood had oozed from the gaping wound briefly, but it was already starting to close. In a minute, his leg would regenerate, and I'd have to start over. I so wasn't in the mood. I just wanted to get this trial over with.

Mentally preparing, I twisted my katana, bringing it above my head. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of light. Distracted, I turned, but there was only sand and more sand.

The Wrath demon pounced, using his tail to swipe my feet out from under me. "You've already become complacent," he huffed, saliva coming from his mouth, spraying against my face and arms.

My skin hissed as it burned me. I forced myself not to focus on the pain. It would do no good to whine about it. I'd heal quickly anyway.

"How arrogant you are. Give me a few more minutes and I'll chop you into little pieces." He was bluffing. We both knew who would win this fight and it wouldn't be him.

I yawned to prove I knew he was full of it and flipped myself back to my feet.

"Slay him and be done with it," Peter said. He and Wrythe stood off to the right, their weapons drawn, though they were obviously bored.

I'd forgotten he and Wrythe were there. They didn't need to be. After I'd defeated the first demon, my confidence, skill level, and abilities had flourished. Even now my demon power burned like a dull

flame radiating from the center of my belly, waiting for a time when I would need it. “Fine.” I ran and leaped on the demon, wrapping my legs around his neck. He grabbed hold of my legs, trying to rip me in half, but I held on, driving the edge of my katana deep between his eyes. The power within burned hot as it left my body, coursing through the sword. It was my power that would kill the demon, the sword just the vessel used to drive it home.

The demon’s body went rigid. A second ticked by before it released a heavy, repulsive breath, falling to the earth in a heap. I held on with my legs until the last moment before doing a front flip off his lifeless body. The demon’s body turning to ash as it hit the sandy floor, becoming one with the hot Arizona wilderness. When he was gone, I faced Peter and Wrythe. “Done,” I said, sheathing my sword and trying not to smirk, though it was difficult not to feel pride at my accomplishment.

“Now you’re just showing off,” Wrythe said, his gray eyes alight with irritated amusement.

“I don’t even know why we come with her anymore. She doesn’t need us, that’s for sure.” Peter jumped down from the large rock he’d been standing on, landing a few feet in front of me.

Wrythe did the same, his gorgeous eyes sparkling as he studied me.

I patted him on the shoulder. “Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving,” I said, heading back to Wrythe’s Hummer.

“Do you ever get the feeling I’ve lost all mystique and she no longer respects me as her king?” Wrythe asked Peter, his voice low, but not low enough that I couldn’t hear.

“I respect you, sire. I’m just really hungry. Demon slaying really builds up the appetite.”

He roared with laughter. “Well, then, Alice, let’s get you something to eat.

As we drove back to the compound, Wrythe turned on his favorite music from the seventies. Over the last few days, I’d learned he liked

the Bee Gees, Blondie, and Queen. It was heavy on the disco with a little classic rock thrown in for good measure. Not my favorite, but it was better than silence, especially since Peter and Wrythe weren't big talkers.

After he parked his Hummer in the large concrete parking garage and we rode down the elevator back into Demonland, I went to my room, showered, and dressed in my standard black before heading to the cafeteria. Wrythe and Peter were already there. Their heads hung together, obviously discussing something. I paused mid stride, clinging to my tan tray. Atop it sat my chicken and waffles and my mouth watered at the scent of salt and sweet. But should I sit with them or find another table?

The cafeteria was empty, so I had plenty of choices. Everyone else was training or in class at eleven fifteen in the morning. But since the ultimatum given by Deckland as part of the first trial, I kept different hours than the others.

Wendy and the other trainees had been returned thankfully. At least Deckland kept his end of the bargain. I hadn't had the chance to talk to them yet. Partly because I didn't know what to say. It was my fault they'd been put in danger and I would understand if they weren't happy with me. The other problem was they knew who my sire was. That knowledge had changed the dynamic between us. I didn't want to believe it made any difference, but it was true. I saw it in the looks they gave me as well as the hushed comments I overheard.

I wanted to feel bad about it. Angry. Upset. Or even sad. Before Kade figuratively stole my heart and left, my emotions had exploded in abundance. But since he'd gone, I hadn't allowed my feelings to overpower me the way they used to. Wrythe and Peter could tell there was something off about me, but what could I say? I was in love with Kade. He'd kissed me and then he told me we couldn't be together.

I shook my head at even the thought of telling Peter or Wrythe the truth. Doing so would be mortifying. Because how did I, the person everyone called the Queen of Hearts, explain to a teacher and her king

that I'd fallen in love with a stranger. Even as I thought of Kade, memories of our kissing came to mind. My body warmed all over and desire filled my belly.

No, I shouted at myself internally. I'd decided that despite the fact that I knew I loved Kade, I needed to lie to myself. It was the only way I got through the day.

With a sigh, I took another step toward Wrythe and Peter. Wrythe saw me and waved me over.

"Alice. Come and sit with us." His easy smile didn't intimidate me as much as it used to. I was glad of that. In fact, I'd spent so much time with Peter and Wrythe the last few days, I kind of considered us friends. More so Wrythe than Peter. I didn't know if that was disrespectful or not, but it was how I felt. The two of us meshed well together.

"I just didn't want to interrupt," I said, sitting beside Peter. "It looked like the two of you were in serious conversation."

Peter narrowed his eyes before taking a bite of the food Cook had prepared. "Not at all," he said, but I could tell that wasn't true. He wasn't trying very hard to hide it either.

"What were you talking about?" The food smelled amazing. My mouth watered. While I waited for a response from either one or both of them, I spread a large pat of butter across the waffle, stuck the crispy chicken breast on top and poured thick, maple syrup all over the whole thing.

"Nothing too exciting," Wrythe said, his eyebrows raised as he watched me.

The king was seriously hot, but also so far out of my league there was no point taking my thoughts about his fineness any further. "Really?" I cut into the food and shoved a bite in my mouth. My taste buds sang, and I closed my eyes a moment, savoring the combination.

"Really," he said, copying the way I'd laid out my food on his plate and then taking a bite. He chewed several times. "Very good," he

added around his food. “Much better than eating the waffle and the chicken separately.”

“Agreed,” Peter said. He’d been eating his food the same way I did.

It was obvious they weren’t going to tell me what they’d been discussing. Besides, the king’s close attention to everything I did made me nervous. Resolute in my desire to ignore the feeling, I took another bite. I didn’t have room in my brain to figure out what was going on in Wrythe’s head.

“You have one more demon to kill,” Peter said, changing the subject. “I think we should get an early start and head out to the dunes again tomorrow. That way we can get out there before the blasted heat boils my skin.”

Wrythe shook his head, pointing his fork at Peter while he finished chewing. “True, but I want to know what will happen to Alice once she completes her task. She’ll have the second trial to contend with, but what will it be?” He licked his fork. “I don’t like not knowing.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “It doesn’t matter what his plans are for me. I have a plan for him and that is snuffing out his very existence,” I said forcefully and lifted my cup.

Peter pushed away his food. “I’ve been studying the histories all the way back to the beginning and there isn’t one iota of evidence leading me to believe that killing the Devil is a good idea or even possible.”

I focused on my waffle, deciding I wouldn’t pay too much attention to Peter’s comment. Whatever the histories said, it had to be possible. I would end him. Without a doubt. Otherwise where did that leave me?

“The texts talk about a need for balance. That there must be equal opposition in all things. Good and bad. Light and dark…” His voice trailed off and he drank from his glass.

What aren’t you saying? I resisted asking the question aloud. That had probably been what he and Wrythe were talking about when I

arrived with my food and interrupted.

But it didn't matter. I'd heard the talk about balance before. From what I'd seen the bad far outweighed the good. Killing the Devil could only make the world a better place. As I thought about it, other questions arose. Like if the Devil were gone, what would happen to the demons? Would there even be a need for the Dark Moth Society any longer? At that last question, a pang of doubt filled my guts. Training and killing demons were all I knew, were what I lived for. My purpose. I didn't need the Trial of Three to tell me that. I knew it as surely as demon blood flowed through my veins. In the same breath though, I understood I had no idea what I would do after I'd destroyed them all, but I wanted to find out.

Just as the human race continues to climb, so too will the demons. That thought entered my mind. I shook it away.

"Alice?" Wrythe was watching me again, his eyes flicking over my features.

"Hmmm," I said, before drinking more water.

"What do you think? Can the Devil be killed?" He stuck an enormous bite in his mouth. Syrup coated his bottom lip and I had the urge to kiss it away.

Nope. Not happening. "Of course he can," I said, tossing my napkin on top of my unfinished food. I was no longer hungry.

"I'd better get back to the books," Peter said standing. He seemed frazzled by my commitment to kill the Devil, possibly because that would mean he was out of a job.

My eyes narrowed as I studied him. Or was it something else? A twinge of worry crept up my spine

"We know Alice will kill the sixth demon tomorrow. After that, we aren't sure what will happen. All we know is that the second trial has to do with the emotional part of her psyche." A shadow crossed Peter's features. "I don't know what that's going to mean, but I hope to figure it out."

Pushing away whatever bothered me about Peter, I stood too. “I need some sleep,” I said.

Wrythe growled. “I guess I’m finished as well, then.” He shook his head in exasperation. “All work and no play is really starting to drag me down.”

Neither Peter nor I offered an apology and from the look on Wrythe’s face, it was obvious he didn’t expect one. “I’ll speak to the others and seek out their opinion on the subject as well.”

We placed our trays on the conveyer belt and went to the exit. At the end of the hallway, I was to turn left and they were to go right. But Wrythe stopped, taking hold of my arm. “Have you heard from Kade?” His voice was easygoing, but there was a glint of… was it wrath or jealousy in his eyes?

“No,” I said. I hadn’t told them about seeing him in my room and our shared kiss. I couldn’t. “Do you know what he is?” My question was direct and to the point, so I was surprised when Wrythe stepped back, concern replacing his previous emotion. But I’d been plagued with strange dreams that were hard to explain. All I clearly remembered was that it felt like I was flying.

“It doesn’t matter what he is,” he growled. “As long as he hasn’t contacted you.” He tilted his head, as though that would help him gauge what I wasn’t saying. “Kade isn’t to be trusted, that’s for sure.” Wrythe rocked back on his heels.

Peter nodded in agreement.

My head rubber-banded back and forth between them. Sometimes I despised the Society and their secrets. “Let me get this straight. You both know what he is but are refusing to tell me. Is that right?” I was in shock. The last several days we’d spent loads of time together, but they hadn’t said a word about any of this.

“Knowing what he is won’t help you fight your demon tomorrow. In fact, it might throw you off your game. Plus, we have no idea what he really wants.” Wrythe stepped closer as though he wanted to say

more, but hesitated.

“If you want my opinion, it’s a mystery best kept unsolved,” Peter said, an unreadable expression on his face.

I opened my mouth to tell Peter I didn’t want his opinion, but Wrythe spoke first.

“Once your first trial is finished,” Wrythe said, taking my hand in his and stroking the back of it. “Then we can discuss it.”

At his touch, I felt a jolt—like electric fire—and it stung me red hot. Dazed, I gasped, pulling away, placing myself at a safe distance from him.

“Alice?” Wrythe’s emotions changed again. This time to a look I never thought I’d see him give me—one of yearning. It was obvious he’d felt the electric fire like I had. “What the—” He swallowed, his pupils dilating.

“Hell,” I finished, moving around them. I couldn’t be in Wrythe’s presence a moment longer. “See you at sunrise,” I added before turning the corner into the hallway that would lead to my room.

In a quiet tone, I heard Peter question the king, but didn’t wait around to hear his response.

OceanofPDF.com

I NO LONGER SHARED A ROOM WITH the other trainees. After slaying the second demon sire, I made the excuse that I didn't want to disrupt their schedules with my odd hours. While that was part of the reason, mainly it was because I could sense their discomfort around me. My life was already awkward enough. I didn't need the few moments I could spend recuperating to be filled with anxiety.

Unlocking my door, I went in, glancing around. The furnishings in my new room were even more sparse than my previous one. Just a single bed, a bedside table, and a dilapidated old chest of drawers. To the left was a small closet where I hung my clothes, all of them black.

I changed and got into bed. My body was exhausted, but my mind wouldn't shut down. I kept thinking about my father and his reasons for siring me. Burning anger consumed my thoughts. As I debated his motives, I stared up at the ceiling, watching a yellow and black spider make its web in the far-right corner of my room.

Out of the corner of my eye light glinted, and then Kade appeared at the foot of my bed. Out of thin air!

On reflex I grabbed the knife I kept under my pillow, brandishing it in front of me. "What the hell?" My momentary fright dissolved into anxious need and a ribbon of desire crept through my veins. Irritating. After days without seeing him, I felt discombobulated and out of sorts. My cheeks became warm and my heart crashed like cymbals in my ears. "You shouldn't be here," I said, working to sound calm.

Kade raised his hands, a wisp of a smile on his lips. "Take it easy. I just… wanted to check on you." He seemed nervous, not the usual cool and overconfident man I'd come to know while he stayed in the compound.

He looked better than I remembered too. I shook those thoughts away, reminding myself that I hated him. "More like you want to

torture me," I whisper-shouted. Seeing him made my heart ache in unnatural ways.

He seemed to sense what my body wanted and came around the bed. "I've missed you, Alice."

The covers had fallen to my waist, revealing the black tank I slept in. I crossed my arms. "I haven't missed you. Not in the slightest," I lied.

He sat down; his green eyes boring into me. "I know that isn't true." He leaned in and his heady, spicy scent filled the air.

To keep from grabbing him and kissing him, I got out of bed. "What are you doing here? The last time I saw you, you kissed me and then said we couldn't be together. I-I don't want you here. Leave." I pointed at the door as he stood. But I still wasn't far enough away from him and walked to the far corner of the room. The same one the spider was using to build her web.

Kade gritted his teeth and then took a deep breath. "That's still true. We shouldn't be together. But…" He wrung his hands, squeezing them tightly, like an unseen force rallied against him. "That doesn't change the fact that it matters what happens to you."

His choice of words were like a slap in the face. He didn't say *I care about you* or *I love you*, he only said *it matters what happens*. But he also said shouldn't not can't. That brought me hope. While he spoke, he slowly came toward me like his body didn't care what his mouth had to say. It eased my longing soul that he was struggling as much as me.

"Why, Kade? Why does it matter?" I pressed my back into the corner, wishing I could disappear into the walls. There must be dozens of women in Wonderland desperate to spend time with him. Why would he continue to make the effort to see me?

"Alice, I want to tell you—" He held his hands out as though trying to calm a scared animal.

"You kissed me," I said, interrupting him, tears budding at the

corners of my eyes. In that moment I despised myself for the way I reacted to him.

He sighed. “Please try to understand,” he pleaded.

“Why?” I didn’t understand. Not in the slightest. “You used me and then you left. You think you’re too good for me or something? Because you’re not.” Unwilling to assault him physically, I verbally lashed out at him, hoping to hurt him the way I was so desperately hurting.

“Think about it, Alice. I know the Dark Moth teachings are lacking when it comes to things not pertaining to demons and how to kill them, but there must’ve been a chapter or two in your schoolbooks explaining why it would be a bad thing if we were together.” He took another step forward. His hair fell into his eyes, making him look young and gloriously handsome.

I tried to focus, to figure out what he could possibly be talking about, but my body yearned for the feel of his crushing mine. I wanted to shout that it didn’t matter the reasons we couldn’t be together. Consequences be damned, I knew how right we were. I swallowed. “Is it because you aren’t a Dark Moth? Regular Moths and Dark Moths can be together. It’s frowned upon but not unheard of.”

He took another step forward. Way too close. I could hardly breathe at his nearness, but when I did I could smell cinnamon. “I’m not a Moth, Alice. I tried to tell you that before the Trial of Three. Wrythe and the council know what I am, but I guess they haven’t told you either.” He paused, momentarily irritated before smoothing his features and leaning in. “I wonder why Wrythe hasn’t told you yet.”

I nodded, indicating Wrythe did know, but was unable to say anything as an image of Kade and me side by side on the stones, preparing for the Trial of Three, came into my mind. We’d been bound by a golden chord. Because of that bond, I’d believed we would traverse the Trials together, but then he’d vanished. *What are you?* I asked in my mind, knowing he’d heard me once before.

His lips were inches away. I could feel his breath, the warmth

causing my body to tingle. He put a hand on either wall, pinning me there. Not that I would've moved. I was exactly where I wanted to be. My anger dissipated like frost melting in the morning sun. In that moment, all I wanted were his lips on mine. His body against mine. His hands in my hair and on me, exploring, while I did the same to him. I wanted to feel one with him again.

Does it matter right now? He didn't say the words, but I felt them inside my head.

That he spoke to me like that shouldn't have surprised me. *No,* I responded, only a little freaked that we could speak to each other without speaking. "Kade," I said aloud, before closing the tiny gap between us and pressing my lips against his.

He groaned against my lips, kissing me deeply as his hands wound around my waist and he pulled me against him. Then his hands went to my hair. He tugged away slightly, pulling my lips from his. "You're irresistible," he whispered, his voice gruff with emotion.

I took a small breath. "Am I?" I responded, my lips meeting his again. He was definitely irresistible to me.

Willpower abandoned us, and we were like starved animals. So hungry for each other. Desperate for more. He spun me around, walking me backward toward the bed, his mouth never leaving mine. I clung to him, already so close, but wanting him nearer. It was as though he'd consumed me. Nothing else mattered, not the demon I still had to kill, not the Devil. There wasn't anything but him.

Until a knock came at the door. "Alice." It was Wrythe's voice.

Kade pulled away, his features a mixture of frustration and… relief? "Saved by your blasted king," he said, and vanished. I jumped up, grinding my hands into fists and stomped to the door. It only took seconds for the heat to leave my body and the hunger to shrivel like an ember floating into the atmosphere. "What is it?" I growled, throwing the door open, desire still a dull ache in my stomach.

Wrythe held his hands up in surrender, obviously sensing the

emotion coming off me. “Mind if we talk?”

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. It was after midnight. “It’s late,” I began, clearing my throat.

“I know, but this won’t take long.”

“Um, sure. I guess. Come in.” I opened the door.

Wrythe wore sweatpants and a black t-shirt. His feet were bare, and his wet hair hung sleek and long to his shoulders. There was no denying the man was breathtaking. A flicker of craving for him fluttered to life. What the crap was wrong with me?

“What’s up?” I asked, trying to keep my voice light.

He rubbed the back of his neck, keeping his eyes on the floor, and I remembered what I was wearing. Tight shorty shorts and a tank top. I thought I should be embarrassed, but instead I lifted my chin in defiance. I had nothing to be ashamed of. He came to my bedroom door in the middle of the night. If he expected me to be wearing more, that was his problem.

“I spoke with the other council members,” he began, glancing around me, probably looking for a place to sit. I didn’t have any chairs, which meant we would have to sit on my bed.

Refusing to act nervous, I went over and straightened the covers, indicating my bed.

He looked around, verifying there wasn’t another spot and then gingerly sat on the edge.

I took the spot at the head. “And,” I said, hoping to urge him to continue. He brushed some hair off his face. The earthy scent of teakwood filled my nose. I placed one of my knees between us.

“They all have very strong opinions about your decision to slay Deckland Friche.” He paused, and I found it interesting he didn’t say “the Devil” but used the demon’s stupid human name.

“Yeah? What do they think?” Not that it mattered. I would do what I wanted. My rebelliousness surprised me, but I didn’t let it

show.

“Peter went through the books and found several passages indicating that killing Deckland is a very bad idea. The other Society members agree you shouldn’t take him on.”

“What do you think I should do?” I wanted his approval. That realization caused me to grind my teeth, though I wasn’t sure why.

His gray eyes studied me. “I’ve no doubt you can defeat him, Alice. You have unmatched skill as well as courage greater than I’ve ever seen before and your power grows with each slayed demon.” He licked his lips.

My head swelled with pride as I waited for him to go on.

“But there are too many unanswered questions for us to allow you to destroy him,” he finished.

“Allow? Really? So, this is a kingly decree?” I pressed my back against the headboard, forcing myself to remain calm.

“You’re so brave, so full of courage. It’s one of the many qualities I admire about you.” He nodded as though he’d expected my outrage. “I need you to understand that killing Deckland isn’t about bravery or courage. It’s about what’s right for not just you, but all of the Moths.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt, but he held up a hand, keeping me silent.

“Think about it. If you kill Deckland, who will take his place? Will another rise to the rank of Devil? We know there is demon royalty, but we don’t know if there is an heir to his throne. And if that happens, what if the new Devil changes the game? Killing Deckland could lead to chaos whereas, at least now we know what we’re dealing with, we understand the game they are playing, and we have a way to combat them.”

He pleaded with his eyes, asking me to grasp what he was saying. But I couldn’t. Not a moment longer.

“Who cares if there’s a hierarchy? Who cares if no one takes his

place or another demon does? Whatever happens, we can handle it. I will take care of it." I pressed my hands together in a fist.

Wrythe smiled grimly, leaning back. "You're his daughter, Alice. What if you're the heir?" he asked quietly.

That question rocked me like a physical blow. I hadn't even considered such an idea. "That isn't possible," I said.

"No?" He rolled his shoulders. "As far as we know Deckland has never sired a Moth before. You're it. And it occurred to us that if he sired you, it might be because he wants to bequeath the throne to you."

The words the Devil had spoken to me returned to my mind. He'd said the world could be ours and that we would be great together. Wrythe might have a point, but I wasn't ready to admit it. "That's crazy," I said. "Why would he want to give the throne to his mutt offspring? It's unlikely the demons would listen to me anyway."

"Don't sell yourself short. You ask why, but I say why wouldn't he?" Wrythe leaned forward, his large body seeming to force the air from the room. "I don't want anything to happen to you, Alice," he said. "You may not know this, but I've grown quite fond of you over the last few days."

It seemed like there was more to his words than what he was saying. "And I'm fond of you," I admitted. "I don't have a lot of friends, but I consider you one of them." I placed my hand over his and he covered it with his other hand. The spark of desire grew brighter in my belly, but I did my best to tamp it down.

"Thank you, Alice." He stood. "I'll let you get some sleep, but please think on my words and consider your king's request." He went to the door. I'd left it open and his frame filled the entrance.

"I will," I said, unable to stop myself from admiring his massive arms and muscled physique.

"Thank you." He took my hand in his. Compared to his, mine seemed so small. And he placed it over his heart. "Goodnight."

“Goodnight, sire.” I swallowed, wondering about the herd of horses racing through my chest. Once the door was closed, I leaned against it and sank to the floor. He’d asked me to consider his request, but I knew he meant it as an order. He didn’t want me to kill the Devil and it was my duty as his subject to do as my king commanded.

“He has a point,” Kade said, appearing in front of me.

I yelped, gripped by stupid fear. “Stop doing that,” I spat, the initial panic melting into irritation. “Please. I can’t keep doing this. It’s obvious there is a physical attraction between us, but nothing more—at least not for you.” I rolled onto my knees and stood.

When I faced him, his fingers caressed my face as his green eyes held mine. “Do you want more, Alice?”

“Yes,” I breathed. My eyes flicked to his lips, my frustration morphing to longing at his touch.

Kade looked away.

I ground my teeth together, telling myself to focus on what needed to be done. I wouldn’t be his plaything. “But I can tell you don’t want that. You don’t think I’m good enough for you—”

He shook his head, placing a finger over my mouth. “That’s not true. Not at all.” He turned away so his broad back was to me. “I have directives, same as you.” His shoulders sagged as though a weight rested heavily on them.

“What are they?” This was news to me. Maybe if he shared, we could work through whatever was bothering him together.

“Have you ever been commanded to do something, but deep down you know it’s wrong?”

I nodded though I wondered why he was asking. “Not even two minutes ago when Wrythe ordered me not to kill my father,” I said, moving around him so we were face to face again. “Whatever your command, I say follow your heart.”

“How can you be a demon for all intents and purposes, and yet

care more for me than anyone I've ever met?" His question was filled with wonder.

"I do care. I don't know why, especially after what you did, but I do." I shook my head, forcing myself to understand how I felt about Kade. Lust came to mind. I wanted Kade more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. But beyond that, would I care if he died? If harm came to him? I didn't know why, but the answer was a resounding yes. "I want you. I want to be with you. When you're around I can't think of anything else. But beyond that, before you disappeared that night—" I hoped he knew the night I was speaking of. By the look on his face, he did. "I thought we were friends. We talked, trained, ate together. I mean, I know how you eat your food, and—"

"How do I eat my food?" he asked, interrupting, a perfectly gorgeous smirk on his face.

The way he looked at me was disarming and my belly quaked with need. "You always make your food into tacos, whether it's a tortilla or a piece of bread or a potato chip. They become the vessels for whatever food you place on them, so you can eat them together," I said, twining my fingers with his.

Kade chuckled. "I do that, don't I?" He stepped closer.

"Yes, and then there's the way you tilt your head when you have something particularly exciting to say…" I let the words die off as he did exactly what I said. "Like that, damn you." I looked away, pushing myself not to sigh.

He took my chin in his fingers and forced me to look at him. His eyes were dark with need. "We were friends. I enjoyed every moment we spent together. Too much. Because I like you more than any friend should. In fact, I want you desperately. But more than that, I care for you more than I've ever cared about anyone." He placed his hand on my chest, just below my collarbones.

"What are you doing?" Heat radiated from his palm as white light glowed all around it. I watched in fascination, trying to comprehend

where his power came from. He didn't have markings on his wrists the way Dark Moths did. Nor did his light radiate one of the colors of the seven deadly sins. Yet, he definitely had something. I just couldn't decide what. It didn't help my thinking that my knees felt weak.

He tilted his head, listening to the way my heart pounded against his hand and gave me a lopsided grin, but didn't respond.

His grin was so damned disarming.

Finally, he spoke. "Do I have your heart, Alice Blackburn? Or is it your soul?" His eyes met mine.

"You have them both," I admitted, breathlessly, though I really didn't know much about my soul.

"What if I don't want to give them back? What if I want to keep them forever?" He was serious. I could feel the truth as well as see it on his face.

White hot need rushed through me and I took a deep breath. "You can only keep them if you intend to give me yours in return, Kade Devereaux."

He picked me up and carried me to the bed. I wrapped my legs around his waist until he lay me down on the bed. Then he settled in beside me. I searched his face, hoping against hope he intended to give me what I wanted.

"I shouldn't be with you. Not in any way. My orders are clear, but I say damn my orders and damn my heritage." He rolled on top of me, his eyes searching mine.

I didn't need any more encouragement. Without another thought, I began unbuttoning his shirt. He lifted himself so I could pull it out from where it was tucked into his jeans. When I couldn't reach the final three buttons, he sat up, pulling his shirt apart so the buttons popped and landed like soft pinging rain around the room. Then he tore it off, revealing his taut chest and arms. I ran my hands along his abs, realizing I would never get enough of how gloriously handsome he was. "Kade, I want you. I want this. More than I've ever wanted

anything else."

He tossed his shirt to the ground before leaning down to kiss me. But something was wrong. I couldn't feel his lips on mine anymore and my hands were no longer touching him but grabbing at air. Before my eyes, he was evaporating. "What's happening?" I asked, trying in vain to keep him with me.

Disbelief crossed Kade's face. "This can't be," he growled. When he was almost gone, he added, "I'm sorry, Alice."

"No," I sobbed. "Not again." Pain radiated through me so strong, I doubted I'd feel anything but sadness ever again. Hot tears burned my cheeks and I let them, allowing myself to cry long after he was gone. When sleep finally found me in the early hours before dawn, it was restless and filled with nightmares. I was surrounded by demons, each one more desperate to end me than the next. They stood just out of reach, as though an invisible barrier kept them from me. I turned, searching for where the barrier came from. And saw him. My father. The Devil. He smiled, smug, until he wasn't. Light emanated from somewhere over my shoulder. I turned to see where it came from, but couldn't make it out.

When my alarm went off, I woke gratefully, determined to make quick work of the final royal demon so my first trial would be over. After that, I'd hunt down my father and end him too, no matter what Wrythe and the others said.

OceanofPDF.com

WRYTHE AND PETER waited for me at the elevator doors. I couldn't help but study them as I made my way over. Both stood seven feet tall, the same as every other male Dark Moth. But Peter was lithe while Wrythe filled out his black camo pants and t-shirt like they'd been painted on him. He was incredible to look at, no doubt about it. Even after the pain of last night, I had no trouble admiring the man.

Wrythe noticed me and smiled.

"Let's go," I said, not bothering to greet them. We were headed out to slaughter a demon and that was all I could focus on.

Peter glanced at me, giving me a once over. "About time," he said. He stuck his key in the elevator's lock and pushed the up button. The pulley system whirred to life, squeaking loudly as it went. Wonderland was calling and the three of us were off to save the world—or at least the final trainee.

Lily, one of the Moth council members came around the corner. "Do you think it's wise to let her out into Wonderland?" She eyed me sharply.

Peter grunted, scrutinizing me carefully before facing her. "It's fine, Lily. We'll be with her.

Wrythe rose to his full height, bristling at her question. "Of course it's wise. She's working to complete her first trial and we're going with her to back her up. You know this. We've discussed it at length." He glared, but it seemed like it was more than that. Were the two of them an item? I wouldn't have recognized the tension before, but after last night, my emotions were raw, and I was more in tune with the physical part of myself.

Peter rolled his eyes. I knew he didn't want to be here. He'd made it clear he didn't think I needed backup, but there were others on the council who disagreed, so he went. It looked as though he hadn't slept

for days. Alarm bells went off in my head.

What had he been up to? I brushed the question aside.

“If you say so.” Lily gave Peter an expression loaded with accusation but didn’t bother another glance at Wrythe before continuing down the hall.

I clenched my teeth together, forcing myself not to watch the way she sashayed her hips, as though each step were an invitation. She’d been sired by a Lust demon, that much had been obvious from the moment I met her, but I hadn’t realized just how much of it rolled off her. Besides that, she also had a problem with me. Was the Society really that worried about my parentage? Apparently so.

The elevator doors opened.

“We will talk later,” Peter said to Lily’s back before getting in.

Wrythe and I followed.

“Be careful with Lily,” Wrythe advised Peter. “She’s part of the council, but I don’t agree with most of her opinions.”

Peter grunted, but didn’t respond, and we rode up in silence. Out in the parking garage, I followed Peter to Wrythe’s Hummer. It would take an hour to get out to the desert. After buckling up, I ignored the warriors and faced the window, staring out at nothing. As Wrythe drove, the world went by, but all I saw was Kade’s face in my mind. I was worried about what had happened. He’d never faded away like that before. Usually he just appeared and disappeared at will. Last night, something out of his control had happened, as though he’d been forced from me. But why? Or by whom? Those giving his orders seemed the most likely. Would they kill him for what we’d been about to do? I hoped not. Kade had to be okay.

“Are you ready to finish your first trial?” Wrythe asked, his eyes finding mine in the rearview mirror.

“I am,” I said, gritting my teeth. “Are you?” I studied his face, surprised by the sudden rush of emotion I felt for him before quickly looking away. There was growing magnetism between us. I could feel

it, but it wasn't the same as the uncontrollable fire I felt when Kade was around. This was purely carnal.

Wrythe snorted, oblivious to the thoughts tumbling around in my head. "As ready as I need to be," he said dryly. "Basically, I'm just your driver."

Peter nodded. "And I'm here as hero support, no more than a sidekick." He crossed his arms, grimacing. Peter had been sired by a Pride demon. Occasionally, like now, when he wasn't the center of attention, his patrimony was exposed.

I laughed, which surprised them and me. Wrythe raised an eyebrow, his gray eyes searching mine from the mirror while Peter turned to look at me from the front seat.

"What?" I shrugged. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that you're both hilarious." When they didn't respond, I added. "And I really appreciate you coming with me. I wouldn't want to do this alone." That was the truth. Before entering the Trials, I'd been eager to slay all demons—it was great practice for when I had to fight my sire. But now I knew who my father was, and he'd forced me to slay royal demons on a daily basis. Despite what Wrythe and Peter thought, I needed them, even if it was just as support.

Peter squinted, studying me. "You're welcome," he said. "But what's gotten into you?"

I didn't know. "Nothing. Sheesh. Can't I share my appreciation without getting the third degree?" I turned my attention toward the window again. We'd left the city and were making our way out to the spot where I'd killed the Wrath demon yesterday. Sand stretched in front of us on all sides. The temperature rose ten degrees. "Wrythe, can we turn on the—"

Something slammed into the driver's side of the Hummer causing it to flip several times. I was glad I'd buckled my seatbelt. Glass shattered, sending twinkling shards through the air and into my skin. The sound of ripping metal raked my ears. I tried to cover them, but

my katana struck my lip, splitting it open. Then the butt of Peter's gun hit me in the forehead, gashing my skin at my hairline. Blood oozed from the wounds. A salty, copper stench stung my nose.

When the vehicle stopped moving, I let out a shaky breath, wiping blood from my eyes. Grabbing the knife from my boot, I cut myself out of the seatbelt. With the Hummer upside down, it took a moment to get by bearings. My mind was fuzzy, like I wasn't all the way awake.

Shaking off the feeling, I listened for what I already knew had happened. The final demon had launched a surprise attack. And he wouldn't wait for me to catch my breath before bombarding us again. Righting myself, I did a quick check in the front seats for Wrythe and Peter. Neither was inside. Despite the heat, a chill ran the length of my spine.

"Alice!" Wrythe's hands appeared through the broken window before ripping the passenger side door off its hinges. "Are you all right?"

"Great," I said, taking his outstretched hand and hauling myself out. Blood was smeared on his face from a gash on his cheek. There was another on one arm and a third across his chest. His shirt was sticky with blood, but none of it seemed to bother him. "Where's Peter?"

"He's contending with the demon but just barely." He shook his head, releasing me. "I know we talk in class about how Pride and Greed demons can be similar, but many times they aren't. Pride is arrogant and self-righteous while Greed demons tend to be much more sneaky."

I glared, wondering why he felt the need to lecture me at this moment. He noticed and shook his head, then winced. "Sorry. Peter and I went through the windshield. I'm not functioning on all cylinders, but Peter's worse off than me. He took the brunt of the blow. I don't even know how's he's standing."

“Okay. Hang on.” I clambered back inside the Hummer, searching for my katana and praying it was still in one piece. It’d been in its sheath on the seat beside me. I found it in the back, grabbed it, and careful to avoid the shattered glass, stepped out. “Where are they?” I pulled off the sheath and searched the sand dunes until I found them.

“There,” Wrythe said, pointing.

I nodded, watching Peter as I felt to make sure I still had my gun. “You’re right, Peter looks bad. Let’s go.” They were about fifty feet away, Peter covered in blood from head to toe. One of his arms dangled at an odd angle.

Thankfully the demon hadn’t taken on its original form, but still held his human shape. He wore a bright gold suit with a white shirt open at the collar. At least a dozen gold chains dangled from his neck. One of the sleeves had been ripped, but otherwise he looked like he belonged at an upscale Hollywood party, not fighting a bloody man in the middle of the desert.

I took off running, my katana drawn, desperate to get in there. The demon was playing with Peter, one hand behind his back, smiling smugly. I would skin the smile off his face.

“Hey,” I shouted, pushing Peter out of the way just as the Greed demon swung down hard with his sword. My katana took the brunt of the impact, vibrations running painfully down my arm. I grunted as I removed my gun and shot the demon between the eyes.

He roared, shaking his head back and forth as he fell, momentarily stunned. The bullets had been dipped in a special solution Heathcliff created. Whatever was in it was powerful if it could cause such damage to a royal demon.

He was Greed and he writhed on the ground. I took the opportunity to check on Peter. “Are you all right?”

His face was ashen, I guessed from the loss of blood. With little effort, I lifted him and brought him over to Wrythe. “Take him. I’ll finish off the demon.” It only crossed my mind for the briefest

moment that I was giving orders to the king of the Dark Moths. Such a thing was unheard of. If the council had witnessed me doing so, it would've been considered treason. I shoved the thought aside. If necessary, Wrythe could punish me for my treachery later. Right now, I needed him to get Peter out of harm's way so I could finish my first trial.

Without a word, Wrythe took Peter and moved off toward the mangled Hummer.

I faced the demon, gun in one hand and my favorite sword in the other.

While I'd been distracted, the Greed demon shifted into his true form and now stood nearly nine feet tall and half as wide. "Are you prepared to die?" He spoke with superiority as he studied my katana and gun. Then, a blade exactly like mine appeared in each of his slimy, pus-filled hands. "You think you're better than I am, Alice, Queen of the Halflings? You think you can take me?"

I nodded. "I know I can," I spat.

In response, he growled, gnashing his teeth.

"I don't care what the Devil says. I will kill you. Have no doubt of that."

I flinched at his words for two reasons. The first was that he'd called me Queen of the Halflings. Why? I wasn't queen of anything, nor did I have plans to be. The second reason was what he'd said about the Devil. Had my father told the royal demons to let me kill them? That seemed absurd. "Not happening," I said, trying to cover up my annoyance. Why was I even listening to him? It was literally in his blood to lie. Pushing aside my doubts, I stepped toward him and shifted my weight. It was difficult to get good footing in the sand. As I moved, the demon followed my every step. Just to make sure he was copying me; I bent my knees and swung my sword. To which the demon replied in kind. It was like watching myself in the mirror—a much grosser, much larger, and slimier version. "What are you

doing?" I didn't realize I'd smiled until the demon did too, flashing his blackened teeth.

"Just showing you what an idiot you are," he replied.

I didn't respond with words, but ran and jumped so I was his height. Our blades clashed as I landed in front of him.

For several minutes, we sparred, our blades sending sparks into the air as the distinct aroma of burned metal momentarily covered up the demon's stench. Unfortunately for me, the stink returned all too soon.

"You're good," the demon quipped. "Passable as a fighter, but nothing compared to me. I've trained in every form of fighting ever created. I know it all." He threw his blade into the sand and created a much bigger one. It was the same size as me, but it wouldn't matter. He was still going to die.

I shifted to the right, hoping he wouldn't notice. But he did, following suit. His actions had me grinding my teeth, especially with that extra-large sword in his hand. I was on the edge of losing my temper. "You should be proud of yourself, demon. The others died much more quickly than you." I'd expected my words to throw him off, but he repeated them back to me, which threw me off instead. "Are you going to stand there copying me all day or are you going to fight?" Anger bubbled to the surface as he repeated my words and I felt my demon power spring to life. I hadn't used it on any of the other royal demons. I hadn't needed to. But this one was really starting to tick me off.

With a backward glance at Wrythe and Peter to make sure they were out of the way, I turned, dropping my hands to my sides, and closed my eyes. The tip of my katana dug into the sand as the power within me boiled, inky and thick. The last time I used it, it came out of me like a thunderclap. This time it rolled off me like smoke in a dry ice machine. I opened my eyes and watched the misty tendrils leak toward him.

The demon inhaled, getting ready to speak, and choked. "What are

you doing to me?" He fell to his knees, dropping his weapon while his fingers dug desperately at his throat.

He was dying. I could feel it, but I wasn't taking any chances. Grabbing the demon's massive sword with my free hand, I lunged at him. We were eye to eye. My power stirred stronger than anything I'd ever felt before. I didn't recognize it and it startled me. "Not so smug now, are you filthy beast?" I said and shoved both blades into the demon's eyes. He roared as I pulled the weapons out and crossing the blades, sliced the demon's head clean from his neck. It rolled backward and turned to ash. A moment later, his body followed.

I heaved a cleansing breath, my demon power dissolving as quickly as it'd come.

"Very good, Alice."

To my right stood Deckland Friche or more accurately the Devil. My father.

At his arrival, the morning sun seemed to lose its luster. Clouds rolled in, making the sky, clear blue a moment ago, turn gray and ominous, a torrid cauldron of dreariness.

I worked hard to hide my surprise at his being here and cleared my throat. "I defeated the sires just as you demanded," I said, lamely, my wrath from a moment ago softening at the sight of him. Had he come to kill me? Kade said he would try. Not that I would let him succeed. He would die instead, and I would be the one to kill him.

"Of course, you did, my dear Alice." His hands were in his pockets and he stood like we were chatting about the weather.

"I'm not your dear anything," I hurled back, the anger flaring up again.

He chuckled. "I can't say I'm at all surprised. My hope for these Trials was that your confidence would increase. It obviously has. I believe, from what I've just witnessed, that your powers have increased as well." He clapped slowly. "It's incredible. You're incredible."

The Devil stood on a shiny black rock that had appeared out of nowhere at the same moment my father did. He wore a black suit with a blue silk shirt that glistened in the sun. His sleek hair had been pulled back, revealing his angular face, highlighting the blue eyes that perfectly matched mine.

After what I'd just done, the Devil seemed smaller somehow and I stepped toward him, thinking if he took that moment to kill me, I would be ready, and I would retaliate with a vengeance. The power I'd sent into the Greed demon returned, thick and needy. I longed to fling it into the demon before me and end him where he stood.

"Alice," I heard Wrythe call in warning.

I glanced back at my king. He gasped when he saw me and took a tighter hold of Peter, who hung limply against him. Wrythe was afraid. Of me. "What is it?" The words hissed from my mouth like snakes in a pit.

"Let's go. You've completed your task. He—," Wrythe indicated the Devil with his head before continuing, "He can't make you stay." His voice didn't possess the confidence I was used to hearing and I wondered what he saw when he looked at me.

"Well, King of the Dark Moths, that isn't true. Yes, she completed her first task, but since she followed the rabbit down the demon hole and came to me, I'm in charge of her Trial of Three, and the next one has already begun." He smiled, showing off teeth that looked too perfect to be real.

I wondered what his real form looked like. Was he a pus-riddled giant like the others?

"I understand that, but she needs time to recuperate," Wrythe said, some of his confidence returning. "The first task was for one demon sire per day. You can give her the remainder of today, Deckland." Wrythe's kingly voice was back in full by the time he finished.

The Devil's eyes squinted as he studied Wrythe. "I suppose I can give her a little time…" His voice trailed off. "But I'll decided how

long." With those final words, he left in a puff of smoke.

I blew out my breath, glad he was gone, but worried about what he had in store for me next. He said it had already begun. Did Wrythe miss that? And while the physical trial hadn't been too hard, it had been tedious. Tucking my gun back in its holster, I went over to Wrythe. "Do you have your cell phone? I'll call for help."

He took it from his pocket. While he kept Peter upright, I called Heathcliff, the Dark Moths' doctor and after a brief conversation where I promised we would all make an appearance in the sick wing, he agreed to send help.

While we waited, we walked and eventually found the road we'd been traveling on and followed it back.

Wrythe kept glancing at me, his eyes darting over my face like I'd grown horns or had oozing sores on my body. "What's your problem?" I finally asked, frustrated.

He ground his teeth as though debating what to say.

"Just spit it out," I added, too tired and sore to be politically correct. "Whatever it is, I can take it."

He hefted Peter, adjusting his unconscious body into a better position. "I'm not sure what to think, Alice. You were amazing, but at the same time terrifying. And for the briefest moment, I would swear your skin changed."

I gaped at him, confused. I'd used my demon power and knew it was dark. When it left me, it could've affected the look of my skin. "Changed how?"

"You…" He cleared his throat. "Almost seemed to be glowing." He shook his head as though trying to grasp what he'd seen.

"What color?" I asked. It wasn't vanity. Since I could remember, we'd been taught that our marks revealed our sire, which revealed our power. Deep down, I still didn't want to believe the Devil was my father. I guess I still hoped he wasn't.

Wrythe didn't respond right away, but I could tell it was because he was thinking of a way to describe what he saw. I waited, my heart racing.

Finally, he stopped, and I followed suit. Then he straightened. "Like the way the moon blocks the sun during a solar eclipse. Shining black with bright rays of light surrounding you. And I could swear, I saw wings…" He let his voice trail off as he shook his head.

I raised my eyebrows. "That doesn't sound right." I turned away, hurrying down the road. My mind wandered over what he said. "Wings?" I asked, turning and walking backward.

He gave a brief nod like he was pondering too.

I went back to walking forward. *You still have two more Trials,* my mind whispered. *And then your true self will be revealed*. At least that was what the Trial of Three was supposed to do. I hoped it worked. But maybe, like Kade, it wouldn't work on me. What would I do then? I had to be more than just the Devil's daughter.

OceanofPDF.com

"HOLD STILL," Heathcliff said to Wrythe, clearly frustrated. "I can't stitch you up if you keep moving around."

I resisted the urge to laugh at the scene in front of me because the wrath rolling off my king was nearly stifling. Not to mention the irritation oozing from Heathcliff.

Since we Dark Moths healed more rapidly than humans, regular medications didn't help us. We basically had to suffer through the pain, knowing it would only last a few hours, instead of days or weeks.

Wrythe had his shirt off, the muscles flexing along his neck and shoulders. His jaw was set, and his eyes closed as though he wished he were anywhere else.

I glanced over at Peter. Heathcliff had given him an elixir to help heal his injuries faster. He lay on a bed off to the side. Doc had set his shoulder as well as the fractured bone in his arm. He writhed in agony, rocking back and forth as the bones healed quickly. I felt bad for him and all the discomfort he was in. Gratitude for his efforts washed over me. He and Wrythe had been there for me the last several days, and especially today when I needed them most. It meant a lot they'd been there to back me up.

My lip had healed and the other cuts were gone as well. My body restored faster than usual, even for a Dark Moth. I didn't want to believe it. Nor did I voice this development to Heathcliff, especially not in front of Wrythe and Peter.

"Just leave it," Wrythe growled, hopping off the table. "You're torturing me, Doc."

"But you'll scar," Heathcliff said in horror as the king put back on his shredded shirt.

I looked away as Wrythe tried to dress, focusing my attention on the jars littering the shelves along the edges of the room. Because we were so far below ground, the sick wing always stayed cool.

“A king needs scars so his people will know he battles on their behalf,” Wrythe said, towering above Heathcliff. The doc was tall, maybe six feet, but still no match for Wrythe. Next to the king, Heathcliff looked like a child.

Wrythe’s words surprised me. They were the first really kingly things I’d heard him utter in days.

“What?” he asked when he noticed me looking at him. His eyes flashed a mixture of anger and amusement.

“Nothing.” I crossed my arms, stepping backward. “Nothing at all.” Nervously, I picked up a jar. It slipped from my hands, shattering on the concrete floor. The liquid contents as well as whatever had been inside (it looked like a brain) slid across the floor, splashing my boots as well as Heathcliff’s and Wrythe’s. “Sorry,” I said, bending over to pick up the pieces.

“Leave it,” Heathcliff said, his voice resigned as he grabbed a broom and a dustpan.

“Sorry,” I said again.

“It’s fine,” he said, but obviously it wasn’t. “I’ll clean it up.” He paused, looking at me. “I forgot to check you.” He leaned the broom against the table and removed his gloves. “Tell me where you’re hurt,” he said.

I shrugged, trying desperately to feign nonchalance. “I feel fine. All this waiting around for Peter and Wrythe and I’m healed up.” I shrugged again.

Wrythe stepped around Heathcliff and took my chin in his hand.

I tried to pull away, but he held tight. “What are you looking at?” I blushed, wishing like hell he’d let me go. “I hardly had a scratch on me. You and Peter got the worst of it.”

Wrythe didn't look convinced, but he released me. "There was a deep cut on your arm," he said, touching the spot where it'd been. "I saw it."

At his caress, tingles ran the length of my arm. I stepped away, feeling awkward yet strangely euphoric. Yearning sprang to life in my belly. I was shocked by the sensation. Wrythe was King of the Moths, but more than that, he was old—well, a lot older than me anyway. I mean, gross, right? Unfortunately, my body didn't seem to think so.

Wrythe sucked in a breath and I glanced at him. He'd felt something as well. I went to move away from him, but he gently took hold of my arm. "I need to speak with you. Meet me in my rooms in an hour."

I bristled at his tone, but felt my face get hot as well. "Is that an order, sire?" I glanced up at him from beneath my lashes, feeling alive and nervous and embarrassed, yet excited at the prospect of meeting him later.

"Alice, you're good to go. But…" Heathcliff trailed off, waiting for me to focus my attention on him.

Wrythe huffed before leaving the room. "An hour," he growled, slamming the door behind him.

Crossing my arms against whatever was happening, I faced Heathcliff. "Yes?"

"Did you try the bullets?" he asked, completely unfazed by the king's temper.

"I did," I said, my mood changing to a different kind of excitement. "I shot the damn demon between the eyes and it knocked him out flat for a good twenty seconds. It was fantastic."

Heathcliff smiled, a rarity for the good doctor. "Excellent. My hypothesis was sound, but he was only down seconds? I'd hoped it would last longer."

"How much longer?" I thought twenty seconds was great. Usually a bullet did nothing but cause a royal demon a single moment of

frustration.

“I really wanted it to be permanent,” he said, going over to his workstation and settling on a rolling stool.

I followed, standing beside him as Heathcliff rolled under his desk, which was littered with plastic totes containing dozens of bullets. There was also a microscope, several different bottles of solutions, a knife, and a few other items I couldn’t describe. Most surprising was a totally mundane spiral notebook lying open with a number two pencil on it.

Heathcliff took the pencil and began writing in the notebook, mumbling as he went. Suddenly, I felt invisible and unsure what to do. I watched him write a moment and then began reading on the page he’d already written. Words like infinite, eternity, and seven magics jumped from the page, but two words shocked me more than the others. I gasped.

Heathcliff stopped writing and looked up.

“What are the bullets dipped in?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around the words. They kept repeating themselves over and over in my brain.

Heathcliff shut the notebook, facing me. “An elixir of willow bark and celery root as well as hibiscus…” He trailed off as though he debated whether to continue. It didn’t take him long to make up his mind. “But the main component is angel essence.”

Those were the words I’d seen. The ones I hadn’t wanted to believe I’d read. “How?” From my schooling, I’d learned about all the different demons. I knew how they worked, what they liked (hearts), hated (liver, but didn’t we all), and yearned for (virgin blood). But never once had I read a single thing about angels. “Are angels real?” Not for the first time I felt like I lived a very sheltered life. Sure, I knew how to make demons suffer. I knew how to kill them and turn them to ash, but the rest of the world? I didn’t know much. It seemed I hardly knew anything.

He gave me a disgusted look. “Of course angels are real, Alice. There are several types of angels, just as there are different types of demons. Perhaps you’ve heard of chayots? From your studies?”

I shook my head. None of my classes discussed anything angelic. Not angels and definitely not chayots. “Not yet,” I said.

He snorted. “Figures.” He swiveled over to his microscope. “The Dark Moth council is aware of them. In their histories I’ve no doubt there is plenty of information. See, without angels, there couldn’t be demons. There must be a balance.” He picked up a bullet and placed it under a weird-looking microscope to the right of the one he’d been using a moment ago.

“They never told us about them.” Which was strange because they mentioned balance many times and what Heathcliff said about demons and angels made sense. “Chayots? Why not just call them angels? Why get fancy? Are angels good?” The last question seemed like the easiest to answer. Demons were bad. I mean they were named after the seven deadly sins. So, if there had to be balance then angels must be good

“Most of them,” he said, shaking his head. “But seriously, you should know this. I really need to speak with Wrythe about what’s being taught.” He glanced around the room as though looking for the king.

“So, angels? Chayots?” I said, bringing his attention back to me. “What are they?”

He studied me like I had a bug on my nose. “They are immortal beings created by God. Chayot specifically are warriors for the human race, but only when absolutely necessary. They’ve assisted during some of the greatest wars in the human histories, but for the most part they are to allow humans to make their own choices. They must observe and report, nothing more, unless ordered otherwise.” He made a face before turning his attention back to the bullet.

“Have you met a chayot?” I couldn’t believe it. All this time! I was

half human. There were plenty of Moths in the world—all of them half human too. Where had the chayots been for them these many years? Why had it been necessary for the Dark Moths to be created? If there were angel warriors, they should've defended the Moths.

"I have. One of my brothers is half chayot."

"The angels have mutts as well?" I snorted, a sick sense of justice floating through my veins. "Do the angels hunt and kill them the way the demons do?"

Heathcliff scowled before looking away. "They are called Nephilim and as a matter of fact, they do. Or they did. Not anymore. My brother, Gabe, helped put a stop to that. Since his father was leader of the angels, he had some sway and made changes." He adjusted the microscope's lens, peered through it, and then looked at me.

"Wait." It occurred to me he said brother. "Are you half chayot too?"

"No," Heathcliff said. "Our father adopted each of us for one reason or another over the years. We were raised as brothers but we aren't related by blood. Still, I would do anything for him as well as the others."

"That's cool," I said, considering, not for the first time, what it would've been like to have a parent who wanted me. Loved me. Pain shot through my tender heart. I'd never known my mother. Didn't even have a picture of her.

"Yeah, my dad is vampire. Born in the time of Joan of Arc, turned by the Vampire Queen herself. He served her for many years until he finally broke free. But that's a story for another time," Heathcliff said.

I was in shock. Heathcliff really didn't talk much at all, let alone about his family. But vampires? "Excuse me? Did you say he's a vampire?" I really didn't know anything unless it had to do with demons. It was time to change that.

"Did you think our world so small that there were only humans and demons?" He gave me a look filled with disappointment.

I nodded, hating to admit that I'd been so naïve. "What else?" I asked, pulling another chair over so I could sit beside him. Even though I was deep below the earth, it felt as though my world was opening for the first time.

"Dragons. Gargoyles. Werewolves. Fairies." He looked at me. "Want me to go on?"

I pressed my hands against the sides of my head.

"Witches," he continued when I didn't say anything. "How do you think I create the elixirs?"

I shook my head. "I have to admit my mind is literally blown right now. I had no idea."

Heathcliff combined ingredients for a solution as I watched, my mind working to adjust to this world the Doc mentioned.

"You have no idea what those words mean, do you?"

"I do. A little," I admitted, but mostly from fiction. I did like to read. I mean I lived underground, but not under a rock.

"Well, there's more if you want to hear." It looked like he questioned whether he should go on or not.

"Tell me," I said, feeling less confident than I sounded.

"There are many different realms as well as dimensions, too." He grinned slyly as he watched my reaction.

"No way. You're lying," I said, scooting back on the chair.

"Nope." He shook his head, going back to his work. "Like I've said before, you trainees need more than just a demon education. So much more."

"I agree. But…" Peter told us they trained us for what we needed to know to survive. Once we made it past eighteen and defeated our sire, then we could have the world opened up to us. But it seemed to me if we learned more, it would help because it might create hope within us. I wanted to learn more, to know more. I didn't like that I was nearly an adult, but still felt like a child.

“Let me get your education beyond this compound and killing demons started.” Doc went over to a bookshelf, searching a few moments before selecting a volume and bringing it over. “Here,” he said, handing me the book.

I took it, and immediately saw it wasn’t a textbook but a journal. Across the front were the words: *Supernatural Creatures* by Heathcliff Henry.

“Some light reading,” he chuckled, sitting and turning back to his work.

“You wrote this?” I asked, running my fingers over the name on the front. I opened the journal, perusing the pages. The pages were filled with pictures of monsters and creatures as well as notes about them.

“I did. When I was in high school. It should help you learn more of what else is out there in the world.”

“High school?” Of course, he went to school, but it was weird to think of Doc as a teenager.

“Sure. I learned all about this stuff from my Dad at an early age. You should see my dad’s basement. It’s enormous and filled with life-sized creatures of all kinds as well as more in-depth information about the creatures.”

“I’d love to visit there sometime,” I said, though it would probably never happen. But his father sounded like a man I’d love to meet.

“Maybe someday,” he said, then glanced at the door. He was excusing me. Apparently, I was keeping him from his work. “Read through my journal and come back in a few days. I’ll answer any of your questions then.”

I closed the book, tucking it under my arm carefully. “I will, thank you.” When I reached the door, Heathcliff called after me.

“Alice?”

“Yes?”

“If I were you, I’d start on page thirty-two. You might find that entry particularity interesting.”

I wanted to read the journal from front to back, but decided if he wanted me to start there, I would. “Will do. Thanks again.”

“And Alice?”

“Huh?” I opened the door.

“Keep the journal to yourself. No sense worrying the other trainees, not to mention the teachers and council members.” He shook his head. “They might not appreciate my broadening your horizons.”

“It’ll be our secret. I promise.” I couldn’t wait to have a moment to myself to look it over.

“Night,” Heathcliff said.

“Goodnight.” I closed the door, making my way back to my room. “Angels?” I whispered. “Dragons? A vampire queen?” The Devil, demons, and the life I’d been living the last seventeen plus years seemed to fade into the background as I thought of all Heathcliff had told me. Was it really possible? I tried to imagine what life outside the compound would be like. Not that I would ever get the chance to know. A Dark Moth was born and raised to serve the Moths. But, what if…?

“What did you say?” Wendy asked.

I hadn’t seen her in the hallway. I’d been too preoccupied with my own thoughts, and she startled me. I dropped the book and rushed to pick it up. “Hey, Wendy.” The pages had fallen open revealing a creature with a mouth full of sharp teeth.

“What book is that?”

“Nothing important. Just some light reading Doc gave me.” I tucked it back under my arm. “How are you feeling?” She looked good, better. After Eric died, I worried. And then when she’d been taken by the Devil for my trial, I thought it might’ve broken her. But she’d shown her fire and her wrath came to life.

“Fine.” Her eyes fell to the book. “Light reading, huh? Can I read it when you’re finished?”

I decided if she still wanted to talk to me when all of this was over, I’d be more than happy to let her read it. “Sure.” I didn’t see what it would hurt. I’d killed her demon sire. She would become a Dark Moth. She might as well learn more about the world as well.

“Sweet. Thank you.” She looked like she wanted to say more.

“Did you need something else?” Had she asked me a question and I missed it?

Wendy reached out and hugged me. “Thank you, Alice.”

“I—” I knew she was talking about me slaying her demon sire. Because of what I’d done, her Dark Moth ceremony as well as the others’ was coming up soon. And then it occurred to me that my birthday was tomorrow. I would be eighteen. Not that it mattered any longer. The Devil had made sure I understood that.

Wendy gave me a look, waiting for me to finish my sentence.

“You’re welcome, Wendy,” I finally said.

She stepped back. “I don’t just mean for what you did in the trial, but also what you did for Eric.” Her bottom lip quivered. “Even though he didn’t make it, I know if he were here, he would be so proud of you and grateful you killed his sire.” She touched my arm. “We should’ve been nicer to you. I should’ve been nicer to you. I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

Her words meant a lot. “I appreciate you saying that.” I shuffled my feet, uncomfortable with her unexpected admiration and apology.

“I mean it.” She took one of my hands in hers and swung it lightly. “How are you doing? I mean the Devil’s daughter? You must be devastated. I know I would be.”

I let out a sigh, grateful she’d asked the question I knew everyone else wanted to know. If I told her, then she could tell everyone else and I wouldn’t have to. If I didn’t share, then it would only widen the

separation between us and I didn't want that. "It's—I don't want to believe it's true," I said honestly.

"I get that," Wendy said. "But it is true, right? I mean it must be. It explains so much about you."

My heart sank because she wasn't wrong. I didn't want to admit it, or hear it, but I was grateful she still talked to me, even after what she knew. She continued, "Are you going to dinner? I believe the cook made hamburgers and fries."

"Um, yeah. Sounds good," I said, grateful she didn't say more about my father. "I'll be there in a bit. See you there?"

"I'll save you a seat." She smiled.

My heart expanded with warmth for Wendy. Maybe she and the others could accept me. As I watched her walk away, hope fluttered through me. "That would be wonderful."

OceanofPDF.com

INSIDE MY ROOM, I searched for a place to keep the journal and eventually decided on my sock drawer. Once I buried it under all of my black socks, I glanced at myself in the mirror above the dresser. The young woman staring back surprised me. I looked pale, which made my blue eyes stand out starkly against my black lashes. It was odd because I was so used to seeing the other trainees and Dark Moths with their gray eyes that once in a while I forgot mine were a different color. They made me think of my father and I quickly looked away. Then glanced at the edge of the journal peeking out from under my socks and changed my mind about keeping it there. Opening my closet, I put it on the shelf above my clothes. “I don’t know,” I whispered, taking it from the otherwise empty shelf and spinning in a circle. Under my bed? In my underwear drawer? Under my pillow? Finally, I decided to tuck it between my mattresses. Not near the edge, but closer to the middle. Satisfied, I made my way back to the cafeteria. Upon entering, I caught the scent of seasoned hamburger topped with cheddar cheese. My mouth watered as I made my way over to the counter, picking up a tray, silverware, and a napkin.

Cook was there, hovering over the grill, sautéing some onions. She was a large woman with a kind, round face. Seeing me, she came over. “Hello, Alice.”

“Cook. The food smells like heaven as usual,” I said, sincerely.

“Thank you.” She came closer, leaning over, beckoning for me to do the same. “I heard about your father,” she said, making a face like she had a nasty taste in her mouth. “The Devil. Such a shame because how do you kill the unkillable?” She straightened, taking a bun from the bag and sliding a hamburger with melted cheese on it. “Here you go.” She put the burger on a plate then added fries before handing it to me. “You didn’t hear this from me, but I’ve heard talk that some

folks are worried about what your parentage means for the Dark Moths and if you should even be here." She clucked her tongue. "Not me, mind you. I like you, Alice, and I'm on your side, but I thought you should know."

"I appreciate that," I said. "And thanks for the food." My mind whirled. If I wasn't supposed to be here, where would I go?

She smiled, giving me a salute with the hand holding the spatula.

I waved and wandered over to the drink station.

Sure, I wasn't sired by one of the usual royal demons, but that didn't matter. Did it? The gap I'd subconsciously felt between myself and the rest of the trainees widened. I was different from them. Not just my eyes or the marks, but in every way. Except I still wanted what they did—the end of the stupid game demons chose to play with their offspring. And if possible, the end of all demons. Period. The prospect hadn't seemed possible a week ago, but as I thought about it, something inside me still stubbornly believed that anything was possible.

At the condiments station, I added catsup, mustard, lettuce, tomato, and pickles to my burger and then extra, extra catsup on the side for my fries before moving on.

When I had everything, I glanced over the sea of trainees and teachers eating, searching for Wendy, and located her sitting with some of the other trainees. True to her word, she'd saved me a spot beside her. My pulse quickened nervously, which I found amusing in a not so funny way. I could kill royal demons as easily as swatting a fly without feeling anything but excitement. But when it came to my peers and fellow trainees, I got twitchy.

Wendy noticed me and smiled. "Here," she mouthed, pointing to the empty seat beside her. I nodded a thank you and continued over. Someone stuck out a foot and I tripped, flying forward, but was somehow able to stay upright. I turned, glaring at the younger trainee. He seemed proud of himself. Anger flared, and I thought of dumping

my plate of food, catsup on all, on his arrogant head.

But I was hungry, and he wasn't worth missing out on lunch. "Watch it," I said, the anger rolling off me like frothy waves.

He opened his mouth to return my retort, but suddenly changed his mind. His face went white and he turned away from me, but not before mumbling, "Sorry."

I snorted, glad for his change of heart as I continued to Wendy's table. All of the group minus Eric were there. Swallowing my apprehension, I put on a grim smile and made my way over. With each step, my confidence waned.

"Hi," Wendy said when I sat.

"Thanks for saving me a seat," I responded, sticking a straw in my water.

"Sure," she said before eating a fry.

Georgia sat across from Wendy, eyeing my food while she chewed her own. Even though she had plenty on her plate, she still wanted mine. It was the Greed demon part of her DNA, I knew. Before she could take some, I generously doused them in catsup before putting one in my mouth. She could get up and go get seconds if she was still hungry.

Pam sat on the other side of me and gently pushed her shoulder into mine. "Glad you're okay," she said.

"Thanks. You too." I took a bite of my burger and tried to relax. There didn't seem to be any awkwardness coming from them.

Pam sipped her drink, her eyes on me. "How did you do it, Alice? Slay all of those demons, especially with what you're dealing with?"

Before I had a chance to respond, Gilbert spoke up. "Big-time thanks, by the way. We're all going to be Dark Moth warriors because of you." He clucked his tongue, eyeing my burger gluttonously. "Not sure if I deserve it, but I'm glad to be alive and I'm glad you're such a kick-ass Dark Moth trainee." He held up his hand and I smacked it in a

high five.

“It was really—”

“But is she?” Georgia gave me a sideways glance. “A Dark Moth, I mean.” She sipped her drink. “You weren’t sired by one of the seven deadly demons, which is the criteria for being a Dark Moth.”

“Duh. She was sired by the king of the demons,” Pam added, giving her a look that said she should shut up.

“She has the marks, Georgia. She is one of us,” Wendy added, picking at the bun on her burger.

I wanted to hug her. It was strange, but I greatly appreciated that she seemed to be on my side.

“So, does that make her a princess?” Gilbert asked. It was an innocent question, but I could sense everyone was thinking about what it meant that the Devil was my dad.

“I’m definitely not a princess. Like Wendy said, I’m the same as you,” I said, but Georgia was already shaking her head.

“But you aren’t. Not at all.” Georgia refused to let it go. “According to our books, the demons we’ve all been sired by answer to the Devil. Since you were sired by him, it would stand to reason that the Dark Moths should answer to you.” She covered her mouth. “Can you imagine how Wrythe must be feeling? I mean you basically outrank him.”

What she’d said made me sick to my stomach. “The Devil is still a demon. He sired me, and he will still be hunting me after my birthday tomorrow.” I dipped another fry in catsup and shoved it in my mouth. “I don’t outrank anyone, especially not Wrythe.” I wanted to be done talking about this and eat in peace.

“Can he die?” Pam asked, crossing her arms and leaning forward. I appreciated that she’d changed the subject even if it was just slightly. She’d pulled her dark hair, the same color as every other Moth’s, up into a bun, making her features appear extra angular.

Only Gilbert and I were still eating.

“He can die,” I said, picking at the cheese on my burger. I didn’t know that for sure, but I wanted to believe it. Had to believe it if I was going to stay alive.

No one spoke for a few moments and I used the opportunity to take a bite of my burger. It was delicious, just as I thought it would be. But my mind couldn’t focus on enjoying the food. Instead I thought about my father. He had to be able to die. Otherwise, my death was imminent, and I wasn’t ready to go yet. I’d only just discovered there were other kinds of supernatural creatures out there. Not just demons but vampires and angels and werewolves! That excited me, and I wanted to experience life outside the Demonland compound. I wanted more.

An image of Kade appeared in my mind. The way he looked when he pinned me in the corner just before we kissed. And then there was Wrythe. I didn’t know what was going on between him and me, but I felt something for him. All of these things were new and thrilling and I wanted to see where they led.

“I don’t know,” Gilbert said, interrupting my thoughts. He didn’t say more, just shoved a bite of his second burger into his mouth. The orange markings on his wrists came into view as he did.

“I guess we’ll see, won’t we,” Steve said, commenting for the first time.

Wendy patted my hand. “Princess or not… Whatever you are, you’re still our hero.” She made eye contact with the rest of the group.

“Absolutely,” Pam agreed. “Thank you.”

The others thanked me as well. They seemed sincere, but I felt completely self-conscious, and decided to change the subject back onto them.

“Where did the Devil take you?” I gulped as fear crept into Georgia’s eyes. “I mean did he hurt you?” I hoped not. Now that I had their attention, I didn’t know if I wanted to know the truth.

The tone of them immediately shifted from gratitude to pain and I regretted my question. But it was too late. And it was for the best I hear what they had to say.

Leif who kept quiet during our meal and conversation looked at me like he would say something, but Wendy spoke first.

“It wasn’t pleasant.” She cleared her throat. “It was probably easier for me than others though.”

A ghost of a shadow passed over Pam’s face. “I was alone in what looked like a cave. Light shone in from somewhere.” She shook her head. “I never figured out where. Not that it matters. At first, I thought the cave was made of rocks, but after a while the rocks moved. And when the light went out, that’s when I saw the eyes. Thousands of them all around me.” She picked up her napkin and started tearing it to shreds. “That and the smell were bad enough, but then they began to talk. Whispering things about me that no one knew.”

Wendy reached behind me and placed a comforting hand on Pam’s shoulder.

Pam went on. “Sometimes the tracker demons came into the room. They would poke at me with their claws, most of the time drawing blood. One time,” she paused and shuddered before continuing. “One of them licked my face with its long tongue and its slobber got into my mouth and eyes.” She made a face and I thought she might lose her dinner. But she swallowed several times. “It told me how delicious I tasted. Then he cut into my neck and licked my blood off the tip of his nail.” She stopped talking. A sharp perusal of the others revealed they’d been through something similar.

“I thought I would die in that hole,” Steve said. His face turned ashen. “They came in one after the other and would say things and do things…” He trailed off, grabbing at his marks. “They thought it especially fun to take their time torturing me, telling me that since my sire was a Sloth demon, it made sense for them to move more slowly

so they could draw out the pain.

Gilbert made a noise. I glanced over and saw his eyes roll into the back of his head for a moment before he squeezed them eyes shut. “They would stuff… things, I don’t know what,” he paused. “But they put them in my mouth and forced me to chew them and swallow. When I retched onto the floor, they laughed and joked before picking it up and forcing it back into my mouth.” He crossed his arms, pulling them tight against his chest. “When the demons weren’t around, water dripped from the ceiling, a constant, painful thunk against my bare feet.”

“Right,” Pam said. “Because they kept us hung by the ankles upside down the whole time.” Pam shook her head as her eyes turned haunted. Then she sat up straight. “But we survived. And after the stories we read in class of all the ways the royal demons tortured their offspring, I think,” she stopped as though she had to force the next part from her lips, “we got off easy. Thanks to Alice.” She tried to smile, but her teeth chattered.

They’d all been traumatized. Because of me. And it was worse than I could’ve imagined. “I’m…” Saying how sorry I was didn’t feel like enough. Not by a long shot. “I know it might seem empty, but I am truly and sincerely sorry you had to go through that.” As I spoke, I met the eyes of each trainee—at least those that would. Steve and Gilbert kept their faces turned down toward their plates. And even Gilbert no longer seemed hungry.

“It wasn’t your fault, Alice,” Wendy said, patting my back. “We know that. The Society allowed you to be part of the Trial of Three and the Devil made you do this. If you hadn’t killed our demon sires, we would all be dead.”

“Right, I mean this way at least we were only tortured,” Georgia added, but I sensed the anger in her tone. Anger at me. “I wouldn’t have had to endure them peeling off pieces of my skin and eating it while I watched. Or seen them laugh as I writhed in pain, making bets on how long it would take me to heal before they could go again.

When I finally did heal, golden coins were exchanged right in front of me." She raised her hands as if trying to grasp those phantom coins, and the gold markings on her wrists seemed to grow brighter. "The places they hadn't skinned, they would slice open and insert the coins into my body. Doc had quite the time removing them," she added, her voice hoarse.

"Georgia…" I began. She glared. I stopped, straining to find the words that would express how awful I felt for all they had suffered.

"I know," she hissed. "You're sorry. So, so sorry." She looked away. "You should be."

"Georgia," Wendy said, her anger evident.

"I won't apologize to her. I can't help the way I feel."

"It's fine. Really. Georgia, you're welcome to your feelings and I appreciate your honesty." I felt so mature saying that to her, though part of me didn't appreciate her honesty, not in the slightest. But I needed to hear what happened to them. It fueled my anger toward the Devil and reinforced my knowledge that his death would be best for everyone.

Leif looked at me then. His eyes were haunted. Since his sire was Lust, I shuddered to think what they did to him. "Leif, did you want __"

"Alice!" Wrythe yelled my name from across the room, causing me to jump.

Beside me, Wendy jumped, too. Everyone in the cafeteria ceased talking and turned to look at me.

I stood, worry furrowing my brow. If he weren't King of the Dark Moths I would've lost my temper at the way he bellowed at me in front of the whole group. But I held my tongue.

He pointed at me and then indicated the hall. "My office. Now."

I'd forgotten we were supposed to meet. "Crap," I said when the doors closed behind him.

“And the fact that our *king* caters to her.” Gilbert pulled a pickle from one of his half a dozen remaining sandwiches and flung it on his tray. “It’s disgusting in my opinion.”

“I thought we all agreed Alice did nothing wrong,” Wendy said, her hands on her hips, an elbow jabbing into my side.

“Whatever,” Gilbert said, refusing to look at me.

Wendy turned to me and I got relief from her protruding elbow. “What was that all about?” Before I could answer, she faced Gilbert again. “The way Wrythe just shouted at her, it doesn’t seem like he’s “catering” at all.”

Gilbert made a face but didn’t argue further.

Wendy rolled her eyes and then looked at me. “Why is he upset?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, standing. No sense telling them that along with everything else, the king had seen something black and shiny surrounding me when I fought the Greed demon.

“Well, you’d better hurry up and find out,” Steve said. “If we keep you, Wrythe will probably blame us.” His words were laced with disdain. Even though they were grateful I’d saved them, it wouldn’t be easy to forget their tortured captivity. Not only that, but somehow, they blamed Wrythe for what had happened to them as well. It was incredible to me that they were showing the man who’d given them everything so little respect. The unfairness of it all made me angry, and I felt the stirrings of that power course through me. But I pulled it back. They had a right to their feelings. They’d been through a trauma I couldn’t understand, and all because of my trial.

“Whatever you did, don’t let him take it out on us,” Gilbert added, grabbing the uneaten fries off my plate. Apparently his momentary aversion to food had already vanished. He shoved my fries in his mouth and picked up one of the burgers on his plate, taking a bite of that as well.

I picked up my tray, trying to act like I wasn’t worried. “I won’t,” I promised.

“Thanks for sitting by me,” Wendy said, sorrow furrowing her features. Apparently, she’d hoped for a friendlier meeting.

“Anytime,” I responded, leaving the table. But before I got too far, I heard Georgia whisper something awful under her breath. It sounded like some of them were back to calling me the Queen of Hearts behind my back. My shoulders slumped in dejection a moment before I remembered all that was at stake. I didn’t have time to mope or feel bad for myself. Rolling back my shoulders, I took my tray to the conveyor belt, dumped things where they needed to go, and exited the cafeteria.

OceanofPDF.com

I KNEW I shouldn't be nervous about seeing Wrythe. I'd seen him plenty in the last week. We'd fought side by side. The king had my back on more than one occasion. But as I got closer to his office, my nerves were on edge and my pulse quickened. He wasn't Kade. With Kade, there was kissing and more kissing and wanting more. So much more. When he wasn't around, it hurt to breathe, a permanent weight. I didn't want to try to live without Kade. Even though I knew I should. His back and forth drove me mad.

Wrythe, on the other hand… My feelings for him were more difficult to explain. I found him attractive and was attracted to him. He was kind, courageous, caring. Any woman would be lucky to have him, but I couldn't see myself as that woman. A picture of the sultry Lily came to mind. She looked like the type of woman Wrythe would want. I was just a child by comparison. Naïve when it came to the carnal needs of a man. With Kade, my lustful desires overruled all other emotions and I forgot to care that I was inexperienced. With Wrythe, I was well aware of what I lacked.

Someone said my name, pulling me from my thoughts.

I glanced in the direction of two trainees. They walked close together, staring at me.

"Do I have something on my face?" I asked, sounding pithy.

"No, but I'm guessing you have something on your heart," one of them said.

"If she even has one," the other whispered. They both laughed, moving on.

My mouth hung open in shock before I caught myself and closed it. The other trainees had always treated me like I was odd, but they'd never been quite so rude before. Ignoring the pang that shot through my heart, I held my head high, making my way to Wrythe's office. As

I went, I passed several more trainees. They looked away when I tried to make eye contact, whispering to each other. Some pointing. Others laughing. Like I had three heads shooting from my shoulders or a giant eye in the middle of my forehead. I had an idea about why they were whispering. Surely, it had to do with who my father was. I hadn't told anyone, but somehow everyone in the compound knew.

"Alice," Gage, the Greed Society councilmember said when he saw me. "Where are you off to?" His face was full of accusation, like I should be anywhere but in the hall I walked.

I edged closer to the opposite wall, not in the mood for another confrontation. "King Wrythe's office," I responded. "He asked to see me."

"Better hurry then." Gage passed me by without another word.

As I went, my ears popped, and my eyes began to water. I rubbed an ear, thinking my body was responding to the way the other Moths were treating me. After several minutes I knew that wasn't it, but something else. I glanced back the way I'd come, hoping to see other trainees or Gage, but the hallway was completely empty in every direction. It was only me. Alone.

Facing forward, I picked up speed, but the next corner didn't get any closer. It was as though I ran in place. "What's happening?"

In answer to my question, a white rabbit came around the corner and stopped, his big, shiny eyes holding mine. His pink nose wiggled, causing the whiskers on his face to dance erratically.

"Not again," I said, my shoulders slumping.

"Alice, where have you been?" He took his watch from his powder blue jacket pocket, checking the time. Seeing it, he jumped high into the air so that his long ears nearly touched the ceiling. "We're late. Late. Late. Late." He hopped toward me a few steps, waving his white paw, urging me forward." Let's go."

"Oh no. No way. I'm not following you again." I turned back, heading the way I'd come.

“Alice,” he hissed.

I kept walking away from him, holding up a hand. “Nope.” The last time I’d followed the rabbit, the Devil had taken my friends and made me kill their sires in exchange for their lives, claiming it was part of my Trial of Three. And then he’d told me he was my father, making my already frustrating life nearly unbearable.

Killing the demon sires had only been the first trial, the physical challenge. That meant my dear old dad intended to tell me what my second trial would be. The emotional trial. I already felt overwhelmed. I wasn’t ready to add an emotional trial into the mix. No way.

“You must come, Alice.” The rabbit’s voice was wary, and I turned around in time to see him pulling on his ears.

“Why?” I asked, drawing out the inevitable.

“If you don’t come on your own, there are those…” The rabbit paused at a high shrieking. It sounded like it came from everywhere all at once. The walls started to ripple, and hideous faces tried to force their way out. As if they were connected to a rubber band, the faces pressed against the chair-railed walls, receded momentarily before pushing back out again. The howling apparitions were everywhere, all at once, reaching out toward me. Several brushed against my arms and hands. The harder they pushed, the more of their bodies appeared.

The rabbit hopped back to the corner and paused, waiting. “Hurry. They won’t stay contained much longer.” His eyes darted around at all the faces and figures. He was more terrified than I was, but it seemed he couldn’t leave without me, even though it was obvious he wanted to.

Several faces and appendages had broken through the walls, their blistered fingers brushing against my bare skin. “Fine.” I began to run, pushing past the outstretched arms. The smell of burning flesh filled the room. When I reached the rabbit, he turned the corner and I

followed. But we were no longer in a hall. We were no longer in the compound at all.

I tripped over a rock. “Where are we?” I asked the question but had my answer already. This was the same dirty, holey tunnel I’d climbed through during my first time following the rabbit. Frustrated, I scrabbled over roots and kicked through dirt. The rabbit stayed just ahead, his fluffy, white tail bouncing along. “Great. This is super.” The whole affair was frustrating, especially since this time I knew where I was being led.

“What is?” the rabbit asked seemingly unconcerned with my temper tantrum as he continued through the brambles and roots.

“We’re back in a hole. How quaint. How exciting. How—” A large, black scorpion dropped onto my arm. I screamed, brushing it off, its pincers clicking rapidly as it hit the dirt floor and scuttled away. “Freaking great,” I grumbled, picking up the pace.

“That’s more like it.” The rabbit jumped ahead, disappearing behind an enormous root.

“Wait!” I pushed on. What kind of a tree could be attached to such a thing?

The rabbit poked his head around and grumbled. “We’re late. Hurry.”

“I am,” I said, clawing my way forward. It was difficult though and by the time I reached the spot where the rabbit had been, I had bloodied fingers. *Irritating rabbit!*

Ahead, the tunnel ended abruptly at a black door with a golden knob. The door wasn’t more than four feet tall. Letting out a sigh of relief, I reached the rabbit just as he opened the door and went through. I followed, squatting and walking like a duck to get through.

My senses recognized the place. Across the room was a large throne, my father seated upon it. His chin rested on the palm of one hand, his forefinger pressed against his temple. He appeared to be deep in thought. Or bored.

“It took you long enough,” he snapped at the rabbit.

“She’s slow. Only half demon,” the rabbit responded, pulling his watch from his now dirtied waistcoat, glancing at it, and tucking it away. He made his way over to the Devil, climbing the steps before disappearing behind the throne.

“Very well,” my father said, before turning his attention to me. “It’s lovely to see you, Alice. Are you ready to begin your second trial?”

I wasn’t. Not at all. I breathed through my mouth, trying not to smell the putrefying flesh of the menial demons that were pressed like wallpaper against the walls. “Sure,” I said, forcing myself to shrug, unable to stop myself from looking at the menial rats once in a while.

“Excellent.” He rose, his long black jacket flowing out behind him like a cape. He wore black boots, black pants, and a black shirt as well. This time there was a golden crown sitting on his head. I wanted to say he looked ridiculous, but he didn’t. The man was handsome, and the crown suited him.

Each step he took toward me I copied, except I stepped away, until my back pressed against the door. A palpable force surrounded him, an oozing evil, and I didn’t want any part of it. In the back of my mind I noted that as his daughter I should’ve been able to tolerate the evil. At least to a small degree. But it took everything I had to keep my eyes trained on him.

He noticed what I was doing. “You seem uneasy, but you shouldn’t be. Not after the demons you’ve slayed.” When he was no more than two feet away, he stopped and shook his head as though disappointed in me. Not that I was surprised.

Crossing his arms, he rocked back on his heels. “The second trial is emotional and it’s a doozy,” he began without preamble. “You see, my dear Alice, you must make a sacrifice and choose who lives and who will die.”

“I don’t want anyone to die,” I said, working to get a handle on my

racing heart. I'd already killed the sires so the trainees wouldn't have to fight them.

"Oh, but someone must. That's the nature of the trial. The choice you make will say a lot about you." He snapped his fingers.

Wrythe appeared at his right. He was shirtless, which surprised me seeing as I had just seen him a few minutes ago in the cafeteria and he'd been fully dressed. Regardless, his muscled torso glistened with what appeared to be sweat. His long, dark hair hung loosely around his face. Anger rippled across his features, but there was something tender in his eyes, a combination of relief and more, but I couldn't internally debate what that might be. Wrythe flexed, his muscles straining and that's when I noticed he was chained to the wall like a menial rat. "Alice," he said in obvious confusion. "Where am I?"

The Devil smiled, and a shiver ran down my spine. "You, Wrythe, are deep below Demonland. In my lair. I call it Underland, but you can call it Hell."

I took a step toward Wrythe. Surely, I should save him. He was my king.

"Stay where you are, daughter." The Devil held up a hand.

I stopped. "Wrythe?"

"You've been gone a week. I've been worried. Peter, the rest of the Society, and the other trainees have been searching for you. Heathcliff even had his… unspeakable otherworldly miscreants try to find you." He pursed his lips like he'd just tasted something terrible. "I had to speak with a… dragon. It was beyond unpleasant."

I shook my head at thoughts of a dragon, but I focused on time. "That can't be. I just left the compound a few moments ago."

He shook his head. "It's been seven days. We thought—" He glanced at the Devil and didn't go on.

"That can't be," I began, but the Devil interrupted me.

"Enough chit-chat!" He glared at Wrythe.

“Whatever your plan, this is not the way to accomplish it, Deckland,” Wrythe said through gritted teeth.

Irritation flashed through me. Why wouldn’t Wrythe call my father what he was, the Devil, instead of using his stupid human name.

“Actually, it’s the perfect plan, especially since I know your feelings for her,” the Devil said. He clucked his tongue. “Rest assured, she feels something for you as well, though I don’t believe those feelings are as strong as the ones she has for this one.” He snapped his fingers and Kade appeared on the other side of him.

Dread filled my stomach at the sight of him. Kade had on a white shirt, jeans, and black combat boots. His light hair looked wet and hung in his eyes. Unlike Wrythe, Kade didn’t seem surprised to be chained at the wrists.

“Kade. I’m so sorry.” I started toward him, but the Devil grabbed my arm.

“Don’t worry, Alice. Kade is well aware of what is going on. He understands the part he has to play.” Deckland spoke of Kade as though they were familiar. They’d been together at the restaurant. I remembered that, but I couldn’t comprehend it. How did the Devil and Kade fit together? Kade seemed so full of light while the Devil… definitely wasn’t.

“How do you two know each other?” I couldn’t help but ask the question.

“You know the saying, keep your friends close and your enemies closer?” The Devil asked.

Of course I’d heard of that saying. At least once, anyway.

“Well,” he went on before I had the chance to answer. “Kade and I are the dearest of enemies. We need each other the way a moth needs a flame, the way peanut butter needs jelly, macaroni needs cheese…” He chuckled at his own cleverness, walking back to his throne. He sat, crossing one leg over the other. Wrythe and Kade had been dragged along behind him, as though they were tethered to my father by an

invisible string.

“What does that mean?” The more he explained, the more confused I became.

“It doesn’t matter,” he tsked. “Now, let’s discuss rules.” As he spoke, the menial demons gnashed their teeth, whispering their hatred for the rules.

“No rules.”

“Dash the rules.”

“Eat the rules.”

“Squash the rules.”

I fought to ignore them, determinedly approaching my father. “The rules be damned. I won’t choose between the two of them. I won’t! I don’t care what your rules are.” I crossed my arms and stomped my foot. I knew I was acting like a child, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Alice,” Kade whispered, shaking his head slowly.

Wrythe cursed under his breath.

“Pay attention,” the Devil snapped, eyeing me coldly. When I refocused on him, he smiled. “You won’t choose?”

“No.”

He steepled his fingers, studying me intently. “The rules are simple. One must live, and one must die. But, if you refuse to make a choice, then all of the Dark Moths, all the trainees, and the Moth children will die. And it will be your fault.” He shrugged as though he couldn’t care less one way or another. Death was all he was interested in. That and suffering. “But if that is your decision, I suppose I can accommodate it as well.” He stood, and a glittering black door appeared out of thin air. He went to it.

“Where are you going? What do you mean?” He was the Devil, I told myself. Surely he lied. No one possessed that kind of power. Not even him.

“I’ve explained myself, Alice.” His evil eyes tore into me and I saw

the truth of his words. “You agreed to the Trial of Three. And with that agreement comes unbreakable conditions.”

I wanted to taunt him, to tell him I was shocked even the Devil had limits, but my better judgment told me not to. I looked at Wrythe, my eyes pleading. There had to be another way.

“He’s right. You must complete each trial. Otherwise all will be lost,” Wrythe said.

My heart lurched. That meant either he or Kade had to die. And I had to choose which of them it would be. I couldn’t make such a decision. It was beyond my ability to fathom.

The Devil was at the door, and he turned the knob. “I know you care for both of them. I can feel it within you. But that’s why this is an emotional trial. Your heart will tell you one thing while your head will demand another.” He glanced at Wrythe and then Kade. “Or maybe I have it wrong. Maybe you’ll come to your senses and realize neither of them deserve you.” He seemed to grow two feet taller as he spoke. “You are my daughter after all.”

When I didn’t respond, he rolled back his shoulders. “You have one week to decide who will die. Choose.” He pushed open the door, stepping through the doorframe, his glittering blue eyes never leaving mine. “Seven days and then I’ll come for you. You’ll either tell me who will die, or you’ll watch as every mutt goes up in flames.”

“Don’t do this. Wait. Please. This is too much. I can’t do this.” As I spoke, the menial demons chittered and squealed. The room rippled and shimmered like I was looking at a mirage in the desert.

“Wrythe.” I ran toward him just as he vanished. I turned to Kade, but he was already gone. “I can’t,” I said, closing my eyes.

When I opened them, I was back at the compound, standing in the same hall I’d been in before following the rabbit. The hall was empty, for which I was grateful as an overwhelming wave of devastation rushed through me. I fell to my knees, covering my face with my hands. Bitter, hot tears burned my cheeks and stung my eyes. How

would I ever decide between them? The Devil had given me an impossible task.

I thought about running away, but a second later I knew I couldn't. That would only condemn the other Moths. Wrythe could help. I needed to see him. Not quite running, I traveled the length of the hall and turned the corner.

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN I REACHED Wrythe's office, I raised my fist to knock but paused. What if Wrythe didn't know what'd happened in the Devil's throne room a few moments ago? Or what if he did and he was gone? Like the trainees in the first trial, what if the Devil had Kade and Wrythe imprisoned elsewhere?

I lowered my fist. How was I going to do it? One man was my king and the other… I didn't know what he was, but I couldn't imagine losing either of them. Sighing, I prepared to knock but paused again when I heard voices coming from the other side of the door. Wrythe was in there but he wasn't alone

Glancing both ways down the hall to make sure I was still alone; I carefully leaned my ear against the door.

"She's the Devil's daughter, Wrythe." It sounded like Gwen, the Gluttony councilmember.

"I know, but what would you have me do? She saved those trainees' lives. She slayed their sires like they were menial demons. She should be applauded as a hero," Wrythe returned, his voice low and gravelly.

"She saved them, yes. But at some point, she could turn around and use them as bait in her own game. Or worse. I mean, have you thought about the implications? I'm beginning to wonder if she should even be allowed in the compound." That sounded like Lily.

"What do you think, Peter? You've spent the most time with her. Do you believe she's a threat to the Dark Moth Society, or me?" That was Wrythe. He still sounded like he couldn't believe what they were discussing, and I was grateful.

"Well, sire…" Peter paused.

My heart raced like it would run out of my chest. Did Peter believe

me dangerous? If I looked at it from their point of view, I could understand their point. The Devil had demanded the demise of either Wrythe or Kade. If I chose Wrythe, his death could send the Society into chaos. Who would lead us if not Wrythe? Obviously, the Devil knew that, which was why Wrythe was one of my choices. And Kade? Well, he'd claimed my heart and soul. I loved him in a way I'd never believed possible.

Love! Had I really just thought that? But it was true. In that same moment, I knew I loved Wrythe, too, though not in the same way as Kade. For some reason, that line of thinking brought up my mother. I'd never known her, didn't even know what she looked like, but I couldn't help wondering if she'd loved me.

"I like Alice," Peter continued, cutting through my tumbling thoughts. "But if what you've told us is true—if the Devil is going to make her choose—then I have to agree with Lily. Alice is a threat. And not just to you, but to the whole Society and our way of life. We can't have that."

"You see, sire, even Peter agrees the girl must be put down. Now. Before she makes a decision." Lily again. I was beginning to dislike the Lust councilwoman more and more every second.

"I didn't say we should kill her! For crying out loud, Lily," Peter said. "She's a person! And personally, I like her." He cleared his throat. "But the Devil has put us in a predicament. Something must be done. I saw the way she behaved around the boy, Kade. And if I'm right and Alice has feelings for him, then she might choose him over you."

"I don't believe that," Wrythe said. "We're family. But if you must lay blame for this predicament on anyone, then it should be on us. We're the ones who agreed to let her go through the Trial of Three. It's our fault we are in this mess."

"Maybe so," Peter said, "But I've watched strong kingdoms filled with loving families crumble and degrade over much less."

Peter had a point, but I didn't like it. This situation was impossible. I pressed my nails into the palms of my hands, drawing blood. The Devil had pitted me against the only family I'd ever known. And the Dark Moth Society would come after me. No doubt about it. They would be careless not to.

"That we allowed her to submit to the Trials was a mistake, without a doubt, but that doesn't mean we should make more errors by allowing her to continue to live. Doing so would be irresponsible," Skye, the Sloth councilmember said.

"I agree we shouldn't have allowed her to participate in the Trials. I didn't appreciate her for who and what she is," Wrythe began, but Gwen cut him off.

"We did what we thought was best for the Society as a whole. It was wrong and now we must correct the error and put her down, as Lily suggested. There is no other way."

"It's horrible to be thinking of killing someone we've trained and taught for so many years," Lily started, her voice like poisoned syrup. "She really is like our daughter, but we have to think of the Society as a whole, Wrythe, dear. She could destroy everything we've created or worse."

What could be worse than total destruction, I thought, torn between wanting to go in there and rip Lily's head off and curling up in the fetal position and rocking myself through the pain.

"Don't be so dramatic," Wrythe said and I cheered internally. At least one person in that room didn't want my demise.

"I'm not being dramatic. Everyone in the compound will agree when I say she is a nuisance, a stain on our way of life. She must be snuffed out." Lily shouted the last part and I flinched.

"And what about you, Ewan?" Wrythe asked the Envy council member. "You've been quiet throughout this conversation, but I need your vote."

"Well, sire, I'm with the majority. Alice must die," he said quietly.

“Thank you. I appreciate your opinions, all of them,” Wrythe said, his anger radiating through the door. “That is why we have this council, but as King, I have the final say, and I absolutely refuse to kill Alice. No more discussion!” I jumped at the sharp bite in his words. “Peter,” he continued, “Search the archives. There must be a way to reverse the Trials.”

“Yes, sire.”

“The rest of you hold tight and if you see Alice, you will treat her with the utmost respect.”

Mumbled responses filtered through the door.

“I will talk to Alice myself, get her thoughts on the whole business. Perhaps there is a way…” I didn’t catch the rest because he lowered his voice. I knew whatever they were saying, it wouldn’t bode well for me.

And that knowledge filled me with sadness. But I had another choice. I could let the sadness swallow me or get myself together and fight this second trial. Deciding on the second, I straightened. My path was clear. Because despite what Lily, the others, or even Peter wanted, I knew Wrythe wouldn’t allow them to kill me. Without a doubt I knew it. But that didn’t change the fact that I was royally screwed. And Wrythe might be outvoted or worse. Hopefully, Peter would find a way out of this mess, but I couldn’t sit back and let them do all the work. I needed to find a solution on my own.

“I have to!” The words burned in my mouth, determined. Without a doubt, I knew I wouldn’t find the answers in Demonland. Even if I could, I had a feeling the Society members wouldn’t let me. Every move, every breath I took would be scrutinized. Plus, I wouldn’t put it past Lily or the others to just end the whole situation and kill me in my sleep. I needed to escape and I needed to do it now.

Quietly I moved away from the door. By now it was clear the week had passed just as Wrythe said. I still had seven more days until I had to make a choice and I didn’t intend to waste them. A plan began to

formulate in my mind. With that knowledge driving me, I ran to my room. On the shelf in my closet rested a black leather backpack. I took it and opened it. Then threw in some clothes as well as underclothes from my chest of drawers. From the top drawer of my dresser, I grabbed my wallet. I didn't have much money. We had no need of it in Demonland, but there was enough. At least I hoped so.

After tucking it in the front pocket of my pack, I went to the place between my mattresses where I'd hidden the journal Heathcliff gave me.

Answers lay within those pages or at least a way to find help. I could feel it in my bones.

Once I had everything, I cinched up my backpack and threw it over one shoulder. Peeking through the doorway, I checked the hallway, but before I left the confines of my room, I encountered my first problem. The only way out of the compound was the elevator. And the only way to ride the elevator up into Wonderland was with Peter's key. Taking several deep breaths, I started down the hall toward Peter's room, grateful most everyone was either training or in class. Hearing voices a ways off, I sped up. At the door leading to the teachers' quarters, I glanced in through the small window. Gage was coming, but he was distracted, talking on his phone. In a dash, I ran back down the hall toward the trainee rooms and around the corner. Curiously, I took a quick peek. He was still on his phone and headed in the opposite direction, toward the cafeteria. After several long seconds, I carefully walked back to the door, peeked in, and seeing the teachers' hallway empty, opened the door.

I hadn't ever been inside Peter's room, but I knew which one was his from the day I arrived at the compound many years ago. The door was unlocked and I carefully went in, feeling only the slightest bit of guilt before pushing it aside.

His room was cluttered. Books, scrolls, papers, clothes, and weapons lay everywhere. This didn't look like the room of a man whose sire was a Pride demon. I shrugged it off and started through

the drawers at his desk. “I need that key,” I whisper-shouted, picking up a thick tome and shaking the pages. A folded piece of paper fell out. I stared at it a moment and without overthinking, put it in my pocket. Then I moved on to his closet and finally his sock drawer. As I went, I put everything back in its place exactly as I found it. Doing so would keep them from knowing of my search and give me extra time.

After picking through a pile of clothes on the floor in one corner, I stood, trying not to panic, but with little success. If I couldn’t escape through the elevator, there was nowhere I could hide in Demonland that they wouldn’t find me. I had to get out. I had to! My breathing came erratically as I spun in circles, searching for something that would shout out at me that the key was inside. A purple jacket hung on the back of his door. I studied it a moment. It looked like one he would wear to go above ground.

“Maybe,” I said, hoping against hope it was in there.

I checked one pocket and came up empty. Then the other. My fingers wrapped around cold steel. Desperate to believe, I slowly pulled it out.

“The key,” I said, tears of joy stinging my eyes. I tucked it in my pocket and was about to open the door when I heard voices.

“She wasn’t in the training room or the cafeteria. Did you check her room?”

It was Peter!

Frantic, I searched for a place to hide.

My mind was buzzing.

The closet? I ran to get in but changed my mind. I wouldn’t fit.

What about under his desk? There was an opening where the chair slid in, but it went all the way through and they’d see me there for sure.

Peter was at the door. The knob began to turn.

The bed! my mind screamed. And I dove under it just as Peter came

in.

“What if she isn’t in her room?” he asked.

I watched as two sets of feet came in. One set belonged to Peter and the other belonged to Wrythe. I’d know those black combat boots with white skulls painted on the sides anywhere.

“I hope she isn’t.” As Wrythe spoke, he walked over to the bed.

“We need to keep tabs on her at all times, but first we need to know what she’s thinking.” Peter’s voice was arrogant and filled with pride.

“No, Peter, we need to let her complete her trial. Whatever the outcome. If we don’t then we all will be in grave danger. She either chooses one of us or every other Moth dies.” Wrythe sat on the bed. For a moment I thought he might know I was under there, but that was impossible.

“I can’t believe he would do that.” Peter sounded confident. “He simply isn’t strong enough. It’s nothing but a ploy to rack against her emotions. It’s a trial, it isn’t real.” He huffed several times, taking off his shoes and changing them. “I mean, where would be the fun in that if he killed us all? And isn’t that why the demons created us? For their fun. But if she chooses the boy—”

“Then it’ll be the right choice, Peter. Even if, as you say, Deckland’s only testing her. If that’s the case, I don’t think he’ll kill either Kade or myself.” Wrythe’s fingers appeared below the bedframe and directly in my line of vision as he casually tapped the bed. There was something in his hands.

He knew I was there!

I covered my mouth with a hand, desperate not to freak out or scream.

He tapped his hand against the frame again and I realized he wanted me to take whatever he held in his hand. I carefully scooted forward and reached out.

“We cannot take that chance, sire. The Dark Moths cannot survive without you,” Peter said, and I hesitated.

“Stop trying to blow smoke up my ass. Of course it can survive!” He tossed whatever was in his hand under the bed. It struck me in the cheek before hitting the ground. Then he stood. “Life always continues. Even if I’m not around, the Earth will keep spinning and the Dark Moth Society will continue training and saving regular Moths from their demon sires.” He opened the door. “We have more pressing matters to deal with. I know there is something disturbing going on between Lily and Gage. More than worrying about Alice, we need to discover their plans, and dole out whatever consequences are necessary.”

“You really believe they could be up to something traitorous?” Peter went to his desk and rummaged around.

“Absolutely. Now let’s go see what Cook’s got to eat. I’m hungry.”

“Again?” Peter sighed and then followed the king from the room.

“Always,” Wrythe said, shutting the door behind him.

Once they were gone, I held my breath, momentarily terrified Wrythe would tell Peter where I was hidden. After waiting several minutes, I exhaled and crawled out, taking the small, dark orb Wrythe had thrown and tucking it in my pocket. I would look at it more closely when I had the chance, but it felt like a smooth pebble.

Carefully, I opened the door and peered out. The hall was empty. Quickly, I ran toward the exit, through the door, and slid to a stop once I reached the elevator. Taking the key, I turned it in its slot. The hum of the elevator grated against my ears.

Someone will hear, I thought, wishing I had my katana. There wasn’t a single person in the compound (except maybe Lily) I wanted to kill, but I didn’t have a problem wounding them. I would fight Demonland’s residents until my last breath if it meant I could escape this place.

I had to.

The elevator door pinged open. I stepped in and turned just as Pam and Wendy rounded the corner.

“Alice,” Wendy called, raising her hand in greeting.

I returned the wave, trying to look casual. “Come on. Come on. Come on,” I muttered under my breath, pushing the button that would take me to the surface over and over again.

“She’s leaving without Peter or Wrythe,” Pam said. “I think she’s running away.”

“That isn’t like Alice.” But Wendy walked faster, then began to trot.

“Close already,” I said, willing the elevator door to shut.

“Alice,” Wendy said, stopping in front of the elevator just as the doors completely closed.

I heaved a sigh of relief, sensing freedom.

At the top, the doors pinged open again and I was in the parking garage in Wonderland, Arizona. The concrete structure immediately calmed me. Freedom. I breathed in, happier than ever before to be above ground. No one knew who I was up here.

Readjusting the pack on my back, I started toward the exit and the fading sunlight. “Where to begin?”

OceanofPDF.com

THEY WOULD COME AFTER ME, of that I was certain. Because of me, the Dark Moths' king might die. And we Dark Moths lived by a code. Sewn into that code and ingrained within our very bones was the need to keep our king alive. No matter the cost. From the talk I'd overheard between Wrythe and the other Society members and then Wrythe and Peter, something was going on that went deeper than just my trial. I had no doubt Lily would never not stop trying to kill me and it sounded like she wasn't the only one.

I needed to get somewhere safe, somewhere out of the way. But I had no idea where to begin.

Away, my mind screamed. In the distance a horn honked long and loud. Cars travelled the streets and several passed me as I moved through the garage. Occasionally I heard the loud thumping of music.

Beside me, a man with graying hair and wearing a tan button up shirt rolled down his car window. "Hey, need a ride?"

"No, thanks." I kept walking. The car followed, and I picked up the pace, climbing over a steel rail and lifting myself up to the next level. Jogging, I exited the garage, glancing back to make sure the man hadn't somehow made his way up to me unnoticed.

"Spare some change?" A man with no teeth was seated to the right of the exit. His clothes were filthy as were his face and hair.

"Sure." I unzipped the front pocket of my pack and pulled out some change. "Here you go," I said, holding out my hand.

He looked me up and down, eyeing me greedily. Moving faster than I would've believed possible, he stood from his cross-legged position on the ground and held a knife to my throat. "I'll take the whole pack," he said. His breath smelled of dead animal and something else. Antiseptic, maybe?

Wrath burned just beneath my skin as the blazing late afternoon sun burned the rest of me. Sweat beaded along my upper lip and along the edges of my bra. “You can’t have it,” I said, forcing myself to stay calm. There was no need for anger. This man was nothing compared to what I’d fought during the last week.

“And you think you can stop me from taking it?” He pressed the knife harder against my skin. Wetness trickled from beneath the blade. My wrath grew. I didn’t have time for this.

“Absolutely,” I growled, grabbing the hand holding the knife and bending it back at the wrist until bone snapped. He cried out in pain, dropping the knife. I picked it up, aiming the dirty tip at him. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“Why can’t the human race see how awful my life is and give me a break?” He held his wrist against his stomach, cradling it in his other hand. Giant tears streaked his face, making him look like a clown.

I wanted to be cruel and tell him I’d already given him a break in the form of his broken wrist and tell him what he actually needed was manners. Instead, I tucked his knife into my pack and started down the street.

“You should’ve killed me,” he sobbed. “I’ll be dead by the end of the day anyway.”

I stopped, heaving in the dry, hot Wonderland air. “Do you have a phone?” I asked, facing him.

He looked surprised. “No,” he said, but I could tell he lied.

“Look, if you have a phone, I can call you an ambulance. They can take you to a hospital.”

“Don’t bother. You’ve done enough already.” He turned his back on me and seated himself.

“Fine,” I said, suddenly tired. “Good luck.” I headed down the street, determined to get as far away from the parking garage as possible.

Each step took me further away from the Society threat in Demonland, but it also took me farther from my family. Depression slowly set in as I walked. A somberness followed by sadness. I was alone. No matter what I did, loneliness was my destiny. The knowledge sent me on a downward spiral. At that moment I would have given almost anything for a demon to fight. Battle always brought out the best in me. To keep my mind from the hurt, I went over how I'd slayed each of the demon sires, looking for things I could've done better. It worked and before I knew it, the sun was setting. I'd been walking aimlessly for hours.

Turning in a circle, I read the street signs. I was at the corner of Tweedledee and Tweedledum, but that gave me no more sense of direction. Across the street, a white van pulled up to a large warehouse. Familiarity caused me to search for the name of the building. It was the Mad Hatter, the club we'd gone to on Eric's birthday. My depression deepened, and I wondered if it would be better if the Society just killed me. Death would mean my fight was over. That didn't seem like such a bad thing at the moment.

A man climbed out of a large work truck wearing jeans and an old tee. He went around to the back and opened the double doors. After a few seconds, he pulled out a crate of bottles, causing them to jangle before setting them on the ground. He repeated the process several times. Watching him work made me think of Kade. Had he really held a regular job? He'd said he worked at The Caterpillar Place fixing cars, boats, and motorcycles. Was that true? I could try to find his work place and see if he still worked there. At the thought of seeing Kade, my heart raced.

But something told me the car shop was a lost cause. Still, it was better than nothing.

Unable to move, I imagined what it would be like to live in my own space. To get up each day and go to a job I loved. But it wasn't in my realm of understanding. I was born to slay demons and nothing more.

And I loved slaying demons, didn't I? It was all I'd ever known. I had a feeling that, given the chance, I might find something in the real world I could love too.

With a start, I noticed the man was staring at me, his hands raised in question. Embarrassed, I crossed the street, heading toward a fast food restaurant whose sign stood high above the building a little ways down.

Inside, cool air leeched the heat from my skin. There were only a few people eating and one at the counter, ordering. I got in line behind him. When it was my turn, I ordered a drink and fries.

The cashier rang me up. "Is that for here or to go?"

"Here." I grabbed my wallet, unzipping it, waiting for the total.

"That'll be two twenty-nine."

I counted out three ones and handed them over.

"Great," he said with a smile. "Just a moment."

I returned my wallet and waited off to the side while he scooped fries into a container and filled a cup with my drink before placing them both on a tray.

"Did you want sauce with that?"

"No, thanks." I took my tray to a seat near one of three visible exits and sat facing the windows. That way I could see everyone coming and going. Ignoring the food, I pulled the journal from my pack and opened it. The pages weren't numbered, so I began flipping through until I reached thirty-two. That had been where Heathcliff suggested I start.

The strange thing about his request was the page was blank. At least that's what I thought at first until I noticed several pages were stuck together. I carefully separated them, unable to help but look at the illustrations as I did. When I was done, I turned to page thirty-two. On it, a man was drawn in pen. He was the length of the page and looked normal enough, except for the wings protruding from his back.

Above him was a word I didn't know: C-H-A-Y-O-T. I sounded it out. Then I remembered Heathcliff's pronunciation of chayot. It sounded like coyote, but with a *ch* sound.

Next to the picture was a breakdown of what chayots were meant to do. In that moment, I decided to call them angels. It was easier. And their number one duty? *Protect humans*. Underneath the breakdown was a longer text with a quote from someone named Gabriel. "At all costs, the human race must come first." Beneath that was a list of the angels' powers:

Strength.

Agility.

Immortality.

It made sense they would be immortal. As I studied the page, a feeling of rightness came over me. Angels had to exist. They were the opposite demons. So why hadn't we been taught about them? Heathcliff said the Society knew about angels too, so why did they deliberately withhold information from us? Did they just not think we needed to know? Or more likely that we wouldn't live long enough to care.

I read over the page several times hoping to figure out why Heathcliff had suggested I start here first. What were his motives? I didn't know and since reading about the angels wasn't bringing me any closer to the answer I desperately needed, I continued through the pages until I reached the end.

On the final page was a name handwritten in pen: *Professor Pops*. Below the strange name was a phone number.

"That's something," I whispered. But how to get in touch with him? I didn't have a phone. I debated going back to the man near the parking garage and decided he would be my last resort.

All around me were people immersed in their phones. Surely someone would let me borrow one for a quick call. For several seconds I tried unsuccessfully to make eye contact. I wasn't a fan of

human confrontation, but taking a deep breath, I cleared my throat, and tried again, willing someone to look up and meet my gaze.

Finally, the only person not on a phone looked up from his food, and noticing me, smiled. He was pasty and slightly overweight, and his light brown hair was combed to one side and thinning. “Hi,” he said, getting up from his table next to mine and sitting across from me. “Did you need some help?”

I figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask him. “Would you happen to have a phone I could borrow?”

“Oh,” he said, touching his chest, checking the non-existent pocket on his pink polo shirt and then moving to his khaki pants. “You can, but I must’ve left it out in my car. Want me to go get it? Or you could come with me? Either way.” He slid out of the seat.

“Thanks, I’ll come out to your car with you.” There was no point wasting time. The sooner I called this Professor Pops guy, the better. The Society could already have Dark Moths in Wonderland looking for me, and I hadn’t gotten very far.

“Great. But what about your food?” He indicated my uneaten fries.

“Not hungry.”

“Alrighty.” He picked up his tray and I did the same. He threw away his trash, stacked his tray and then waited for me to do the same. I followed him out of the restaurant and into the parking lot. It was dark and the lights from the surrounding businesses had their lights on.

Everything changed in the dark.

He’d parked in the farthest parking spot near the back. And his car wasn’t actually a car but a van. The unassuming man didn’t look like he belonged to the van. No other cars were on this side of the building, leaving us alone.

“It’s in the back,” he said indicating the back of the van.

All sorts of alarm bells started going off in my head and I almost

laughed as I understood what he had planned for me. The man had no idea what he'd done. But if I let him take me then the Society wouldn't be able to follow, and I hoped wherever we went, the man would have a phone. So, I played along. "Well open it up and let's get this… I mean, let's get it."

He flinched at my tone and I looked away. "Sure. Okay," he said, opening one side. He was like a menial demon who'd zoned in on his prey and couldn't see anything but what he wanted, obviously ruled by greed and lust. "It's in here somewhere," he said. "Darn thing. I'm always losing it." He climbed in. "Found it."

"Great." I stayed put. No sense making my abduction easy on him. And I wanted room to maneuver if he pulled out a weapon.

"Did you want to climb in out of the heat? I'll turn on the van and get the air conditioning going." As he spoke, the car turned over, sending a large cloud of exhaust into the air beside me.

I rolled my eyes. If this guy was a serial killer or whatever, he was terrible at it. "How nice," I said, playing the part of a trusting teen, though I had a feeling there wasn't a single human teenager in all the world who would fall for his shenanigans. Either I was his first victim, or he was terribly off his game tonight.

As soon as I got inside, a needle pricked the side of my neck. Part of me wanted to head butt the man I'd dubbed Pasty and drop him off in front of the police station. Instead, I pretended that whatever he'd shot me up with had worked even though my demon metabolism wouldn't allow it to, and dropped onto the filthy, litter-strewn floor.

"Got her," he said, and I could swear he did a fist pump. "Now to take her back to my lair."

I forced myself not to laugh. No one had a lair, not even the Devil himself. I mean I guess it was a lair, but he didn't call it that. It took all of my self-control not to slap myself in the forehead in exasperation.

He clicked on his blinker before merging into traffic. I knew a

normal human would be scared, but I felt only relief. In a way, this bumbling man had done me a favor by taking me because if I didn't know where I was going, the Dark Moths wouldn't either. I would remember that and perhaps not punish him quite as much as he deserved.

He drove for at least thirty minutes, singing along with music from the radio without a care in the world. When the van stopped, and he got out, I turned so I could see him open the door and know whether he had a weapon or not. He didn't.

"Come on, little girlie. It's time to play doctor." He yanked me by the arms and threw me over his shoulder. I gritted my teeth at the uncomfortable position and fought back the urge to beat the dumb out of him.

We were inside an oversized garage. He walked us up a few steps and opened the door. "Hello, Mom," he called. "I'll be with you in just a few minutes." He sounded out of breath and I grinned to myself. I wasn't a waif, but a half demon full of muscle.

"Thank you," came the soft reply, probably from his mother.

He opened another door and flipped on a light before walking down a set of stairs. Huffing and puffing, he reached the bottom. The basement windows had all been covered and the room was dark, but only for a moment until he flipped on the lights. Where the upstairs looked like a house that'd been around since the seventies and never been dusted, down here was pristine. The walls were painted white, the floor was concrete with a large drain in the center. Along the walls were torture machines of all kinds. Off to one side were two aluminum tables. One had something on it covered in a blue tarp. The room reminded me of a macabre version of Heathcliff's lab. I shuddered but pushed the feeling aside as I studied the tarp. What could be under there?

"Rest here, my pretty. I've got to take my stupid mother her pills and then I'll be back to play." He set me on one of the torture

machines and handcuffed me to it.

I moaned, allowing my head to flop to one side like a dead fish.

He touched my face with one of his pudgy, sweaty hands. “I’ll be back, my love.”

Through my lashes I watched him climb the stairs, turn out the light, and lock the door.

OceanofPDF.com

I WAITED until Pasty closed the door at the top of the stairs before sitting up straight and opening my eyes. He'd only cuffed one wrist to the chair I sat in and I easily broke free. It was dark so I gave my eyes a moment to adjust.

There had to be a phone around here somewhere, but before I looked for one, I had to see what was under the tarp. With tentative steps, I went over. A rank smell wafted from it. I lifted one side and my stomach flip-flopped at the sight of the dead body beneath. She looked worse than I could've imagined. Her insides gone with a gaping hole where her torso had been, her hair matted with dried blood. But it didn't end there. One of her hands and feet was gone. I looked, but couldn't find them. One of her ears was missing as was both of her eyes. Her mouth had been sewn shut, the black thread visible.

The longer I observed her, the stronger the rage boiled through my veins. My demon power sprang to life and a red hue emanated from my skin. Shock at seeing such a thing momentarily tamped down my anger, but not enough to change my mind about all the things I would do to Pasty when I got the chance. First I needed to locate a phone.

At his workstation, there were dozens. I picked up one and opened it. "No charge." It took several seconds, but I finally found one with a charge and dialed the number on the last page of the journal. My backpack was still in the jerk's van, but I'd memorized the number as soon as I read it.

"Hello," a deep but kind voice answered.

"Um, hello. Hi," I said, but in a whisper. I didn't want the guy upstairs with his mother to hear me. "My name is Alice. Is this…" I was embarrassed calling him the name next to the number, but it was all I had. "Professor Pops?"

“This is. How can I help you, Alice?”

“Yes, well Heathcliff gave me one of his journals and your number was in the back of it.” I paused, unsure how to get to my big question.

“Heathcliff always was good at keeping journals, especially in high school,” the man said. “But I don’t think that’s why you called, my dear.”

“No,” I said, liking him already. “It’s just… do you know anything about a place called Demonland?” I began pacing, my anger momentarily forgotten.

The man didn’t respond right away, and I wondered if he would help. “Of course I do,” he said, and I sighed with relief. “Heathcliff spends a lot of his time there. Why?”

Right. Duh. “Well, that’s where I’m from. And I could really use your help.” I heard walking above me and lowered my voice. “Can we meet somewhere?”

“We can. Where are you?” He paused. “And why are you whispering? Are you in trouble?”

“I’m in Wonderland, Arizona and I’m whispering because… I’m in a predicament at the moment, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.” I thought of all the ways I would torture Pasty and make him suffer for what he’d done to that girl.

The man on the phone took a deep breath. “If you’re sure, I can be there in a few hours. Can I call this number when I arrive?”

The door to the basement unlocked. “Yes,” I said, and hung up, tucking the small flip-phone into the top of one of my black combat boots. Quickly, I ran over to the table, searching for something I could use to hold Pasty down. I found another set of metal handcuffs and tucked them into my front pocket. Then ran back to the chair the man had put me in and sat, closing my eyes. I slowed my breathing, forcing myself to appear asleep.

Pasty relocked the door, flipped on the lights, and came down the stairs.

With each step my heart picked up speed. Not with fear, but with excitement as I thought of all the ways I would hurt him. He wasn't much different than the demons I'd slaughtered the last week.

"There you are, my pretty," he said, but didn't come toward me. I opened one eye to see where he was. He was at his workstation, whistling as he selected the tools he wanted. I couldn't tell what he grabbed, but I hoped like hell it was something big and violent.

Anxious to get started with the guy, I stood. Per my training, I found my center and waited.

When he turned, he held a large butcher knife in one hand and something I hadn't seen before in the other. There'd been a smile on his face, but when he saw me awake and alert and standing, the happiness disappeared and was replaced by fear. He stared at me for a moment before rushing me, not with the knife, but with the other thing.

I debated whether to let him hit me with it, just so I could find out what it would do. I was half demon, so he couldn't kill me. Whatever the weapon was, it wouldn't be able to do any permanent damage.

The man saw his opening and took it, jabbing me in the cheek. Ten thousand volts of electricity shot through me, knocking me back a few steps. I recovered, standing upright. Pasty was shocked and annoyed. He glanced at the electric thing in his hand and shook it. "That's impossible," he said, trying to hit me with it again. But I wasn't going to let him zap me a second time. At the last second, I sidestepped him, slamming my elbow down on his arm, knocking the thing, whatever it was, from his hand. Then with great satisfaction, I backhanded him across the face.

He roared in frustration, slashing at me with the scary-looking knife in his other hand. But unlike me he wasn't skilled in the art of a fight. He was inadequate and clumsy. I blocked easily and grabbed his hand, twisting until the knife clanged to the floor and he fell to his knees. With my free hand, I took the cuffs and despite his struggling,

dragged him over and flung him into the same chair he'd put me in. Then locked his wrist onto the armrest. "How do you like it?" I asked, my voice quiet. If he were a demon, I'd guess he belonged to lust.

"I'm sorry. Please. I'm so sorry," Pasty whined, looking at me with a mixture of astonishment and fury. Without question, he wasn't sorry. The eyes couldn't lie and there was death in his.

"You're anything but sorry," I said. "And although you're a fool and as evil as any demon I've slaughtered, you shouldn't feel too bad. In the last week I've killed six royal demons and you're not even the equivalent of a menial rat." As I spoke, the red glow on my skin flickered and intensified. "You picked the wrong woman to mess with tonight, little man."

"What are you?" he asked, his anger turning to awe. He pupils grew as he studied me, like I was a new toy and he had to have me. "I've never seen anything like you before." He clucked his tongue. "Incredible." He reached out with his free hand to touch me.

"You don't want to know," I said, batting his hand away before slamming him back into the seat.

At that point he turned his head away and began to cry. "No. No. No. Please. You have no idea what I've been through. My mother… the things she did to me. It's no wonder I am the way I am. Playing doctor with the pretty girls is my release, my way to survive in this cruel world." Snot ran down his face as he spoke.

"I might feel bad if I believed you, but I don't. And I know if I let you go, you won't stop. You'll go out and find another young woman to torture to death. And I won't have that on my conscious." The rage turned to a boiling calm as it raced through my veins.

He faced me, opening his eyes. The fury was back, the hazel in his eyes gone until they were almost completely black. He sat up, taking a swing at me with his uncuffed fist.

I caught it and squeezed until the man cried out and tried to pull away.

“How dare you,” he demanded. “How dare you decide who deserves to die and who doesn’t? You’re just as bad as I am.”

I twisted harder, feeling his bones crack in my palm. “Not so, Pasty. I’ve never killed a human.”

Between broken sobs, he tried to speak. “But you said you killed six in the last week. That’s worse than me.”

I ignored his comment, checking out the chair and all its buttons. There was a black one with the word ON above it. I pushed the switch and the machine whirred to life. It was a mechanical arm with a small, circular blade on the end.

“You’re a killer like me.” He tried to move away, pushing his feet up onto the seat. “Stop!” He screamed. The words echoed through the basement and I decided I should’ve taped his mouth shut. Letting him speak freely was a bad idea unless I wanted his mom to come down and check out the noise. But just as quickly, I knew the man wouldn’t have had such a basement in the first place if he worried his mother would come down. She must be bedridden or confined to a wheelchair. And besides, I’d heard him lock the door. But she might be able to call the police. That dampened the plans I had, but only slightly.

“I’m a killer, sure, but not of humans. I slay monsters,” I said, pulling Pasty back down in the seat.

“You aren’t human?” His terror turned to awe and that wicked smile widened his lips.

“Not completely,” I said. It didn’t matter that I looked human. As the Devil’s daughter and in possession of all seven of the deadly sins, my humanity barely existed.

“So, I’ll be your first human kill, then?”

“That’s right,” I admitted, speculating at the change in him.

“Then do your worst, whatever you are. I think I’ll enjoy dying by your hands.” His face and body went slack. He moaned and one hand went to his crotch.

Disgusted, I moved the spinning blade, bringing it down toward his groin. “Keep it up and that’ll be the first to go,” I said, slicing into the material of his pants.

He squealed, falling back into his seat and his mood changed to crying again. “Okay, I’m sorry. Please, just let me go. I won’t hurt another girl ever again.”

I cut into his thigh. “I don’t believe you,” I said, watching a red line of blood appear. The sight of it set something off in me and memories of the game the other trainees and I had played with the menial demons sprang to mind. “Rat,” I said, looking him square in the eyes. He still wasn’t sorry, I knew it. But he would be. “Why don’t you tell me how this feels?” I angled the blade on his biceps, slicing through his shirt and skin in a quick nip before pulling back.

He screamed. Blood formed a line along the pink sleeve of his shirt and then began to spread. He tried to push me away with his broken wrist, but it was useless. I cut lines all the way down his arm, enjoying the red blood beading along his skin. “This is fun,” I said, meeting his gaze. There was fear in his eyes now and that egged me on. “Is this how you started with the girls?”

“No,” he sobbed, tears covering his face.

“I think it is.” I made several more cuts. Two along his neck and a couple on each of his thighs. Blood was everywhere now, and my anger changed. I knew it because the red glow on my skin had been replaced with a golden hue.

Greed, I thought, watching it grow stronger.

Pasty continued to cry, but I barely heard him. All I could focus on was the blood—the color and the smell—and I wanted more. This time I moved the blade to his stomach, wanting to see what his insides looked like. The need swirled through me, dark. Darker than anything I’d ever felt before.

And then it was gone.

Replaced by something new, something warm and light and

completely out of place with what I was used to experiencing. The hue on my skin changed as well. It became silvery white.

"You're glowing," the man said, his broken voice filled with pain but also awe.

A quick glance confirmed he was right. I *was* glowing. But my surprise was washed away by a tidal wave of guilt. An emotion I'd never experienced before. It caused my heart and body to physically hurt. "What is this?" Without wanting to, I tried to sit and stumbled over to another of Pasty's torture machines. Was the man's humanity rubbing off on me? That couldn't be it. He had none. Otherwise he wouldn't be torturing and murdering young women.

"I debated how far you would get."

I gasped as Kade appeared. "What are you doing here?" My guilt grew stronger and twisted to shame. "Go away," I said, turning so I could no longer see him as my cheeks blazed with heat.

Pasty's cries had become whimpers. "Help me. Please. She's crazy! I mean look at me, she's going to kill me!"

Kade ignored the man like he wasn't even there. "Listen, Alice," Kade said, resting a hand on my shoulder. "His mother has called the police. They are on their way. We need to go."

As disgraceful and guilty as I felt, I still didn't want to let Pasty live. "I get that, and I'll go, but first Pasty needs to die. He's as much of a demon as any I've killed and I can't let him hurt another human." I wasn't even sure why I felt such strong emotions for a dead girl I'd never met and the others I was sure he killed but I'd never seen.

"Yes, he does. But he's a human and must be punished according to human laws. They call it justice." He grimaced. Even he wasn't buying it.

"Human laws? Justice?" I shook my head at those words. How was it justice to let such a monster live? "I don't understand."

"It's…" He swallowed down whatever else he was going to say. "Come on. They're here. We need to leave." Kade took my arm, but I

pulled away.

“Wait,” I said and walked over to Pasty. “He may get to live, but he will not get away with what he’s done.” I turned back on the machine and pressed the edge of the spinning blade into his cheek. “How many have you killed?”

He looked at me with burning wrath in his eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” he spat.

“Alice,” Kade hissed, coming toward me.

I raised my hand to hold him back and heard a crash. A glance in his direction showed me that I’d somehow thrown Kade across the room. He landed with an audible grunt against a cabinet filled with different bottles and knives. I wanted to know how it’d happened, but first things first, I needed the police to know how many people Pasty had killed. So, I put aside my curiosity about what just happened and pressed the blade into his shoulder. “Tell me,” I yelled.

He screamed as the blade cut in.

Dark tendrils swirled through my belly, pushing away the silvery glow on my skin. The demon in me wanted more. It didn’t grow because this time I held it in check. I wouldn’t kill the man, but I would make sure he received human justice. I was half human after all.

“Five,” he said through clenched teeth.

I pulled the blade from him. I’d gone deep enough that I could see bone. The man panted with pain. “Five?” I verified.

“Yes. I slaughtered five sleazy, scheming sluts and loved every minute of it!” Spittle came from his mouth. “I promise, if I ever see you again, I’ll find a way to butcher you too.”

I smiled, reveling in his wrath, letting it wash over me. “You can try,” I said, slicing five, long ticks into his clean arm, deep enough that even when they healed there would still be scars.

The police were working to bust down the door leading into the

basement.

Kade stood beside me, his hand outstretched, waiting. “You ready?”

“I suppose,” I nodded, taking his hand.

“Good,” he grunted, and we vanished from the room.

OceanofPDF.com

KADE and I were in a meadow blanketed with flowers. The petals were white, the centers yellowish orange. The flowers were hip high, and I ran my hands softly through them, enjoying the sweet scent and the feel of the petals against my fingers.

Kade watched me but didn't say anything. I guessed because he was disappointed by what I'd almost done. But I was feeling rather content. I could've killed that human. Had I been a human, I had no doubt the police would've justified my reasoning. Pasty had tried to kill me, and they would've seen his death as self-defense. But the scum wasn't dead. And according to Kade that was a very good thing.

I didn't understand why. Was killing a human worse than killing a demon, even if the human acted demonic? I guessed the answer was yes. But I felt the reason had less to do with the evil man and more to do with what would happen to me—my humanity—if I killed him. I didn't know and Kade wouldn't tell me. He was busy… thinking or whatever the hell he was doing.

So I ambled through the flowers, taking a moment to ponder what'd happened. I'd almost killed a man. Not a demon, though he acted like one, but a human being. And suddenly my pride over the matter turned to shame and I began to shake. Because there was still a part of me that craved more, that wanted to go back and finish what I'd started. It wouldn't be that hard to track him. If he'd been arrested, I could go into the police department and… what?

I ripped at a handful of flowers, tearing off the petals and wishing they were Pasty. A silvery warmth trickled down my spine and through my fingers. As before, something happened. The consuming darkness turned to light. I had no idea where it was coming from or why it was happening. As half a demon or more accurately, the spawn of the Devil himself, it made sense that I would side with the dark,

with those things that went bump in the night. I'd believed myself in accordance with the demonic part of my heritage. I figured I had to be. But that didn't change the other—new—part of me. Light. It had emanated from me in Pasty's basement as it was now. There was so much more to what was happening though. Beyond the light was a feeling. One I hadn't experienced before, and while it wasn't bad, it was weird, and foreign, and difficult to comprehend.

The second trial, my mind said, trying to answer my own questions. And I thought that must be it. The second trial was supposed to be all about my emotions. I shook my head. Emotionally, I needed to come to terms with killing either my king or Kade and the Devil wanted me to suffer.

Thinking I had it right, I turned, my gaze locking in on Kade. He'd moved to the far edge of the forest and was facing the trees. Along the soft breeze came the sound of his voice. Was he talking to himself? It sounded like it, which made me smile. *He isn't perfect,* I thought, but I didn't believe it. Even when he'd been lying on Heathcliff's hospital bed after the demon attack, even writhing in pain, he'd still been beautiful.

The phone in my boot rang. I took it from its resting place, opened it, and answered. "Hello?"

"Alice? This is Professor Pops. I'm in Wonderland at a place called The Habit. It's a restaurant near the corner of Tweedledee and Tweedledumb." His voice was filled with mirth at the name. "Do you know where that is?"

I thought it might be the same restaurant I'd been in when I met Pasty. His calling from there couldn't be a coincidence, but how had he known? "I'm pretty sure I do."

"Okay. Good. If not, I can meet you elsewhere, just let me know."

I appreciated his willingness to be accommodating. "It's fine. I'll be there as soon as I can." Kade would help me find the place. I was sure of that.

“You’re all right? The last time we spoke, you were in a predicament and you ended our call rather abruptly.” His worry for me came through loud and clear.

“Yes, I’m fine. Thanks. Thank you. I’ll see you in a bit.” No sense oversharing with a complete stranger my abduction and subsequent desire to murder a human.

“I’ll be here.”

“See you soon,” I said and hung up, readjusting the pack hanging from my shoulders. Kade had gone back for it when I explained I needed the journal. He hadn’t been thrilled and had put up a fight because the police were everywhere, but he’d done it anyway.

Kade paced back and forth, his hands on his hips. I tilted my head, trying to listen to what he was saying, but couldn’t make it out. “Kade,” I shouted across the field. “I need to go.”

“Go where?” He practically glided over to me, his face gloriously handsome, but stern as well. He didn’t want to let me out of his sight.

I sighed, knowing I needed to tell him my plan but unable to fathom where to start. Wrapping my fingers around the straps of the pack for support, I cleared my throat, pushing down the lust burning in my belly, and tried. “Listen, I know we need to talk about the… situation with the Devil… and what happened with Pasty in that basement, but I need to meet someone.”

“No, you’re going to stay right here. I’m working on a way to get us out of this situation. The Devil didn’t have the right to do what he did. The Trials shouldn’t involve the lives of others, and definitely not the death of others. It’s wrong in every sense of the word. And my…” He paused, running a hand through his hair. “There are… those who are working to get this reversed and get you out of the Trials.”

Was it possible? I doubted it. Otherwise my father wouldn’t have allowed Kade to be one of my two choices. *Unless he was just that arrogant,* I thought.

I took a small step forward, closing the distance between us. “I

appreciate your willingness to help, but I have to do this. It's important to me."

He threw his hands in the air. Frustration rolled off him in waves. "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

"No, so let me give you the quick version of my plan, and then you can come with me or find me later and let me know how things are going on your end." I wanted him to come with me, but I also knew no matter where I went, he would be able to find me. He always had in the past. I wondered if he was some sort of tracker.

"We definitely need to talk more about the Trials as well as what happened in the basement where you threw me across the room." He rolled his eyes, but I sensed there was more. "Or maybe we'll discuss how you almost killed a man for the fun of it."

My face turned red. "Yeah, I guess all of it. But you saw yourself I didn't kill him. I resisted."

Kade made a face. "Barely." He studied me, seeming to look right into my soul. "Tell me who you're going to see."

I told him about Professor Pops and explained my plan. He listened with interest but remained silent until I finished.

"So that's my plan," I said, looking away.

He didn't respond. I tried to be patient, hoping he'd say something. Feeling less than kick ass, I watched a ladybug land on a flower before flying away. When I couldn't stand the silence any longer, I looked up. "Can you take me to him?" I asked.

"You're determined to do this, aren't you?" He crossed his arms, studying me.

"I've got to do something," I said, curious about the time of day. It'd been night when I left with Pasty. "Tell me, has it been a whole day since the Devil introduced the second trial?" I leaned into him. Lust built, a wild hunger for the man in front of me.

"Yes," he said, his body responding to mine. Then he took a deep

breath. “All right. I won’t stop you.” He tilted his chin up, looking down his nose at me. “But you need to be prepared for what’s going to happen in six days if none of us can find a way out of this.” He wrapped his arms around me. “I won’t hold it against you if you decide not to choose me. Wrythe is your king.” His voice was barely above a whisper and the look on his face caused my thighs to quiver. So close, his cinnamon scent left me feeling heady, like he was a drug. Just being near him got me high.

And while I appreciated his sweet declaration, it filled me with dread. I couldn’t choose between them! I didn’t want to and refused to consider either of them as a logical choice. Ignoring his comment, I changed the subject. “What happened to you the other night?” I shook my head, trying again, curious about why he’d been taken from me while we were kissing. “Why did you disappear the way you did?”

He looked away, staring at something I couldn’t see. “It was my superiors. They won’t allow what we almost did to happen. No matter what.”

My head buzzed. “Tell me who they are—who you are.”

“I will,” he promised.

“Now?” I asked, surprised by his sudden willingness to share.

He shook his head, a lopsided smile on his lips. I wanted to kiss him and have him kiss me until my lips were swollen, but I was also frustrated with his refusal to give me a straight answer.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, completely throwing me off balance and putting my questions about him from my mind.

My cheeks warmed, and I pulled my gaze from his lips to find his eyes. “Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.” The look on his face caused my breath to hitch. He wanted me. I could see it. Feel it even. “Okay, actually you’re devastatingly handsome.”

Kade pulled me against him. “Devastatingly?” He trailed his thumb down my cheek before pushing some stray hair behind my ear.

Tingles covered my body. “Yes,” I breathed, watching him, praying

his superiors didn't take him away from me again. Not yet. That first night we kissed flashed into my mind. But then he'd pushed me away, saying we couldn't be together. Yet here we were. Together. What had changed? Did he not care about the consequences? Was he lying? Or was it something else? I wanted to know the answers to those questions but not more than I wanted to kiss him. Tilting my head, I waited only a moment until his lips found mine, caressing eagerly. My body's response was immediate. He did something to me. No doubt about it. I ached for him.

Forgetting everything else, I moaned, running my nails down his back, pulling him closer. He responded by pushing my mouth open and deepening the kiss, his hands stroking my hair, my shoulders, and along my waist.

Like before, I felt our bodies fuse, become one. There was no telling where I ended and he began. Within, I saw or felt—it was hard to tell—but a silvery white light licked through my body, like a serpent, it slithered along my veins filling me with… what? Hunger? Greed? No. It wasn't one of the seven deadly sins. It was light and beauty and warmth and… happiness. I would be fine if I never ate, never slept, never did anything else but kiss Kade.

He became my breath and the beat of my heart. I thought if he pulled away from me, I would die. That knowledge should've scared me. But it didn't. It made me crave him all the more.

With great effort, his lips released mine. "As much as I'd love to stay and do this forever, Professor Pops is waiting," he said, kissing me lightly, his hands tangling in my hair.

"What?" I'd forgotten. His touch, his closeness had sent all logic from my mind. I shook my head, working to clear it. "Right," I said, trying not to show how affected I was by the loss of his mouth on mine.

He smirked, kissing my forehead. "Talk to Professor Pops. I'll come to you tonight. Maybe we can do more of this."

“Promise?” I asked. The idea of seeing him again tonight sent chills though my lower belly.

“Yes, Alice. I promise.” He took my hand, intertwining our fingers. There was a light pop and we were no longer in the meadow but beside a dumpster behind an alley. The scent of rotting trash tinged my nose while the Arizona heat stung my flesh.

Back to reality, I thought.

Kade touched my cheek. “He’s inside,” he said, his eyes lingering on my mouth.

I almost grabbed him and kissed him again, despite our location. It was definitely the same restaurant I’d been at when I met Pasty. “Okay,” I said, heaving a giant breath. “Will you come in with me?”

“It’s better if I don’t,” Kade said.

“Why? Do you know Professor Pops? Do you like him?” I hoped I liked him, but beyond that, I thought all supernatural creatures knew each other.

“I know of him. From all I’ve heard, he’s a good man. But I think it would be better that you meet him alone.”

“I guess.” I wasn’t convinced.

“Look, Alice, I know you’ve been through a lot lately, but you need to understand you’re about to step into a world that can be overwhelming.” His smile disarmed me. “It doesn’t matter that you’re the Devil’s daughter, you’re still innocent when it comes to all of this. You’ve been schooled and trained in how to slay demons, but there’s so much more to the supernatural world than what you’ve been taught. One step at a time, okay?”

A wave of nervousness washed through me. “I guess that makes sense. But how will I know who he is?”

“Listen in here,” he touched his forefinger to my temple. “And here,” he added, resting his palm against my chest where my heart thumped. “You’ll be able to sense him easily. And if you can’t, then

one look and you'll be able to see he's different than everyone else in that restaurant." He paused, studying me. "It's true most of us only see what we want to see."

"If you say so." I turned to make my way to the door, but Kade took hold of my hand and pulled me back to him, kissing me soundly on the mouth.

"You'll be fine. Trust me, I wouldn't let you go in there if I believed otherwise." He caressed my cheek.

I relaxed, knowing he was right. "See you tonight," I said, catching his gaze and holding it.

"Yes, you will." He released my hand and vanished.

I felt empty when he was gone, but also resolute. I needed Professor Pops' help. I adjusted my clothes and combed through my hair with my fingers, hoping I looked presentable. At the entrance to the fast food joint, I pulled open the door and searched the cool interior of the restaurant for a man who was as kind as his voice and looked like a professor.

Kade had been right. Professor Pops was easy to spot. The man looked young and old at the same time, which I knew made no sense. His hair was graying at the temples and there were wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and near his mouth, but he held an air of youthfulness that drew people to him. A woman who'd just received her food noticed the professor and walked over, but before she got close, he raised his eyes. They tore into her with a ferociousness that I couldn't comprehend. The woman turned and bolted for a seat as far from him as possible.

That intrigued me. He wore a navy blue sweater even though it was over a hundred degrees outside. A newspaper lay open in front of him and he read it, with a black pair of reading glasses on the end of his nose. And even though all of those things screamed "old guy" there was something… young… no, *immortal* about the man. That was what I felt. Somehow this man was an immortal, but not a demon. He

wasn't like the demon sires I'd slayed. They were immortal in the sense that they couldn't be killed unless it was by a Dark Moth like me. Many of them had been thousands of years old before I'd come along and ended them. Yet while I sensed danger in him, there wasn't an ounce of evil.

Timelessness, I thought. That was what I got from Professor Pops.

I hesitated a moment.

Professor Pops glanced over and seeing me, he smiled kindly. "Alice?" he mouthed.

I nodded.

He indicated I should come and sit down.

I slid into the booth seat, resting my backpack beside me. So close, his immortality weighed over me. "Are you Professor Pops?"

"I am," he said, folding the paper and tucking it on the far end of the table. "Should we get out of here? Or are you hungry?"

"Um," I hesitated. I didn't know this man and while Heathcliff trusted him, I still worried. "I'm not hungry, but where will we go?"

"I thought I'd take you to my home in Salem, Massachusetts."

"How?" I asked, completely baffled. I knew Arizona was across the country from Massachusetts.

"We'll fly, of course." His eyes twinkled at my question.

"We will?" I didn't know whether he could travel the same way as Kade or not? And then it dawned on me. If Kade were a Dark Moth like me, then that meant I had the power to pop in and out the way he did. If he weren't a Moth, which I doubted he was, then was Professor Pops like Kade? Could he pop in and out of places? My head hurt.

"We'll fly in an airplane," he said and smiled kindly.

"A plane?" I repeated. The idea of flying in a giant metal contraption didn't fill me with joy.

"Yes, I've reserved two tickets." He glanced at his watch. "And we should get going. The plane leaves in an hour."

“I… okay.” I studied him a moment, surprised.

He winked before giving me a large grin. “What, did you think we’d fly on the back of a dragon?”

My mouth fell open. “Is that even possible?”

“Anything is possible, Alice.” He touched the side of his nose. “Just you wait.” And without another word, he walked out of the restaurant.

I followed close behind as a flash of the last time I’d walked out of this restaurant came to mind. Pasty. I wondered if he was suffering in jail by now. I hoped so.

OceanofPDF.com

ON THE DRIVE and then the flight, I told Professor Pops about myself. All of it. Every last sordid detail, including the horrible fact that I was the Devil's daughter. I expected him to be shocked or disgusted by the news, but he only seemed interested. Never once did he give any indication he thought I was a horrible person. He asked questions occasionally, but mostly listened. When I finished telling him about myself, I told him about the Trials, and even a little about Kade.

Once we landed in Massachusetts, a car picked us up and drove us to his home in Salem. It was dark, but I was still able to see his place. My jaw dropped as we pulled into the drive. This was more than a home; it was like a small city. The mansion and surrounding yard sprawled across the expanse of several acres. It was beautiful, like something out of the fairytales I'd read as a child. I expected there to be a drawbridge, a moat, and a princess hanging out of the tallest window, begging to be rescued. Inside, he showed me to the kitchen, telling me I could help myself whenever I was hungry. Then he walked me upstairs and indicated the room I'd be staying in.

Decorated in deep reds and golds, it appeared to be freshly remodeled and included its own bathroom done in white and gold. "Why don't you get some rest and we can talk in the morning?" He took hold of the doorknob and stepped into the hall.

I liked the sound of that. It felt like I'd been up for days and technically I had. "Sounds amazing," I said, placing my backpack on the bed.

He started to leave, but I called after him. "Professor Pops?" Over the course of our trip, my embarrassment at calling him by such a name had lessened, but only slightly.

"Yes, Alice?" His kind eyes crinkled along the edges giving his elderly appearance more levity. But I still wasn't buying it. The way

he moved made me believe he was around my age and I wondered at the disguise.

"You don't think Heathcliff will tell Wrythe or the others where I am, do you?" I opened my pack.

"Definitely not," he said. "I'll see you in the morning. Relax and know you are safe."

"Thank you," I said as he closed the door. Feeling numb, I changed, and fell into bed, asleep before my head fully hit the pillow.

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke with a start. Dreams of Kade and Wrythe made my sleep restless, but I felt better regardless. Getting out of bed, I went to the window. Pulling back the thick drapes, I checked out the backyard (if you could call it that). It went on as far as the eye could see. Green grass, a tennis court, a putting green, and who knew what else. "Who is this guy?" I wondered aloud.

I left the curtains open, allowing the morning light to shine in. It was nice to feel the warm rays on my skin after so many years without sunlight. Deep below Wonderland, there'd been no windows, but as half demons we didn't need sunshine to survive.

I lifted my hand, allowing the light to warm it and then it occurred to me that it was daytime. Which meant another day had passed, and the worry hit me hard. *Only five more days*, I thought, feeling panicky. "No!" I shoved the thought aside, focusing on Professor Pops. I knew Heathcliff trusted him, but it felt wrong to do the same until I knew more about him. Promising myself I'd stay sharp, I showered before changing into clean clothes. After a while, hunger pangs drove me from the room and down to the kitchen. Chocolate cupcakes covered in frosting and topped with a shiny, round chocolate sat in the middle of an island, begging to be eaten. But they looked too beautiful, resting on their own silver tray. It reminded me of a festive tree created for a party. Curiosity about what Professor Pops might be celebrating had me distracted.

At the fridge, I found an apple and bit into it. “Mmmm,” I said, heading over to the French doors off the kitchen. A gray cat sat on the back patio, facing the yard, its tail flicking back and forth. He turned and meandered over, raising a paw like he wanted to be let in.

A smile formed on my lips. I couldn’t help it. The cat was plain gray but adorably fluffy. I decided I could use some fluff in my life and opened the door. “Hi kitty-kitty.” I squatted to pet him.

The cat didn’t move, just continued to stare, his head tilted to one side as I scratched his ear.

Professor Pops walked in. He’d changed his clothes. His navy blue sweater was now tan, but he still wore slacks, a button up shirt, and his reading glasses were tucked in the sweater pocket. “The cat isn’t allowed in the house,” he said, his tone light.

“Sorry about that.” I shooed the cat back outside and closed the door. “Your cat is so cute.”

Professor Pops chuckled. “Gatsby is not my cat. If he’s anyone’s cat, he’s Snow White’s. But really he’s just a nuisance.”

I’d seen the name Snow White in Heathcliff’s journal. “I’ve heard of her. Do you know her?”

“Indeed. I know her well. She’s my daughter-in-law.” He walked around the kitchen island and went to the French doors, opening the same side I had a moment before. Leaving the door open, he walked past the cat and waved for me to join him. “Come and sit out on the patio with me a while and let’s talk,” he said, indicating one of the chairs.

“Thanks.” I followed him out after closing the door. “Have you found anything about getting me out of the Trials?” It had only been a few hours since we got to his home and I was probably overstepping and not having patience, but urgency drove me. I sat in the chair next to him. Gatsby jumped up on the chair across from us, turned in a circle a few times and then lay down, his eyes focused on me.

Professor Pops nodded. “Actually yes, I believe I did.”

Joy leapt into my heart. “That’s fantastic,” I said, watching him.

His strange eyes found mine and held my gaze. “Maybe,” he replied.

“What are you?” I asked, hoping that didn’t sound too forward.

“That is an intriguing question,” he answered and then chuckled. “My real name is Adam Henry. I was born in the Middle Ages and…”

I sat up, surprised I hadn’t put two and two together. “You’re Heathcliff’s dad! He told me about you. Well, at least that you fell in love and that…” I paused as understanding filled my breast. “You’re a vampire,” I breathed, leaning forward, thinking that had to be why he seemed so timeless.

He chuckled lightly. “That’s right.”

“You’ve been alive more than five hundred years.” That amount of time shocked and amazed me, even though I’d learned from the time I was a child that Moths could live for a very long time too. The problem was most didn’t. They were killed right after their eighteenth birthdays, slaughtered by their demon sire.

Dark Moths weren’t much better. If we didn’t die right away, we were sure to die a whole lot sooner than humans while fighting one of the demons. It was part of the job. Wrythe was the oldest living Dark Moth—at least as far as I knew.

“Yes, it’s been a while,” Professor Pops went on. “But my longevity has allowed me to study, research, and educate myself on all things supernatural, including demons, though I didn’t spend much time on them.” He sat back, crossing one leg over his knee. “Not because I didn’t find them interesting, but because I learned early on about the Dark Moths and their destiny to protect their own kind. They keep out of the limelight for the most part and don’t mix with others, including humans unless…” He let his voice trail off, uncomfortable.

For good reason too. No one liked to discuss why a Dark Moth might be around a human—specifically a female. But the reason was simple. Where the virginal human females were, there would be a

demon close by, looking to bed her and impregnate her. Of course, these days, virgins were becoming harder and harder to find. At least according to Peter. The demons were branching out. “Lowering their standards,” he’d said darkly, his voice filled with sarcasm.

Professor Pops went on, “So, I haven’t had much of a chance to get to know any Dark Moths personally.” He tilted his head back. “Of course, Heathcliff shares a little, but not a lot.”

“But you’ve heard of the Trial of Three?” I asked, focusing my thoughts on the task in front of me.

“I have, and last night I took the opportunity to refresh my memory.” He shook his head. “The Trials aren’t often used and the few times they are, the participants wind up dead or deranged.” He crossed his arms, letting his words sink in. “I appreciate the Dark Moth Society and Wrythe wanted to discover who sired you, but I’m surprised they agreed to put you through the Trials. They had to know the serious consequences behind their decision.”

I shrugged because even though Wrythe was the king and he had final say, there were also six other council members. But it’d been more than that. “The reason he allowed me to enter the Trials was because I volunteered and wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Professor Pops leaned back. “So, you’re the Devil’s daughter and you’re stubborn as well?” He leaned back, steepling his fingers.

“Pretty much,” I said, finishing off my apple. Professor Pops’ statistics weren’t encouraging. “At the time, I didn’t know I could end up dead either.” I got up and threw away the apple core in the trash before returning to my chair and sitting, crossing my legs. “But you found a way out for me?” That would be the best news. If I didn’t have to choose between Kade, Wrythe, or all of the Moths.

Professor Pops patted my arm. “I have.” He nodded intently. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned over my many years, it’s that nothing is unbreakable, not even the Trial of Three,” he said with a grim expression, though he kept his tone bright.

“Really, not even death?” I thought of my mother, whoever she was. Could she be brought back to life? Strange that my mind went to her.

“Correct, in some cases. There are times of course where death is better than the alternative, but it’s possible.” He leaned back in his chair, looking up.

The sky was blue as my eyes. Birds twittered happily, busily going about their day. For some reason their happy song irritated me. My fingers dug into the armrest and I took a deep breath. “What do I need to do?” I was beyond grateful for Professor Pops and Heathcliff. Without them, I would’ve been in a much more difficult position.

“As far as I can tell, you have to convince each of the seven on the Dark Moth council to rescind their decision to allow you to participate in the Trial of Three.” His voice was conversational, like that was possible.

I uncrossed my legs and tucked them under my butt. It sounded easy enough, but I knew better. It wouldn’t be. Not with the others and especially Lily working against me. That woman didn’t seem to want anything but my demise. Convincing her would be difficult. Wrythe would rescind as would Peter, I felt sure of them. But the others? They seemed to be on Lily’s side. “If I can convince them, then it’ll be over?” I was unsure.

“Mostly,” he said, lacing his fingers and laying his hands across his stomach. “But, there’s one more item.”

I let the last part of his sentence linger a moment, focusing on the good news. There was a chance, though it was slim. “What is it?” I asked, as all hope melted away.

“Well,” he scratched at his chin. “As far as I can tell, you’ll also have to convince the Devil to agree to release you from the Trial of Three, too.”

I leapt to my feet, throwing my hands up and pacing like a woman on fire. That was impossible. “Then there is no hope. He won’t do

that. I mean why would he? The whole reason he created me was to torture me." My demon power sprang to life, a brilliant red that danced along my skin as a harsh laugh burst from my chest.

Professor Pops stood as well. "You okay?" He studied me without fear, as though mesmerized.

I glanced down at myself. "What, you've never seen a half demon's skin glow different colors based on how she's feeling? Red means I'm angry, in case you were wondering," I snapped and then bit down on the inside of my cheek, working to calm down. "Sorry," I said, feeling ashamed.

"No, I haven't." He considered me a moment longer before going to the door that led back into the house. "And no worries. You're truly extraordinary, Alice."

"Where are you going?" I worried I'd scared him off even though he didn't act like it.

"It's okay. I'll be right back." He went inside and I went back to my seat, falling into the chair with a huff.

"Sure," I said, watching Gatsby. He'd opened his eyes at my outburst and was studying me like I was a mouse. "What are you looking at?" I spoke through clenched teeth, the wrath I felt still too close to the surface.

The cat yawned, flashing all of his sharp, white teeth in a smile before lifting a paw and grooming himself.

"That's what I thought," I growled, causing the red shine to flicker brighter. Seeing myself like that only increased my anger.

Several minutes passed while I sat fretting, wringing my hands, until Professor Pops returned, an old book lying open in his hands.

"I think your parentage is the reason you're glowing red or glowing at all." He looked at me, fascinated. "Since the Devil is the king over all demons, it would make sense that he possesses all seven of the deadly sins' powers. And since you're his daughter, you possess them as well."

I knew that already.

He went on, “It says here that when the Power of Seven is used, its connecting color will manifest. Have you seen all of the colors?” He tapped the book when he finished speaking.

“Pretty much,” I said. “As well as another color. Silver, too.”

“Silver you say?” He turned the page in his book, then flipped another and another.

“A silvery white,” I added. “Almost like a light has turned on under my skin. What do you think that represents?”

“Fascinating,” he said, closing his book. “There is nothing about that color manifesting in the Devil. I have a theory, but I’m not sure. I’ll keep digging.”

That he didn’t know worried me. I took a deep breath, though my heart raced. “Okay,” I said. Another breath. “Thank you,” I said, my voice ragged.

Professor Pops looked over at me. “Don’t panic. It’ll all work out.”

I wanted to believe him. I did, but the dread rose along with the anger, which manifested red on my skin.

Professor Pops touched my arm, flinching a moment, but not letting go. “You’re safe, Alice. Breathe in and out. It’s going to be all right. We’ll figure things out together. I promise.”

OceanofPDF.com

I APPRECIATED Professor Pops and his words very much. “I… I just.” My head pounded loudly. All I could hear was the thudding beat of my heart as blood moved through my veins. I wondered if I might die —if something like that had ever happened to a Dark Moth trainee before.

“You can to this. Relax. Breathe.” Professor Pops’ words were in the background and meant to be comforting.

But the rage still blistered and bubbled in me until I thought it would consume me. I closed my eyes, ready to give in. At that moment, I felt the soothing balm I’d experienced twice before rush along my veins and sinews, extinguishing the rage. Slow and steady it leeched away the red glow, replacing it with the silvery white light I didn’t understand. With that light came hope and warmth. The prickling wrath became softness and peace.

Professor Pops shook his head. “That’s amazing. Quite lovely, too.” He opened his book again, but didn’t look at the pages. “It’s strange because the white light doesn’t represent any of the seven deadly sins. In fact, it almost looks…” His voice trailed off, but before I could demand he finish his sentence, he continued. “I might actually know where to begin searching for an answer. There’s got to be a reason for what’s happening to you. There always is.” He set the book on the table to the right of his chair.

“I’d appreciate knowing whatever you can find.” The swift change had left me feeling less than in control. What was happening to me?

“I was thinking, it might do you some good to get a quick win,” Professor Pops said. “The first step in rectifying your situation might be to call Wrythe, tell him what’s been discovered about the Trials. If he’s the first to rescind his agreement of your participation in the them, then perhaps he will speak to the others about doing the same.”

He gave me a wry smile. “It’s possible this whole thing might all be over in twenty-four hours.” He spoke the words, but I sensed it wouldn’t be that easy. It never was, though I really wanted it to be.

But if I could get all the Society members to withdraw their agreement in my participation, if I told them it was possible to end the Trials, it made sense they would want that. When I’d listened in on the conversation between Wrythe and the other Society members, they worried I would choose to have Wrythe die…

“When they all agree, then you can talk to your father,” Professor Pops continued, before pausing, his eyes drifting over to Gatsby.

He was right. I would focus on speaking with Wrythe and getting the council to rescind. That win would be nice and a step in the right direction. A quick check of my boot for my phone revealed I’d left it up on the bed, next to my backpack. “That’s a great idea. Mind if I use your phone?”

He pulled his cell from his pocket and handed it to me. “Not at all.”

I dialed Wrythe’s number.

He answered on the first ring. “Who is this? And why do you have my personal number?” he asked in a growl.

“Wrythe?” Relief flooded through me at hearing his voice. “It’s me. It’s Alice,” I said, just in case he didn’t know. He’d given me his number when I started battling the royal demons. He’d felt it prudent in case we were somehow separated or something else went wrong. I was grateful for his decision. It’d served its purpose now.

“Alice, are you all right?” His anger was replaced with relief and that encouraged me. “I’ve been worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” I stood and walked to the other end of the large patio, wanting privacy.

“Good to hear. You made it someplace safe, then?” His voice was quiet and I guessed he might be with others.

“Yes.” I debated telling him where I was, but the conversation I’d overheard between him and the other Society members came out instead. “I was there, Wrythe. I heard what you, Peter, Lily and the others were talking about in your office.”

“I figured,” Wrythe said, sighing heavily. “I’m so sorry you had to hear that. But you have to know I would never let them hurt you. That’s why I gave you the Demon Orb. You have it I presume?”

I’d forgotten all about the orb. In fact, I’d left it in the back pocket of my other pants. “I’ll be right back,” I mouthed to Professor Pops and quickly jogged through the kitchen, upstairs, and into the bedroom. Thankfully, my pants were still on the floor in the bathroom.

“Alice? Are you still there?” Wrythe asked.

“Yes. I—” I picked up my pants, checking the back pocket. The piece of folded paper I’d put in there fell out as I removed the orb. I studied it a moment before refocusing on Wrythe and our conversation. “It’s here,” I said, relieved. “I’ve got it.” I held it up to the light, giving it a quick glance. The orb was unassuming and appeared to be nothing more than a black pebble or a marble. “What does it do?”

“It will—” His words were cut short by a loud boom followed by muffled noises.

“Wrythe?” It sounded like he struggled with something until I heard him moan followed by more stifling blows combined with shouting and cursing. “Wrythe!” I shouted.

“Not anymore, Alice.”

I knew from those three words exactly who was on the other end of the line. Lily. But why?

She went on. “Wrythe is indisposed right now.” She laughed, her voice full and lusty, and my heart turned to ice. Something wasn’t right.

“Is Wrythe okay?” I asked as I went to the edge of the bed and sat,

a sick feeling punching me in the guts.

“He’s fine. For now. We’re just going to keep him chained up for you until you choose for him to die in the second trial. That way, you’ll move on to your third trial, which will kill you, and the rest of the council can get on with their lives.”

So, Professor Pops had been right about the success rate of those who’d entered the Trials in the past.

Lily was still talking. “Apparently, if the second trial doesn’t kill you, the third one will for sure.”

I wanted to reach through the phone and rip her heart out. At my thoughts, the red glow of Wrath returned to my skin, but I didn’t mind. I embraced it like an old friend. “Lily, I swear, if you hurt him, I’ll…”

“You’ll what?” she laughed. “You’re a child, Alice. Do the Society a favor and pick Wrythe to die. We all know you like that boy. Kade isn’t it? Choose him and then never return to the compound. If you do that, and somehow make it through the Trials, I promise, we’ll let you live in peace.”

Unable to sit still, I went to the window, my gaze searching the orange sky. It looked like it was on fire. “I thought you and Wrythe were friends,” I began. Lily started to answer, but I hurried on. “Besides, I may have found a way to reverse the Trials so I can save both Wrythe and Kade.”

“There isn’t a way out, Alice. Choose Wrythe. It’ll save him a lot of agony. If you don’t, we’ll torture him until he’s revealed all we want to know about the Society and then we’ll kill him anyway.”

I couldn’t help but notice the similarities between the Dark Moth on the phone and the demon who’d sired her. This was the game the demons played, not us. We were supposed to be the good guys. Better than our sires. And better even than the Moths we protected. Our training and teachings were supposed to help us become warriors, champions for those who couldn’t stand up to evil themselves.

“Lily, please. Withdraw your decision that I do the Trials. Tell the others to do the same. Then it can all be over, and we can figure the rest out.” My pleading tone took me by surprise. I fell to my knees at the overwhelming shock of her betrayal. “I heard you say you wanted me killed so that Wrythe could live. You said the Dark Moths couldn’t survive without him. Why are you doing this?” My naiveite filled me up with confusion. She wasn’t making sense.

“I was lying stupid girl.” She sniffed. “I only said what he wanted to hear. Nothing more.”

“But I can fix this. All we have to do is get all seven of the council to reverse their decision to let me participate in the Trials…” I paused, deciding it wasn’t a good idea to mention the other, more difficult part. “Then everything can go back to normal. I won’t have to choose at all.” I’d said this already, but was desperate to believe she hadn’t heard me correctly the first time.

“Like I said, that isn’t going to work, Alice. I want him to die. Wrythe is too soft, too kind. His leadership reflects cowardice, not courage. He sealed his fate when he chose not to kill you after you told us you were the Devil’s daughter. You aren’t even a Dark Moth. You are evil incarnate and should be destroyed.” She heaved a deep breath. “But as the new queen of the Dark Moth Society, I will keep my promise to the Moths. Choose Wrythe as the one to die and stay away from us and I won’t kill you.”

I found her calling me evil ironic but didn’t mention that. My focus changed from desperate pleadings to resolute determination. “I won’t allow you to kill Wrythe.”

“If you don’t choose Wrythe, we will have no choice but to kill your trainee friends,” she snapped.

My stomach churned. Everything was a mess. Everybody wanted to kill everybody. What. The. Hell? “Lily. No. How can you do this?” My heart raged at the thought of the other trainees in danger again. The Society were supposed to be our protectors, the compound our safe

haven.

“We won’t do it, not if you do your part. And be warned, the majority of the council supports this decision. Peter will join us or receive Wrythe’s fate as well.”

This couldn’t be happening. “I don’t understand,” I whispered, hot, angry tears welling against my closed lids.

“Why am I not surprised, Alice? You’re a simpering girl. But let me make it clear. I will be Queen of the Dark Moths. And my first order of business will be to kill you if you ever show your face in this compound again. Is that precise enough for you?”

This can’t be happening, I thought, desperate to make this all go away.

“Alice?” Professor Pops was outside my door, knocking lightly. He came in, his features etched with concern.

I barely acknowledged him before turning back to the window. With one hand, I wiped at the tears. Crying wouldn’t do me any good. “Don’t do this, Lily or I’ll make you wish you’d never been born,” I seethed, my anger flaring brightly. My reflection in the window revealed someone scary. But I didn’t care. I’d make Lily pay for everything she’d done.

Lily started to respond, but I hung up. Probably not my finest move. I’d let my wrath get the better of me.

“I heard everything,” Professor Pops said without preface, wrapping his arm around me and leading me to a chair near the fireplace. “I’m guessing Lily was sired by a Lust Demon?”

“Yep,” I said bitterly, setting the phone on the coffee table. “She wants me to continue with the Trials and choose Wrythe.” I shook my head, still not quite able to believe it.

Professor Pops took the couch. He crossed one leg over the other, resting his head on a hand while he looked at me intently. “That is one option to consider, isn’t it?”

“No,” I shouted, rising and pacing. Though he was right. It was an option.

The professor smiled. “I didn’t think so but wanted to make sure.” He clasped his hands together, resting his elbows on his thighs.

“It’s just, now I don’t know what to do. I mean, Lily obviously won’t rescind her vote. She wants me to continue because she’s hoping Wrythe will die and that the Trials will kill me, and she isn’t alone. According to her, of the seven, five council members agree with her asinine idea.” I spoke harshly, desperate to believe it was just a dream and that I would wake up in a world where at least those I fought beside were all good. “It’s impossible,” I said, falling onto the couch on my side, and curled up in the fetal position.

Professor Pops didn’t say anything, and I closed my eyes. The room went silent except for the ticking clock on the fireplace mantle. I tried to steady by breathing to match the clock. Then I breathed in, skipping three ticks and breathed out for three ticks. In. Out. *Perhaps I can go to sleep and then when I wake, this will all have been just a dream.*

OceanofPDF.com

“Do you want me to let you sleep or do you want me to help you find a way to fight back?” Professor Pops finally asked, his voice soft but determined.

I blinked my eyes open, knowing my desires were pointless. Sometimes reality sucked. “This is really happening, isn’t it?” I pushed myself into a sitting position when all I wanted to do was disappear.

“I’m afraid so.” He went to the door. “Let’s eat,” he said, heading out into the hall.

“Fine, then yes,” I said, answering his question. “I would love it if you helped me find a way to fight back,” I said, following him down the hall. My stomach was in knots but lying around doing nothing wasn’t the answer. At least if I ate, I was nourishing my body for what lay ahead.

At the end of the hall, we went down the stairs. To my right was another hallway leading to the other side of the expansive mansion. I momentarily wondered what I would find in that direction but just as quickly pushed those thoughts aside. It didn’t matter unless it would help me in my pursuit. And if that were the case, then Professor Pops would show it to me.

We turned left, going past the front door and toward the kitchen.

If there was one thing my Dark Moth training had taught me over the years, it was to focus on the necessities and leave everything else behind. It was infuriating considering the situation I was currently in, but I finally understood the Society’s decision to keep us in the dark about the rest of the world. That knowledge pulled focus from what was most important, which was killing our demon sire and then serving the Society.

Still, if I were in charge, I would’ve done things the same way as Wrythe… except maybe with a few more trips to the surface. A few

stories about the other supernatural creatures in the world. I believed sharing those little bits of normality would provide a whole lot of hope. And hope had been missing in the compound for too long.

When we reached the kitchen, my eyes landed on those same cupcakes and my mouth watered. I wanted to shove two in my mouth but resisted. I wouldn't let greed or gluttony get the better of me. I'd just gotten my emotions in check once again, my skin finally back to its natural color.

"How do you feel about steak?" Professor Pops asked, opening the fridge.

"I love it," I admitted, though I'd never eaten it before dinnertime. Still, I'd happily eat whatever he felt like cooking. Pulling my gaze from the sweets, and ignoring the chocolate smell that had found its way into my nose, I looked at Professor Pops. "What can I do to help?" I didn't want him to feel like he was serving me.

"Relax. Have a seat." He indicated one of the barstools under the bright white island.

"If you're sure?" I sat as he nodded.

"I am. Steak is my specialty and I'm happy to make it for you."

Obviously, the man had been told by Heathcliff that we trainees didn't do any of the cooking. He probably figured I'd be a mess and do more harm than good if I tried to help. He wasn't wrong. "Thanks." I watched as he took a cast iron pan and placed it on one of the gas burners before turning it on. The blue flame licked the bottom of the pan. He added butter and twirled the pan, coating the bottom before placing two cold steaks on its hot surface. They sizzled, sending a mouthwatering aroma my direction.

For the next several minutes, I watched, and he cooked, and when the steaks had a good sear, he used a hot pad and put the entire pan into the oven.

"I'm thinking a strawberry and spinach salad to go with it?"

"Sounds amazing." I clasped my hands together, admiring his

efforts.

From the freezer, he took some slivered almonds and laid some on a cutting board. “Want to slice up the strawberries?” he asked, eyeing me warily.

“Absolutely.” I handled knives every day, so this shouldn’t be too hard. I went to the sink and washed my hands. He took another cutting board and placed some strawberries in a colander from the fridge beside it.

“These are from my garden,” he said, handing me a knife.

“They look divine,” I admitted, getting to work.

While I sliced, he put together the salad, adding the spinach, some feta cheese, and then mixing up a dressing with olive oil and orange juice in it.

“Add the strawberries when you’re finished,” he said, taking the steaks from the oven and ladling clarified butter over them. Using tongs, he placed both on a plate.

I added the strawberries to the salad.

“They look great,” he said, checking my work.

“Thank you.” I knew what he was trying to do. My situation was urgent, but these basic tasks allowed my mind to relax so I could take a moment to consider all that needed to be done.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Some water would be fantastic,” I said, taking the cutting board over to the sink.

Professor Pops went to the fridge. “Why don’t you go sit down?”

“I can get us some plates,” I said, perusing the many cupboards lining the main wall.

“Not necessary.” He slid a water bottle across the counter. I opened my hand to catch it at the last second. “So, you’ve had a moment to rest your mind. Have any ideas come to mind?” He took a single plate from a cupboard and put one of the steaks on it. Then, using tongs, he

stuck some of the strawberry salad beside it. The white plate against the dark steak and the beautiful greens painted a very appetizing picture.

"Not really," I admitted, wishing that wasn't true. But every scenario I could think of involved killing those I didn't want to kill.

"Well, if you don't know, then it really doesn't matter what you do," he said, filling another plate with the other steak and the rest of the salad.

I gave him a disgruntled look as I cut into my meat. But I knew he was right. After chewing a bite, I stabbed a strawberry, feta, spinach combo, mopping it in the dressing before sticking the large bite in my mouth. "This is so good," I said after swallowing. "You could give Cook a run for her money," I added, momentarily distracted by how delicious everything tasted. *Gluttony,* I thought, and leaned back against the chair.

"Thank you, Alice. Heathcliff has bragged about Cook too." He rested his arms on the counter, watching me.

I took another bite, my thoughts on what Professor Pops had said before. I did need to come up with *something*. The easiest way to save the trainees as well as Peter was to tell the Devil that Wrythe had to die. But if I did that, then Lily would take over the Dark Moths. I couldn't let that happen.

It was bad enough there had to be such a thing as the Dark Moths in the first place, but to have a power-hungry queen ruling a group of highly trained half demon warriors? It wouldn't end well. But could I sacrifice the lives of the trainees as well as Kade in order to save the only family I'd ever known? Neither option felt right and I voiced those concerns to Professor Pops.

"There may be a third option," he said when I finished talking.

"Oh?" I was getting full and there was still half a steak left.

"We fight Lily and the traitorous council members and take them down." Professor Pops leaned on the island; his food untouched.

I liked that idea, but there was still the second trial. “And then what? I will still have to choose between Kade and Wrythe. That won’t change.”

“I’ve discovered throughout the decades that ultimatums tend to cause many people to change their minds. If we fight and capture the council members, we’ll have leverage. Then we make them an offer they can’t refuse in exchange for their rescinding vote.” He raised an eyebrow, waiting for me to respond.

“What’s the offer they won’t they be able to refuse?” I asked, curious what the professor had in mind.

“Their lives, of course.” He stood, crossing his arms, and the gleam in his eyes reminded me that beneath the cultured façade he was still a centuries-old vampire.

Brutal but effective, I thought. “But if they die, then they can’t rescind their vote,” I said, thinking through his plan.

“True, but then you’re no worse off than you were before. This way, you have a chance to save as many lives as possible.”

“The idea has merit,” I said cutting another piece of meat. While I chewed, I absently took the demon orb from my pocket and twirled it between my fingers. After I swallowed, I voiced my concern. “The only thing I worry about is if we go in fighting, then there could be casualties, the trainees as well as the other Dark Moths living in the compound..”

“Agreed. We don’t want that. I know a way we can get in without the need for any casualties.” He gave me a look that told me he had a secret.

“Tell me.” I leaned forward, pushing my plate away and placing the orb on the counter.

His eyes caught hold of the pebble and went wide with surprise. That lasted for a moment before he turned his gaze on me. “Have you ever wondered how Heathcliff gets in and out of Demonland?”

The question took me by surprise. I hadn’t, but had assumed he

came and went the same as everyone else. “The elevator? That’s the only way exit or entrance as far as I know.” Of course Kade popped in and out, but I didn’t think just anyone could do that.

Professor Pops gave me a conspiratorial smile. “There’s another way.” His eyes fell back to the demon orb.

I picked it up, palming it, wishing I hadn’t brought it from my pocket in the first place. “There is?” I asked, hoping he’d forget about it.

“Yes,” he said, taking some plastic wrap from a drawer to his left.

It seemed like a great idea except then what? At some point I would have to fight my way to Wrythe and also secure the council members. There was no way I could capture them all, not without other Dark Moths discovering what I was up to. Another thought occurred to me. Our fighting meant there was the possibility of Professor Pops getting hurt.

And that’s when it really hit me just what he was. A vampire. A blood drinker. “First, and this is a total channel change, why did you cook two steaks?”

“It’s for one of my sons,” he said, but didn’t elaborate, taking it over and putting it in the fridge.

“Oh.” I hadn’t fathomed there was anyone else home, though the mansion was big enough there could be a dozen more people in the house and I wouldn’t know it.

“And second?” Professor Pops asked when he returned.

“I don’t know anything about vampires, I mean not really,” I began. “And I get you’ve been alive a long time, but can a vampire be killed?” I switched the orb between my hands, hoping to use up some of my nervous energy. “Dark Moths are vicious fighters and I don’t want you getting hurt or worse.” I cleared my throat. “Heathcliff would never forgive me, and I couldn’t forgive myself either. I already have several other lives on my conscious. I don’t need another.”

Professor Pops cleared his throat and I could see that he was trying

not to smile. “I appreciate your concern, Alice. I really do. You’re obviously a very thoughtful person.” He reached over and patted my hand. “I can promise you that I don’t die easily not to mention I’ve been fighting against evil supernatural creatures almost as long as I’ve been alive. I have plenty of training.” He smiled grimly. “In fact, I might be able to teach you a thing or two, if you let me.”

A sense of relief washed over me. “Then let’s make a plan and I’ll look forward to learning from you, Professor… uh, Adam… I mean, what should I call you?”

“Professor Pops is fine. Or Adam. Or Mr. Henry. Or Pops. Whatever you’re comfortable with.” He took my plate over to the sink.

“Thank you,” I said, and suddenly wondered if he craved my blood? Could he hear it pumping in my veins? I couldn’t ask him those things even though I really wanted to.

“What?” He gave me a genial look.

“I’ll call you…” My brain froze, flustered at the thought of him drinking blood. *How would my half demon blood taste to him?*

“Alice?” he questioned me, his features scrunching in kindly concern.

“Sorry, I’ll have to think about what to call you,” I said, feeling awkward.

“You do that.” He wiped down the counter. “Before we start planning, tell me about that marble-looking thing in your hand. What is it? What does it do?” He held out his free hand.

“Wrythe called it a demon orb,” I said, handing it to him. “That’s all I know. Before Wrythe could tell me more, Lily took the phone. Whatever it is, I can feel its power.”

“Me too.” He pulled his reading glasses from his pocket, putting them on so he could look at it closely. “Tell me something, when you use your power, how does it work? I’ve read books and done research, but it’s not the same as speaking with a Dark Moth and you are the first I’ve met.”

“But you know Kade Everett?” I’d hoped he was a Dark Moth even though deep down I knew he wasn’t one.

“Yes, but he isn’t a Dark Moth,” Pops said, partially answering my question. Then he looked over at me. “Do you know what Kade is?”

“No,” I admitted, excitement bubbling in my belly. “Will you tell me?”

“Well now,” he said, glancing at me over the top of his reading glasses. “I don’t know either. I have an idea but nothing more.” He returned his gaze to the orb.

“Oh.” My face fell. For a moment I believed I was finally going to get a straight answer. “Anyway, with my power, it’s like something inside me ignites and rushes through me like water through a breaking dam.”

“Interesting. And the other trainees? They don’t have the glow when they use their power?”

“Their markings glow,” I said, feeling slightly better. “But not their whole bodies.”

“Very interesting.” He handed back the orb. “I have a few things to research and I’d also like to do some checking on the demon orb as well, if that’s okay?” He waited for me to answer.

“You don’t need it to do your research?” I asked, even though I was grateful he returned it. I stared at the orb, recognizing the pulsing and acknowledging its power before tucking it back into my pocket.

“Not now, anyway.” He took a tray from a cupboard under the island.

I stifled a yawn, even though it was probably just mid-day.

He caught my eyes just as I covered my mouth. “Sorry.” I felt my face heat with embarrassment.

“Don’t be. Why don’t you go upstairs and relax? I need to speak with my son and I’ll do some research. We can talk more later.”

Urgency beat against my chest, but I also knew I was exhausted.

“All right.” I stood. Then saw the delicious cupcakes again. “Did my being here interrupt an upcoming party?” I asked, indicating the tree stand.

“No, actually, these are for you. Today’s your birthday, Alice, and I wanted to celebrate though I know Moths don’t usually make a big deal of the day they were born, and I understand why.” Professor Pops pushed the tray toward me. “But I thought you deserved something to honor the day you were born.”

A shower of happiness rained down on me at his thoughtfulness. “Wow, thank you.” I hadn’t realized today was the fateful day I’d been dreading since I could remember. I was officially on the radar for me sire, though it didn’t matter at this point.

“These are chocolate with peanut butter buttercream topped with malted milk chocolate balls. Have as many as you’d like. Please.” He pushed the tray toward me.

“Thank you.” I took one, pulling off the purple wrapper and shoveling a bite in my mouth. “Yum,” I said around the food. “Did you make these?” I chewed a bit more and then swallowed.

He nodded, removing a single white plate from the cupboard. “An old family recipe,” he admitted with a smile. “Except the chocolate balls. Those are new, and I thought they would make the cakes extra special.”

I took another bite, enjoying the textures and flavors. “You did good. This tastes amazing.” I was curious how he knew about my birthday and then guessed it was probably Heathcliff who told him.

“I’m glad.” He set the plate in front of me before getting a glass from the cupboard. “Take a few and a glass of milk.” He poured me a tall one and set it beside the plate.

“I will.” I took two more cupcakes before taking the plate in one hand and the milk in the other. “See you later, Mr. Professor Pops.” I smirked, feeling embarrassed.

“I’ll be up in a while. You’re welcome to roam the house and the

grounds. Please don't feel like you have to be cooped up in your room," he said kindly. "There are clothes of all sorts in the drawers and the closet. Something should fit if you want to change."

"Thank you. I really appreciate all you've done for a total stranger."

"You're not a stranger anymore. It's been lovely meeting you." He clasped his hands behind his back.

"And you, Professor Pops," I replied, deciding that was what I'd call him.

OceanofPDF.com

BACK IN MY ROOM, I set the cupcakes and milk on the table next to my bed. Then changed out of my clothes and into black shorts and a purple tank top. I found them in the large walk-in closet. On the way back to my cupcakes, my eyes caught hold of the folded paper that'd fallen from the book in Peters' room. It lay on the floor near the bathroom. I picked it up and went over to the bed, placing it and the orb on the blankets. Then I fluffed the pillows and sat, crossing my legs, turning my attention back to the cupcakes.

After removing part of the paper from one of the cupcakes, I took a bite. While I savored the chocolate and peanut butter deliciousness, I picked up the paper. It was old and wrinkled so I opened it carefully. A quick perusal was all it took to realize the entire entry was about me. The words were faded, and it took me an entire cupcake to get the gist of it.

The markings on Alice's wrists have remained black yet her power is there and it's strong. I feel it whenever she trains. But she isn't like the other trainees. It's as though she possesses all the powers of the seven deadly sins. There is wrath, pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, and even sloth power within her, as though she was born of all of them, which is impossible, unless… I can't even go there. It's unheard of and completely impossible.

What's even stranger is that she possesses the seven virtues as well. We rarely discuss those in class. There is no need. If a virtue is part of a Moth, we treat it as part of their human half and don't encourage it. We are, after all, trying to build them as warriors. With Alice, it's easy to see all of them in her: temperance, diligence, forgiveness, charity, kindness, chastity, humility.

If I didn't know her and interact with her personally, I wouldn't believe it. She is equal parts virtue as well as vice. A perfect balance. In many

ways, I fear the combination makes her more powerful than us all. And if that were to get out, the Society might vote to expunge her before she has a chance to fully develop.

I reread the words several times. With each pass, my confusion grew. “Why did such a thing matter?” I whispered because if I spoke any louder I thought I might scream.

Kade appeared out of thin air, and then I did scream… a little. Not loud enough to worry Professor Pops, but enough that Kade smirked, crossing his arms over his chest and causing the muscles along his arms to flex. He obviously enjoyed scaring the crap out of me. I couldn’t even stay mad as I admired him. He really was the most devastatingly handsome… being.

“You need to stop doing that. Can’t you wear a bell or something to announce your arrival a few seconds beforehand? That way I can be prepared.” I glared, climbing off the bed and stomping into the bathroom to grab my hair tie. I needed to get my hair out of my face.

“That’s not a bad idea,” he said quietly. He’d tracked me with his eyes but hadn’t moved. “I missed you last night, but the way you were sleeping, I didn’t dare wake you for fear it would be like waking the dead.” His smirk grew bigger.

“You’re hilarious. But yeah, I was out.” I studied him. Something was different. His features were soft. Meek even. I’d never seen him wear such a look. Usually his face was a mask of control or filled with passion. But this was new. “What? Did you find out there isn’t anything we can do?” I went back over to him, searching his features for an answer.

“My… contacts are refusing,” he said between clenched teeth. “Did you talk to Professor Pops?”

“I did. There are issues, but he’s agreed to help me.” I watched him curiously. Why would his people refuse to help? Didn’t they understand his life was at stake?

“So he found something?” Hope returned to his voice, though he

still hadn't moved.

"Yeah, but it may not matter," I said, looking away so he wouldn't see my deep disappointment with my family.

"It's more than I've got," he said, his hands touching mine.

I hadn't seen Kade this way before. So… mellow or disheartened. It threw me off. His body language told me there was something very wrong. "It's okay that your superiors won't help. We'll work something out," I said, softly, forcing a tentative smile.

"They can be very frustrating. Makes me wonder why I…" He paused and then growled, running his hands through his hair.

"Why you what?" The man wasn't making a whole lot of sense and his nearness had me distracted.

"I don't know why I follow their orders." He sighed, shrugging, and moved over to the window.

I stood beside him, staring out. Storm clouds had rolled in, making the sky like murky marshmallows. Tension rolled off him and onto me. "So don't," I finally said. "Stop listening to them and do what you believe to be right."

He barked out a harsh laugh. "If only it were that easy." He gave me a sideways glance. "Believe me, I want to ignore them and…" His voice trailed off.

I didn't acknowledge his comment, but continued to stare out at the sky. Because I actually understood about feeling obligated. Since I could remember, all I'd lived for was to train so that one day I could destroy my sire and then join the ranks of the Dark Moths. I would protect the other Moths, those without the marks, those who were born to die in a sucky game of cat and mouse. Since meeting Kade, I had begun to doubt that was still my calling. "Let it be that easy," I said, crossing my arms, trying to hold all my emotions inside. "It's your life."

He noticed my stance and lightly bumped his shoulder into mine. "Enough about me. How are you?" he asked, changing the subject.

Now it was my turn to laugh, and it was every bit as harsh as his had been. I squeezed my arms tighter around myself. “Other than the fact that Lily has done something with Wrythe because she wants to be Queen of the Dark Moths, I’m super.” I relaxed my arms and twisted my hair up in a bun.

Kade grimaced. “All right, that was a stupid question.” He faced me, caressing my bare arms and sending goosebumps all over my flesh. “I just wondered if Professor Pops told you what I was.”

I studied him, thinking if I looked hard enough, I’d be able to tell for myself. “He said he has an idea but that he wasn’t certain.”

Relief tempered his brow and he unclenched his teeth. The reaction piqued my interest even further. “Why don’t you tell me,” I said, cupping one side of his face in my hand. His skin was smooth, almost like porcelain. I hadn’t discerned that detail before and it occurred to me how little I knew about the man in front of me.

He closed his eyes a moment, leaning into my hand before twining our fingers and tilting his head toward the high ceiling where a large fan swirled softly, filling the room with the scent of him. “I will,” he began. “It’s just when I tell you…” He blew out a breath, his gaze leaving my face and searching the bed. “What is that?” He let go of me and went over to pick up the demon orb. “Is this what I think it is? I’ve heard of them, but never seen one up close.” He held it up to the light where it gleamed and sparkled. The longer I looked at the ball, the more I felt myself sucked into its depths. The orb itself was small, but within it seemed to go on forever. “These are extremely rare.”

I heard him but didn’t respond as I felt my mind somehow enter the sphere.

As I watched, like a fly on the wall, a battle raged where brilliantly stunning people in white fought valiantly against the equally horrendous demons. Some demons still wore their human form while others revealed their disturbing, pus-filled selves. I blinked several times, trying to make the images go away, but they only intensified,

and I found myself desperate to help. The Devil came to the front line of the demons, a long, gleaming sword drawn. It pulsed with power, as well as permeated all around him.

Then he pushed his dark power out from him so it surrounded those in white on the front lines. At the leeching darkness, those who were touched dropped their weapons. Their faces slackened as though they'd been emptied of their souls. The Devil made quick work of them, cutting each down like withered weeds in a raging inferno.

"Alice?" Kade fisted the orb, cutting the bond.

I shook myself, desperate to be back in the fray, to find out what would happen, to make sure the Devil didn't win. "I-it's…" I sat on the edge of the bed, covering my face with my hands. "It's a demon orb," I finally said, in case he was unsure, though he didn't seem to be. "Do you know why Wrythe would give it to me?"

"It was Wrythe himself?" Kade sat beside me, resting a hand on my knee. The goosebumps returned as did a tingling warmth. "That's interesting," he continued.

"Why?" I laced his fingers with mine, the need for him returning. "What does it do?"

"What do you want it to do?" He held it out on his open palm.

I grunted, suddenly frustrated with him. The man needed to start providing me with straight answers. There was only so much patience I possessed, and it'd reached its limits with Kade. "I'm not sure," I said, grabbing the orb from his hand.

"I'm not trying to be obnoxious, Alice. I promise. Sure, I've heard of the orbs, but before now, I've never seen one. In all of creation, the orb has only been mentioned twice." He paused as though he wanted to make sure I understood how spectacular it was that I was in possession of one.

I had to admit that did seem rare, but still. "And what happened?" I asked.

"That's the thing. The first time, the orb was used by a young Moth

woman. According to the ancient texts, she found it amongst her mother's things five days after she turned eighteen. As it happened, her demon sire came to kill her while she still held the orb in her hand.

"As she related in the story, her demon sire taunted and tortured her for several hours until she was nearly dead. The demon spoke to her about her mother and how he'd used her and then killed her. Angrier than she'd ever been, she squeezed her hands into tight fists and cried out, 'May you die a thousand deaths and I be there to watch them all.'" Kade shifted so my back was to his chest and wrapped his legs around my waist, pulling me toward him.

Lust licked through my belly. Every part of my body ached for him. But I wanted to hear the rest of the story. With a deep, calming breath, I climbed away from Kade, and went to lie on a pillow. "And?" I prodded, feeling less overwhelmed. "What happened to the woman?"

"With her last breath, the orb flared to life, consuming her and the demon and just as she'd said, she watched the demon die a thousand times, in various ways, all of them horrible and gruesome."

"That sounds like torture for her as well as the demon," I said, tucking the pillow so I could see him better.

He laid beside me so we were face to face. "Agreed. It was. The woman remained within the orb for days until the demon had died a thousand times."

"And then what happened?" I asked, anxious for her though it was a long time ago.

"The demon was gone. With his last death, he turned to ash." Kade held out his hand and like a moth drawn to his white-hot flame, I threaded my fingers with his. He went on, "It's said that while she was within the orb, watching the demon die, something happened to her. When the brutality was over, she came from the orb with markings on her wrists." His thumb stroked hers.

"She was the first Dark Moth?" It reminded me of the story Wrythe

had shared about his markings and slaying his demon sire. Did Wrythe know this story too? I figured he must, even though his story had led me to believe he was the first Dark Moth. But he had said, “one of the first” not the first.

“Correct.” Kade tugged me against his taut chest. I relaxed against him, enjoying the feel and the smell of him.

At his closeness, my pulse quickened. “What about the other time a demon orb is talked about?” I asked, greedy for his lips on mine.

He seemed to recognize what I wanted because he touched his thumb to my lips, brushing against the fullness of the bottom one. “The Dark Moth went in search of an orb. During his travels he was told of a dragon who dwelled within a cave. After years of searching he located the dragon, called Abernathy. According to the Dark Moth’s recording, the dragon tried to eat him at first, but then promised him an orb in exchange for locating a spell book he’d lost. The Dark Moth agreed. He searched for years, coming across many supernatural creatures. Some he helped. Others he killed. Many befriended him, but there are those who became his enemies. When he found the book, he had to kill for it, and barely escaped with his life. Upon returning it to Abernathy, the dragon gave him the orb.”

My need for Kade was momentarily outweighed by the idea of an actual dragon. “Did he say what the dragon looked like?” Wrythe mentioned talking to a dragon. Could he have talked to this Abernathry?

Kade ginned, scooting so close that our arms and legs touched. “I believe there is reference to a golden dragon.”

I closed my eyes, trying to picture the creature. “What did the Moth do with the orb?”

“Well, I’d always believed he used it to become king, but I could be wrong,” he said, letting that sink in.

Was Kade talking about Wrythe? Had he used the orb to become king of the Dark Moths? As I debated what Kade meant, he stroked my

arm causing the flame of need within me to grow. But I needed to verify what Kade meant.

“You think this Dark Moth was Wrythe?” I asked, trying to focus, but it was difficult, especially when his fingers trailed down my arm and along my side to the bare skin at my back.

“Not Wrythe. A different king during a different time.”

For some reason, that gave me relief. Still, I clutched the orb tight, my curiosity about what it did growing ever more intense. But Kade’s roaming hand was beyond distracting. I threw one leg over his hip and pulled him to me, the demon orb forgotten. Kade took off his shirt, tossing it onto the floor. I admired his chest, and the way his muscles moved, but only for a moment, before I remembered what happened last time. “Won’t they pull you away again if we…” I let the words die in my throat at the thought of what we could do to each other.

“Probably, but I say we go for it anyway,” he said, tracing his fingers along my forehead and down my cheek.

Before I lost all control and gave into the hunger in Kade’s eyes, I had to ask him one more time. “Please, tell me what you are?”

Like a dying light, I watched the passion in his eyes fizzle. I pushed him off me, turning my lust and greed for him to anger. “What’s the big deal?” I sat up, adjusting my tank.

He got off the bed and retrieved his shirt, pulling it on. “Because,” he said and sounded horribly dejected. “When I tell you, everything will change between us.”

“Why?” I stood as well, confused. “Just spit it out,” I said, eager to have what he was out in the open. “I’ve been trying to figure out the reason you’ve kept your heritage from me a secret and I can’t understand.” Frustrated, I adjusted my shorts and retied my hair in a bun. “It’s obvious we are physically attracted to each other. Is that a bad thing? At first, I thought you pushed me away because you thought you were too good for me, but if that were true, you wouldn’t

keep coming back." I started to pace. "I mean I'm sure there are plenty of women willing to give themselves to you the way I have." Angry tears pressed against my lids and spilled onto my cheeks. I wiped at them, unable to make them stop.

"Alice, no. I don't think I'm better. It's just…" He paused again looking as though he wanted to comfort me, but wasn't sure he should.

The red glow returned and pulsed around me. "Just go. If you aren't going to tell me, then leave, and never come back. I don't want to see you again," I shouted, sick and tired of his resistance.

He growled, grabbing hold of my hips and crushing his lips against mine. I shoved my hands against his chest, but my heart wasn't in it, because damned if I didn't want him. As before, it felt as though we fused, and it felt like we were one. Our kisses were full of light and warmth and joy and happiness and… the words I'd read about chayot came into my mind. And I knew. Without a doubt, I knew. Pulling away, I held him at arm's length as I studied his face.

"You're an angel?" I whispered.

His shoulders sagged with liberation. "Yes," he said breathlessly.

"And that's why we can't be together. Because I'm the Devil's daughter, and you're…" I couldn't say it. "I'm sure there are rules about your kind and demons—even half demons—getting together."

"Big-time rules," he said, his voice laced with bitterness as his hands stroked up and down my back.

I rested my cheek against his chest, enjoying the way my body buzzed. "So why do we feel so good together?"

He shook his head, resting his chin against the top of my head. "I don't know."

OceanofPDF.com

"SO WHY DO you torture yourself and continue to come back to me?" I asked, grateful he was there. "I mean if we can't be together then why don't you stay away?" The words came out softly, each syllable heavy with pain.

"Great questions." He held me at arm's length, allowing me to see the hurt etched in his features. That helped a little. At least our pain was mutual. But that wasn't supposed to be how love went.

"So," I said, frantic to be back in his arms.

"I was assigned to you," he replied, stepping around me and toward the bed.

"Assigned?" I was trying to understand, but his absence physically hurt. More than that, I was emotionally flustered. "But we met the night Eric's sire came into the club to hunt him. That was a *coincidence*." Even as I said the words, I realized that wasn't true.

"No coincidence, Alice. I put myself in your path. After years of living the life of a normal human, I finally received my orders. They were to find you, and make sure you didn't…" He stopped, running his hands through his hair. "Then I met you and my world shifted." He was pacing, lost in his own thoughts. I watched him, bewildered, using those moments to let my own feelings adjust. "From the moment you climbed into that car to escape the menial demons, the time we spent together training, and up until you stood up for me to Wrythe and the others, my life has been changed. I kept trying to tell myself there was nothing between us, but I knew then just as I now know." He stopped and rubbed his eyes and then went to the window. "As soon as we entered the Trials, I went to my superiors, requesting to be removed from this assignment. I even went so far as to tell them the truth about my feelings for you. But instead of having empathy for my situation, they basically told me to suck it up and to go back and do

what needed to be done." He threw his hands up. "They've put me in an impossible situation." Kade looked at me then, his rant seemingly over. "Because every time I'm near you, I feel what's true."

I held my breath, knocked over by the strength of feeling shining in his eyes. "What's that?" I whispered, unable to say more.

"I'm so in love with you I can barely contain myself," he said, and fell to his knees in front of me.

Seeing him so miserable, so desperate, and in pain, cut my heart into ribbons. I ran to him, kneeling in front of him and pulling him into my arms. "You love me?" I asked, my words shaking with emotion.

He wrapped his arms around me. "I know it's crazy. When we're together, it's mostly about being physical, and in case you couldn't tell, I love getting physical with you." He smiled sadly.

"I can tell," I said, matching his smile with one of my own.

"For me it's so much more than that, too. I don't know everything about you, but I want to, and I want you to know me too." He took my hand, intertwining our fingers.

I hugged him tight a moment and then pushed back, but kept our fingers looped. "Kade, I feel the same way about you, which as a half demon makes no sense." We had all the emotions humans did, but the half demon part of us curbed softer emotions like love and kindness so that they were only a very small part of us. But all the emotion I felt for him rushed through my body, forcing out every one of the seven deadly sins and my heart burned with love for him. As I thought about my feelings, my body began to shine.

When it happened, Kade jumped up, stepping back. "How are you doing that?" He'd seen this happen to me before, but it obviously still surprised him.

I leaned back, sitting on my feet. "I don't know," I admitted.

"It's almost as if…" The sadness in his eyes vanished and he tried again. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were…"

I followed his gaze, but he didn't seem to be looking at anything, except maybe my cupcakes. I tried to bring him back to me with talk. "Professor Pops made cupcakes for my birthday. Did you want one?"

"Today's your birthday," he said, his voice lightening as though he were relieved. Then he smacked himself in the forehead. "Of course it is." Releasing my hand, he went over to the cupcakes. "Mind if I have one?"

I shrugged, as the light emanating from me softened and nearly vanished. "Go for it."

Kade took one and removed the paper. Mesmerized, I watched him rip the bottom half of the cake off, place it on top of the icing portion, and smoosh it together. He winked before taking a huge bite. "Really delicious," he said, licking his lips to get some of the frosting off. His changing emotions had my head spinning. "I love cupcakes," he said after he swallowed.

"I thought it was tacos." I crossed my arms, trying to see the angel in him.

"Technically that's true. I do love tacos, but really I just love eating my food as though it was a taco." He stuck the other half of the cupcake in his mouth.

"Oh." When we'd hung out together in the compound, he'd put all the food he could into taco form. "That makes sense," I said, suddenly tired.

He brushed off his hands and took something from his pocket. "This is for you." He held up a black leather bracelet with a pair of wings laced into the center. "Happy birthday," he said and kissed me lightly.

I licked at the peanut butter buttercream. "You did know," I responded, pleasantly surprised and loving the wings. They would always remind me of him. Except, did he even have wings?

"How could I forget?" He took my hand and slid the bracelet over my wrist, pulling the leather chords tight to keep it secure.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, tears pricking my eyes. “Thank you.”

He kissed me again. “You’re welcome, but why are you crying?”

“It’s just…” I had no idea. Dark Moths didn’t cry.

“What?” he asked, tenderly.

“It’s like you gave me a part of yourself,” I said, my eyes never leaving the angel wings.

“I have, Alice Blackburn. In case you weren’t sure, you do have my heart and soul and always will.” He pulled me into a hug. “But I need to go.”

“No, don’t,” I cried, clinging to him.

He held me tighter. “There is something I need to find out. Now that I’ve seen what you can do, twice, I need to talk to someone about it.” He took my chin between his thumb and first finger, tilting my face up to meet his. “But I’ll be back. Promise.” His kiss was tender, so tender that I felt his love flow through him and into me. In that moment it was as though I was falling into a million daisy petals.

He vanished as we kissed.

When he was gone I felt empty, as though he’d taken my heart with him. Again. Except this time, I gave it freely, knowing he would bring it back. Trusting he would. And if that made me the Queen of Hearts, then so be it.

At his absence, the full extent of my exhaustion filled every crevice of my being. I stumbled to the bed, falling onto it. The demon orb was still in my hand. I lifted it into the light, trying to see what I’d seen before. This time there was only emptiness and I was falling, falling, falling.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Or perhaps it was sideways or upside down. After falling for what felt like hours, time became hard to decipher. I searched for

something within the blackness to tell me where I was or what was happening. Finally, from a long ways off I saw two golden circles. They were coming toward me at a rapid rate. At first, I was excited, thinking whatever they were, they could explain what was happening.

But as they drew closer, I saw a shadow behind them and understood the yellow circles were eyes attached to a body. An enormous body.

With effort, I tried to get away, but nothing worked. In that moment, I believed the monster might eat me, but when the creature was directly in front of me, it came to an abrupt stop. Large golden wings beat at its back. Its snout sparkled with golden scales, and it had a long golden mane. “Abernathy,” I breathed, somehow knowing he was the dragon from the story. I didn’t know how I knew, but it was as though we’d always known each other.

“That’s right, child,” he said, and twin puffs of smoke left his nose.

“Is this real? Or am I dreaming?” I was still in emptiness. Nothing but an empty expanse around us.

A deep rumbling rose up from him. The dragon was laughing, sending tendrils of smoke out of his mouth. “Does it matter? The orb brought me to you.”

“Did you create the orbs?” I asked.

“It was a collaborative effort between myself and two other beings I’d rather not discuss,” he said.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” I crossed my arms, trying to hold myself together.

He turned his face so that one large, yellow eye studied me intently. “Alice Blackburn, I have every faith that you will know what to do with it when the time is right.”

“That isn’t really an answer,” I said, hoping for more.

“Well, that’s because there isn’t a definitive one. How would you learn? How would you grow, if your future was laid out before you

and you knew how it all ended before it even began?"

"I'd be fine with that," I said, truthfully. "If it ends well, I can go forward in confidence."

"But what if it doesn't?" Abernathy gave me a pointed look, his great wings flapping silently at his sides.

"Will my life end badly?" I felt myself getting sick at the thought of losing.

"Tut-tut, Alice. I didn't say that. You have to fight, love, make choices, serve, and become your best self on the journey. You can't do that if you already know how it ends That wouldn't be prudent and prudence is an important virtue.

There'd been mention in one of our books about the seven virtues, plus Peter's note mentioned them as well. "You know about the seven virtues?"

"Most definitely. Do you?" A lick of smoke left his mouth when he asked.

"I think so," I said and told him about Peter's entry.

"He's right. I sense all of those things within you as well. But what you may not know is that the reason there are seven virtues and seven vices is that there must always be balance."

Now that I thought about it, that made sense. "That seems reasonable," I said.

He chuckled, flashing all of his large and sharp teeth. "I'm sure you can figure out which virtue cancels out the corresponding vice and vice versa."

I was about to tell him no, but as I thought about it, the answer came. "Forgiveness would overcome wrath. Humility could diffuse pride. Charity overcomes greed. Kindness would negate envy. Diligence and sloth. Lust and chastity, and temperance cancels out gluttony."

"Exactly, Alice. That's impressive."

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a moment of pride. In the same moment a flicker of humility cut through. I also noticed a palpable difference in the way I felt when my thoughts were focused on pride versus humility.

“You should know most Moths don’t feel much of the virtues, especially the one opposite their demon sire.”

I hadn’t thought about that, but it made sense.

“There are rare occasions when a Moth makes an effort to overcome their demoness, but you are even rarer than that, dearest Alice.” He closed his eyes a moment as though thinking.

Wendy came to mind. After Eric died, she’d been full of wrath, but in recent days that prevalent emotion had changed. I didn’t know if it was forgiveness, but maybe she was getting there. “How do you mean?” I’d been giving in to my greed and lust and wrath on a regular basis lately.

“You’ll know soon enough.” His giant wings started pounding faster and he backed up, flying away from me.

“Where are you going? Don’t leave.” I wasn’t done talking to him. We just started talking.

“Our time together is at an end—at least for now. I’ve shared all you need to know at this time.” Flapping his enormous, bat-like wings, he turned and flew away, ignoring my calls to come back. When he was no more than a blip in the dark, I felt myself falling again. When I woke, I found myself in bed.

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER DRESSING THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I headed down to the kitchen, urged on by my nose. The smell of eggs, bacon, and buttered toast had filtered up to my room and by the time I sat at the counter island, my mouth was watering.

"Everything smells amazing," I said, watching Professor Pops cook.

He wore a black apron with the words *Professors Do It Better* across the front.

I smiled, thinking I'd just discovered another layer to the old vampire. He had a wicked wit.

"Thanks, Alice." He plated the food and slid it across the counter.

"Thank *you*," I replied, picking up my fork and shoveling a bite in my mouth.

"Would you like jam?" he asked.

I really did want jam, but sitting there while he served me made me feel slothful. "I can get it." I stood and went over to the fridge.

"I don't mind. I enjoy being in the kitchen," he said while I slathered some strawberry preserves on my toast.

At that comment, I wondered why he hadn't married. Surely there were other vampires—female vampires—in the world. I wanted to ask him about his love life, but it didn't seem appropriate.

So, while he tidied up the kitchen and I ate, I asked him about his family. He told me about his sons and daughters-in-law. It seemed his family was growing bigger every day and I saw his happiness as he spoke about them. At his words, I longed for a real family, even though I knew it was impossible. Such thoughts were not a good idea and I pushed them away. I had a lot of other things to worry about.

"Should we discuss the plan?" I asked, when I finished eating and as I took my empty plate to the sink.

“Absolutely. I spent most of last night going over ideas and I’ve come up with something I want to run past you.” As he spoke, Gatsby meowed. Professor Pops scowled, heading over to open the back door where the cat stood waiting. “I suppose you can come in,” he said dryly. “Though I can’t see why it’s necessary.”

Gatsby meowed loudly, jumping up on the chair beside me, rubbing his head against my arm. “Hello, kitty.” I scratched behind his ears and he purred loudly.

“Don’t get fresh,” Professor Pops said. I looked up, surprised to see he was speaking to the cat like he understood.

“He’s sweet,” I said, trying to console the professor.

“He’s irritating.”

I wasn’t going to argue. “What’s your idea?” I rested my elbows on the counter and zeroed in on Professor Pops.

He spent the better part of twenty minutes laying it out for me. I asked questions, listened, and gave input when necessary. I was grateful for the distraction from my thoughts about Kade. The man I loved wasn’t a man at all, but an angel! It was all so crazy. When we finished discussing the plan, I needed a moment to digest and changed the subject, asking him about Snow White. He was telling me how she’d become the Vampire Queen. The story of the klutzy young woman who’d believed she was nothing and how she’d become the Vampire Queen was fascinating. The Professor’s insights and stories really helped to expand my world view.

“What’s wrong?” Professor Pops asked after a lull in the conversation.

“Nothing,” I said, my face warming. “Sorry. Please go on.” I really enjoyed hearing about his family, even if it was in the context of how we were going to fix my problem. The Dark Moths, the compound, the Society as a whole and all that entailed had been my home for the better part of my life.

Professor Pops smiled before continuing. As he spoke, Gatsby

jumped up on the counter and sat between Pops and me, his fluffy gray head swishing back and forth as we talked. If I didn't know any better, I would swear the cat was listening as intently as me. After a while, he lay down on the counter and closed his eyes, obviously bored by our talk.

"This is a great idea, Professor Pops. And it just might work," I said, thinking about Wrythe. A big part of the plan involved rescuing him. I hoped he was all right, but I didn't worry too much about him. If anyone could take care of himself, it was the king. "What about weapons?" I asked. There were plenty in the training room at the Dark Moth compound but reaching it without running into anyone would be impossible.

"I've got that covered," Professor Pops said. "Follow me."

I slid off the barstool, trailing him down the hall. He unlocked a door. "I want to prepare you for what you're about to see," he said.

"Okay?" A flutter of worry churned in my belly and an image of Pasty and what I'd done to him crossed my mind.

"Heathcliff told me they don't teach you much about the outside world while you're in school and I can understand why. You are training and learning all you can about the evil creatures hunting you for sport." He gave me a wry smile. "Down here you'll get an up-close look at many of the other supernatural creatures roaming the Earth. They aren't alive, so don't be afraid."

I appreciated his reassurance. "Thank you," I said, eager to see what he had down there. I still had Heathcliff's journal and the pages had revealed a lot, but seeing them for myself would be much better.

"Ready?"

"Yes," I nodded, tucking my hands in my pockets.

He started down, flipping a switch as he went. At the bottom of the stairs was another door, which he unlocked. Slowly, he pushed it opened and went inside.

I followed. Gatsby padded past me and Professor Pops and

disappeared beyond. When I entered the room, I was immediately in awe. There were creatures everywhere. Each in its own glass case. Some were so small they could fit on my shoulder while others were huge, including what looked like a dragon. I was fascinated and went over for a closer look. “This is incredible.” I ran my fingers along the glass, stooping to check out its wings. The creature was fascinating. “Are there still dragons in the world?” I turned in slow circles trying to take everything in and ran into a wooden stand holding a book. Of course my mind went to Abernathy, but I wasn’t sure that was real or just a dream.

Professor Pops caught it with inhuman speed. “Yes,” he said simply. “Most live in the dragon realm, but a few dwell in the human one too.

“Sorry.” I righted myself and the stand. “And cool.” I didn’t mention my interaction with Abernathy.

“Not to worry,” Pops said. “You’d be surprised how many times that’s happened.” He set the book back where it belonged. “You’re welcome to look around if you like or we can continue into the weapons room.”

I really wanted to stay and look around, but doing so wasn’t a necessity. What was most important? Saving Wrythe and encouraging, forcefully, if necessary, the council to rescind their decision to let me go through the Trial of Three. “I’m thinking we collect our gear and go immediately. But I hope I can come back again someday.”

“Agreed,” Professor Pops said.

I followed him to the far side of the massive room.

He opened the door and held it for me.

I walked through the entrance and grinned. A long wooden set of drawers rested near the door and within were armor and other protective clothing. The wall on the left showcased an impressive collection of hammers, axes, bows and arrows while the wall on the right consisted of shields, whips, and throwing stars. There were

quiver cases below the arrows as well as sheaths for the blades. After a quick perusal, my eyes went to the final wall, which was lined with all kinds of swords, including my favored katanas. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” he said, taking a large broadsword, a gun, and several smaller knives.

In addition to the katana, I helped myself to a handgun as well as several smaller throwing knives, tucking a few in my boots. It didn’t take long at all to get stocked up. “I’m ready,” I said, heading over to him.

Professor Pops sheathed his sword and nodded. “Me too.”

I exited the room first and noticed Gatsby sitting on the floor near the dragon, grooming himself. While Professor Pops locked the weapons’ room door, I watched Gatsby. He was an odd cat.

“I have a question,” I said, following Professor Pops back through the supernatural museum and up the stairs.

“What is it?” At the top, he waited for Gatsby and me to pass him and then shut and locked the door.

“How are we going to get there?” Flying seemed the most likely option, but with our arsenal of weapons, I knew they wouldn’t let us on a plane. We could drive, but that would take days. Technically, we had the time, but I was anxious to get going.

At my question, Professor Pops went past the kitchen and out onto the back terrace. Gatsby and I followed. “Wait here,” Professor Pops said.

“Uh, okay.” I wasn’t sure what was going on.

Professor Pops stood beside me while Gatsby padded to the far end of the concrete and then turned back to face us.

The professor cocked his head to one side. “You might as well tell her,” he said, looking at the cat.

Gatsby studied us a moment. “Fine,” he said.

Needless to say, I freaked out a little. “Did the cat just talk?” My

head whipped between Professor Pops and Gatsby.

Professor Pops rolled his shoulders back. “He did.”

“How are you so calm?” I crossed one leg over the other and hugged my arms to myself thinking this was just another day in the life of me not knowing anything about the world.

He chuckled softly. “I’m a vampire. You’re half demon. And that cat… well, let’s just say he’s not just a cat.”

For some reason, his words calmed me. “True. Okay, so what is he?” I turned my gaze on the cat. “What are you?”

He stared back but didn’t respond. Part of me wondered if I’d really heard him speak. It could’ve just been the wind.

The cat proved I had heard him talk by doing it again. “Why are you rushing me, professor?” He stretched out on the concrete like he wanted a nap.

“Holy crap!”

Professor Pops gave an impatient huff. “Hurry up before she loses her mind.”

“When I change, she’ll probably pass out and then that’ll slow us down.” He licked one of his paws, grooming himself like he had all day.

My wrath flared at the way they were discussing me like I was a little girl without the power of all seven deadly sins. “Just tell me already,” I shouted. I was sick of all the secrets!

“As you wish, dear Alice,” Gatsby said. As he spoke, he began to transform. I’d seen that happen before when a demon shed his human shell to reveal what he looked like underneath. Most of the time, a full-fledged royal demon stood eight to ten feet tall. But Gatsby passed that size and continued to grow. The most surprising part of all? He transformed into a dragon! And not just any dragon, but the one I’d seen in my vision or whatever when I was staring at the demon orb.

“Holy… Wow! You’re Abernathy, right?” I gritted my teeth to keep

from screaming.

“Exactly,” he said, and a puff of smoke left his mouth. He ruffled his wings and shook his head. He was golden in every sense of the word. From his shiny scales to his long, yellow mane. And he was glorious to behold.

I walked toward him, desperate to discover whether his scales were hot or cold. Reverently I touched one, which was bigger than my hand. It was warm.

“Abernathy can be quite conceited,” Professor Pops said, though I saw the admiration on his face. It occurred to me that the two of them had known each other a long time.

“No more so than you are, vampire,” Abernathy said.

“Very well.” The professor had a nasty look on his face as if he didn’t appreciate being reminded of his shortcomings. “Shall we be on our way?” He came to stand beside Abernathy and clasped his hands together to form a step. Then he nodded, indicating I should climb on.

“Wait. What?”

“You asked how we are getting to Wonderland and now you know. We are flying, but not in a jet or a plane. We are flying by dragon.”

OceanofPDF.com

THE WIND WHIPPED through my hair, knocking it from the tie that held it back. I clung to Abernathy's mane, determined to stay upright, though there was no chance of sliding off. The dragon was much bigger than I was. I could've laid down and my body still wouldn't have reached the width of him.

Professor Pops sat behind me, his hands resting on his thighs like riding a dragon was nothing unusual.

I didn't have his calm. In fact, my emotions were layered like a chocolate trifle. Fear at the base followed by anxiety, anger, and irritation. But spread over the top and coaxing all of the other emotions into submission was peace. A sense of rightness. It didn't make sense. I was born of a demon, brought up deep below the earth. Flying wasn't even part of my vocabulary. There hadn't been a need. But as the wind tangled my hair, a part of me I didn't recognize soared to life and fizzled with voracious happiness.

"A great way to travel, am I right?" Abernathy said, his voice deep and rumbly in the warm air.

"Sure," I said. And then thought better of my response. "I really appreciate it, but what about satellites and cellphones and just people in general? Won't they see you flying and send F-16's to shoot you down or something?"

He laughed, and as he did, his whole body went up and down. I held on tighter, until my knuckles turned white. "They might if they could see me, but we're cloaked in magic," he said. "So you can relax and enjoy yourself. It isn't everyone who gets to ride a dragon." Smoke blew from his nostrils. "Flying is more right for you than you know."

What was that supposed to mean? "I really don't think so, Abernathy," I said, because hello, I was half demon. But I couldn't

deny flying felt right and amazing.

“Trust me when I say it’s true, Alice,” his deep voice added.

The dragon had lost his mind and I glanced back at Professor Pops for clarification.

He just shrugged, an unreadable look on his face. Was there something they knew that they weren’t telling me? I could ask, but I decided to only worry about the task at hand. “What about the other way in? Where is it?” I spoke loudly enough so Professor Pops and Abernathy could hear over the wind.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Professor Pops pointed down.

“We’re here already?” Below us was the parking garage. The one we used whenever we wanted to exit Demonland.

“We are,” Abernathy said, diving down, down, down. He landed on the upper-most level of the garage, his large talons clicking against the concrete and it rumbled under his weight.

To say I was shocked we’d arrived already was putting it lightly. It felt like we just climbed on Abernathy’s back. But we were in fact here. “Unbelievable.”

“Believe it, Alice.” Abernathy shuddered, and his body changed from a dragon to the very unexciting gray cat called Gatsby.

“How do you do that?” I asked in wonder.

“The question shouldn’t be how, but why? And the answer is quite simple. As a dragon I wouldn’t fit in Demonland without destroying everything in my path.”

“Okay, that makes sense.”

Professor Pops hadn’t said much, but stood off to the side, mixing something together in his hands. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” I asked, watching.

“This.” He threw what he had in his hand up in the air. The particles sailed upward, twinkling like they possessed their own light. They were beautiful, like a million stars dancing. They began to fall,

but when they reached waist level, they stopped, hovering a moment before they started to spin in a circle, creating a ring. The light became almost blinding before it shot down through the garage and disappeared. He shot me a playful grin. “Ready?” He took a step toward the gaping black hole.

“Wait!” I said, grabbing hold of his arm. It seemed reckless to just drop into Demonland, guns blazing. We didn’t know how prepared the Dark Moths were. “Do you know where this… hole will drop us?”

“Not to worry, Alice. It’ll take us directly into Heathcliff’s office.”

I released his arm. “Is Heathcliff there?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “He’s expecting us.”

“Okay.” Worry still fluttered in my belly. Or maybe I wasn’t as ready as I thought I was to fight all of Demonland. “What will you do down there?”

The cat seemed to smile, and I blinked in anticipation. I didn’t have to wait for long.

The cat transformed once again. This time into a man dressed from head to toe in black. He was the same height as me, his eyes dark as the night as was his hair, which was pulled back into a high ponytail.

Professor Pops stopped what he was doing and crossed his arms. “Well, this is a surprise.” He glared at the man that used to be a cat that also turned into a dragon. “And I suppose you want one of my weapons, Kenmei?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble,” the man said, smiling calmly.

My mouth hung open. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

Kenmei took the sword Professor Pops offered, then winked at me. “You keep your mouth hanging open like that for long and you’ll attract bats.”

That shook me out of it. I closed my mouth with a click. “So, I’m not supposed to be shocked that you’ve been a cat, a dragon, and a man all in the last few hours?”

Kenmei gave me a heartwarming smile and I knew we would get along famously. “You slay demons, what’s the big deal with seeing a cat-dragon-man?” He shrugged. “That’s nothing.”

“Your idea of *nothing* and mine are very different.” I checked my weapons to make sure they are all still there.

“Fine.” He glanced at Professor Pops. “What’s the plan?” he asked and looked at me.

I answered. “We find and round up the seven members of the Dark Moth council and hold them captive.”

“Right. We’ll bring them back to Heathcliff’s office. He’s got a room in the back where they won’t be able to use their powers.”

“Yes, and we’ll hold them until they agree to take back their approval of my doing the Trial or Three.”

“And if they don’t?” Kenmei asked, smiling as he waved his sword like a dangerous baton.

“We offer them an ultimatum,” I said, grinning wickedly, feeling a little smug. Pops’ plan was going to work.

Kenmei stopped swinging the sword and sheathed it. “What if they choose death?”

I hadn’t thought about that. “They won’t,” I said, but it was a possibility I hadn’t considered. “They have to take it back.” My smugness turned to wicked worry.

“Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but they don’t have to do anything.” Kenmei gave me a look and I knew he was right.

“Professor Pops?” I needed his calm wisdom.

“It’s true, they don’t have to agree, but I feel confident we can encourage them to see things our way.” He went closer to the hole.

“Right, we will split up, then?” Kenmei asked, going to stand beside Professor Pops.

“Do you know what Dark Moth council members look like?” That seemed impossible. How would they know who to capture? The

question caught hold all of the sudden.

Professor Pops and I had agreed to stay together—at least as much as we could, though he said his vampire abilities would give him the extra senses he needed to find them. “No, but I have plenty of abilities that’ll help me.” Kenmei opened his mouth to reveal his vampire fangs. “Easy.”

“*And* you’re a vampire?” The man in front of me had been a gray cat when I first met him followed by an enormous golden dragon and now, not only had he transformed into a man, but he was also a vampire? I felt very inadequate next to the two of them.

“*Hai*. It’s true. I am.” He bowed slightly. “Shall we go?”

I looked at Professor Pops. He lifted his eyebrows, asking with his eyes whether I was ready.

Was I? Without a doubt. “Let’s do this.”

“Excellent.” Kenmei jumped into the hole first.

Professor Pops followed.

I took in the bright sky for the briefest moment before following after them.

In less than a blink of an eye, I landed with a thud on my feet in Heathcliff’s office. Doc yelped at the sight of me. “You startled me,” he said, adjusting his glasses.

“Sorry,” I replied, glancing around. I knew how that felt. “Where’s Kenmei and Professor Pops?”

“They haven’t arrived yet.” He went back over to his desk. “I’m sure they’ll be along soon.”

Panic set in. “They went through before I did.”

He glanced at me, worried, then went to the door. “Stay here. I’ll go look around.” He left before I could respond.

“They won’t be coming,” Kade said, appearing out of thin air.

I clutched at my shirt over my heart. “What about that bell?” I asked, taking a calming breath.

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, though he didn’t look it.

“Why won’t they be coming?” What did he know? Had he done something to them?”

“They aren’t the right kind of creature for the compound to allow in. Only a select group of supernaturals can enter. Dragons and vampires aren’t on the list.” He tucked his hands into the pockets of his black camo pants that looked remarkably similar to mine.

“But you do?” He was an angel. Why would they be allowed into Demonland?

“Much to the council’s dismay, yes. They can’t keep me out, no matter how hard they try.”

“Why not?”

He gave me a lopsided smile before looking down. “I’m the yin to the Dark Moths’ yang. Balance, remember? Without us there could be no them.”

Angels and demons. That made sense, but I didn’t have time to think more on it, nor did I have the time to study his face and see what he’d figured out before he left. But I wanted to. “I need to find Wrythe and Peter.” I went to the door and turned the handle.

“Alice, wait.” He grabbed hold of my arm and pulled so I fell against his chest. Our nearness astonished him as much as it did me. “You need to be careful. Let me check first.”

That brought me back to reality. I pushed away and stood my ground. “Where did Professor Pops and Kenmei go?”

He crossed his bulky arms over his chest. I licked my lips before looking away. Why did he have to be so damn good looking? “They are safely back in the parking garage where they started. Nothing happened to them. They just can’t enter, no matter how hard they try.”

I couldn’t believe it. “We had a plan,” I began lamely. “I’m not sure…” My voice trailed off as Kade ran a finger down my arm. “Stop

that!" I smacked his hand away. "I need to concentrate."

"Right." He went over to the table where Heathcliff had been standing before he left. On it were totes full of bullets. Kade picked one up, studying it. "These will do," he said, pulling a gun from the middle of his back (the same place I kept mine). He loaded his gun. "You'd better do the same."

I shook my head. "I've got plenty." We'd loaded up at Professor Pops' house.

"Yes, but are your bullets dipped in angel essence?"

"I—" I'd forgotten Heathcliff made those. "I don't want to kill anyone, just slow them down," I said, but picked up a bullet and studied it. They looked just like the regular ones.

"It's a nice thought, Alice, but you may not have a choice. If it's you or them, I'll choose you every time." His words took my breath away.

"Really?" I asked, but I knew he was right about fighting.

He kissed me lightly on the lips. "I've gone all in with you, Alice Blackburn."

My legs turned to mush as a queasy happiness filled my belly. "You have? What does that mean? Where did you go?"

He kissed me again, longer this time. "I'll tell you later. Promise." The cinnamon scent of him lingered in my nose, causing the back of my throat to ache with want. But now wasn't the time. "Follow me," he added.

"But do you know where you're—" I began.

He looked back at me, cutting me off before I could finish. "You'd better lead the way."

"Stay close." Even though I was worried about Professor Pops and Abernathy, I felt good. Better than good. Complete? Kade did that to me.

"Ready?" he asked, opening the door.

“Yep. Yes,” I added. Peering out, I looked both ways, before heading left. “Stay close,” I said, even though I didn’t need to. He was right behind me.

Every time I heard talking, I glanced back, but no one saw us until we reached the elevator. “No key,” I hissed. “Can you do something about this?”

He put a finger over my mouth. “Trust me.”

Trust was a tough one for me. I wanted to trust him though.

You can trust me. He spoke the words into my mind.

My eyes went wide. *Why do I keep forgetting we can do this?*

He shook his head, a wry grin on his face. “Be quiet a moment while I listen.” He winked.

I let out a breath, grinding my teeth, forcing myself not to say anything. And then a strange thing happened. I could hear someone speaking, but they sounded really far away. It sounded like Lily. But before I could understand what was being said, someone found us.

“They said you’d return, but I didn’t want to believe you’d be so stupid.”

“Not after what you’ve done.”

Kade and I spun around as one. It was Georgia and Gilbert, both heavily armed. Georgia with an axe and Gilbert pointing a large gun directly at me.

“Sorry,” Kade whispered. “I was too focused on what was being said elsewhere.

“Did you find him?” I whispered.

“Maybe. Keep them occupied.” He vanished.

Georgia yelped. “That was Kade, right? What was he doing here? How did he do that? Where did he go?” She spun in a circle, searching for him.

I held up my hands, scrambling for words that would end this situation peacefully. “He went to go find Wrythe,” I said, deciding to

tell the truth as I took a careful step forward. “I haven’t done anything wrong, Georgia. I swear.”

“Don’t move,” Gilbert said. “We don’t want to hear another one of your lies.” Quicker than I thought possible, he fired his gun at me.

At the last second, I moved enough that it shot me in the shoulder instead of the neck. That would’ve been a lethal blow. “Gilbert!” I touched my shoulder, verifying that the bullet had gone straight through. If not, I’d have to dig it out later and I wasn’t a fan of pain.

At that moment, the elevator pinged open and Lily appeared, her expression confused then aggravated. “Don’t just stand there. Get her!” she shouted at Georgia and Gilbert, moving toward me.

As Lily grabbed my arm, she shoved a knife into my belly. I coughed and sputtered, surprised she’d gotten the upper hand so easily. “I told you what would happen if I ever saw you again,” she seethed, pushing the blade in deeper.

Blood dribbled from my mouth as I coughed, but I refused to be done already. Going on instinct, I grabbed the gun from the small of my back and fired it at Lily, into her shoulder at about the same place I’d been shot.

She screamed, falling to her knees. I wasn’t impressed by her theatrics. It was a non-lethal wound, especially for a Dark Moth. She would heal soon and probably wouldn’t even have a scar. Unless it wasn’t. The bullets were laced with angel essence.

Behind her Georgia threw an axe. I caught it and threw it back so that it struck the wall behind her, burying its sharp edge deep in the ugly wallpaper. “Stop it,” I shouted. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Pain radiated from my shoulder and my stomach as I pulled out the knife and let it drop to the floor.

Gilbert remained where he was, unsure what to do. The gun wavered in his hand.

“I’m going to fix this, Georgia, and you’ll see I’m innocent.” I jumped over Lily, ignoring the pain and the blood and got into the

elevator, where I pushed a button so the door would close.

“Shoot her,” Georgia shouted at Gilbert, grabbing the axe out of the wall and hurling it at me.

Lily curled into a ball and let out a panicked howl. “What’s happening to me?” As the doors began to close between us, I saw that Lily’s bloodied hand had turned gray. “Help,” she moaned as the gray continued up her arm. I couldn’t see her face, but her long hair turned gray as her hand became ash. Though the bullet hadn’t hit any major arteries, the angel essence obviously was killing Lily. At the realization, my entire body shook. I’d killed her, but I hadn’t meant to.

“Plea—” Lily’s head collapsed and fell forward, changing to ash before hitting the ground. Within seconds, Lily was gone, her body nothing more than a pile of gray powder.

I made eye contact with Georgia. Greed power rolled off her like a thunderstorm, filling the corridor.

“You’ll pay for this,” Georgia spat, running for me.

Thankfully the elevator doors finally closed.

OceanofPDF.com

BILE ROSE in my throat as I watched Lily die in my mind over and over again. What had I done? With more questions than answers buzzing through my mind, I checked to see which button I'd randomly hit to get the elevator doors to close. D13. That meant I was heading even farther down than when Kade and I had gone for Trial of Three. Under D13 were two more buttons: D14 and D15. If D13 wasn't holding Wrythe, then I'd try D14, followed by the bottommost level before starting back up and checking the rest.

As I rode down, I breathed in slowly through my nose, lifting my shirt to see where Lily had stabbed me. The jagged cut was still open, but had stopped bleeding. The bullet wound wasn't bleeding anymore either.

I rolled my wounded shoulder and then tucked in my shirt. When the elevator doors pinged open, a rancid, rotten smell overwhelmed my senses, knocking away any lingering thoughts about my wounds or Lily. The stench was worse than the stinking menial rats. Dim lights flickered in the semi-circular entryway. The floor felt like rock and was a light tan color. Straight ahead, at positions ten, twelve, and two on a clock stood tall metal doors. Stepping out of the elevator, I debated which door to enter first.

I closed my eyes and listened. It was as quiet as a tomb. But after a moment, I heard something familiar. My eyes snapped open. Teeth gritted, I went to the door straight ahead and turned the handle. The room inside felt like Pasty's basement. Torture machines lined the two side walls while metal bars of prison cells ran along the back. Behind them were several menial demons, but they weren't gnashing at the cage bars the way they usually did when we were getting ready to battle them. These looked sick. But that wasn't what caught my attention. Arranged in a straight line from one end of the large room

to the other were metal gurneys. Every one of them had something on it, covered in white sheets stained with demon blood.

My stomach roiled as I thought of the girl who'd been under the sheet in Pasty's basement. He'd said I was just like him—a murderer. And while we Dark Moths didn't kill humans, only demons, as my eyes scanned the gurneys, I couldn't help but wonder if Pasty was right. Was someone torturing menial rats? And for what purpose?

With trepidation, I went to the closest gurney and carefully lifted the sheet. Pieces of a menial lay there, its eyes frozen open, its tongue lolling to one side. I wondered why it hadn't turned to ash as all demons do when they died. And then the eyes slowly moved, catching and holding my gaze.

I gagged. Somehow, they were still alive. "How is this possible?" I moved to the next table and saw more of the same. The demons were all alive! I held no love for demons and I was as anxious to slay them as the next Dark Moth. But with each lift of the sheet, I saw new horrors, and had to believe that regardless of their species, this kind of torture was cruel and unnecessary.

Rage turned my body red. Taking the knife I kept in my boot, I quickly killed the demons on the gurneys. Then I went to the cell. The menials there were still whole, but they had been tortured as well. At my approach, they shied away from the entrance. I shook the handle, trying to open it, but it was locked. Frustrated, I vowed to return and put the rest of the rats out of their misery.

The other two doors held more tortured demons—the one on the left of center held tracker demons while the one on the right contained royal demons. After killing all of them, I felt gross and dirty, and more than ready to bring whoever was doing this to a swift justice. Death wouldn't be good enough for them.

What if this was Wrythe's doing? The question pummeled my mind, but I shook it away. Wrythe would never do such a thing.

Back in the elevator, I gingerly pushed the D14 button, dreading

what I would find below this one. But that floor was empty. Just a vast cave of nothingness. So I pushed D15, steeling myself for whatever came next. Distracted by the horrors above, I'd momentarily forgotten my mission. But as the elevator opened, I remembered. I needed to find Wrythe.

A gust of hot wind struck my face and arms. A flicker of light came from somewhere in front of me, allowing me to see the layout of this floor. "Kade," I whispered. The man always seemed to know where I was. I hadn't called for him sooner because I was humiliated my people, Dark Moths, could be capable of such evil.

"I'm here," Kade said, appearing at my side.

Relief rushed over me. "I need to find Wrythe."

"I'm with you," he responded, studying my shirt like he could see in the dark. But he didn't say anything.

A moan sounded somewhere beyond what I could see. As the door closed, I removed the gun from my back, and made my way toward the noise. As I walked the hallway, I searched each stall for Wrythe, but came up empty. My heart sank. Maybe I was hearing things. Was there even a chance he or Peter could be down here? By the sixth stall, I doubted it, but something urged me on, so I kept going.

Another moan cut through the silence. "Wrythe," I whispered, picking up speed until I reached the end of the hall. The stall on the left was empty so I checked the final one on the right. Someone was in there, leaning against the wall in the corner. His face had been beaten so badly it was difficult to make out who it was. I peered in closer. "Wrythe," I said again, kneeling to get a better look at his injuries.

He let out another moan as he tried to open his eyes. "Alice." His voice was raspy, like he had glass in his throat.

"I'm going to get you out of here." I kept my voice soft though I didn't know why.

He tried to lift his head and I noticed one of his wrists hanging slightly above his head. It dangled at an odd angle. A wail of anger

rose up in me, but I forced it back down. I needed to stay calm. Now wasn't the time to fall apart.

"Peter," he said, indicating the other side of the rectangular stall.

I glanced in that direction. Peter wasn't moving. "Okay, we'll help him too," I said, fighting back tears. The Pride instructor wasn't moving, and his body lay in a crumbled ball.

"Is he dead?" Wrythe asked.

Kade went over to him, placing his fingers at the artery on his neck. Then shook his head. "No, I'm sorry."

I didn't want to believe him, but had to know for myself. "Let me check." I went over, though I didn't want to. I was afraid of the answer. He was so still. "Peter," I whispered. "It's me. It's Alice. I'm here to help." I shook him slightly. Nothing. I checked for a pulse.

"Is he alive? Peter?" Wrythe's words came out choppy.

"I can't find a pulse, Wrythe." Tears blurred my eyes and my resolve to keep calm was shattering with each passing second.

Wrythe let out a haggard breath. "I didn't think so," he said. His resignation made my heart hurt even more.

I went back over to Wrythe and pulled on the chain holding his wrist against the wall. It wouldn't budge.

"Troll magic," he said simply. "I can't free myself, nor can I heal." He coughed, spitting up something dark. I guessed it was blood.

"It's fine. You're fine. I'm going to get you out of here and then Heathcliff can fix you up. Doc can fix anything." I yanked on the chain again, ignoring the stinging pain from my wounds at the effort. Then I stood and placed on foot against the wall, using it as leverage to yank the blasted thing out. "Damn it," I said after several long moments.

"It's okay, Alice," Wrythe said.

But it wasn't, and I could tell. He was dying.

"Help me," I shouted at Kade, but he stayed where he was, frozen. Rage boiled over and out of me and my skin glowed red, illuminating

Wrythe's bloodied and swollen face an eerie glow. "Please," I moaned, confused by Kade's lack of action.

"Hang on, my king." I pulled again. The chain still wouldn't budge. "Come on. I planted both feet and pulled with all my might, including all of my red demon power. "Aaargh!" I yanked again until Wrythe moaned.

"You're hurting my wrist," he said barely above a whisper.

"Sorry. Dammit! Sorry, sire" I said, breathing heavily, beyond angry at Kade, the Society, and the situation. It felt as though I should be able to break the chains with one hand, but it wouldn't budge.

"Give me your hand, Alice. We need to get out of here." Kade grabbed hold of me.

I yanked my hand away. "No! I'm not leaving Wrythe. Get us both out of here."

"I can't," he said and looked broken. "But you can. You have the power to do it yourself, Alice." He touched my arm. "I know you can feel it."

I glared, my blood boiling beyond wrath that he would be using this moment as a teaching opportunity. "I don't give a damn what you think. Help me save him or I never want to see you again!" The threat was a lie, but I was desperate.

Wrythe said something. It sounded like, "Save yourself," but I ignored him. We'd already lost Peter. I'd be damned if we lost Wrythe, too.

Like the flip of a switch, my rage turned to desperation. "Please, Kade. If you care for me at all, you'll go against whatever is holding you back and help me save Wrythe."

He nodded, coming to stand beside me. "Very well," he said.

But before he could do anything, Skye, the Sloth Councilmember rounded the corner. "There's no escape, Alice." She gave me a slow smile, one meant to scare me, but it didn't work.

In that moment, I realized I didn't want to escape. And I wasn't afraid. I would stand my ground. I wanted to fight. "What makes you think I want to get away?"

She took a step back at my comment. "Don't you?" she asked, surprised.

Ewan, the Envy Councilmember, pushed his way around her and towered over me, his seven foot frame like a skyscraper. Kade stood by my side, letting me know he was there if I needed him. *Help Wrythe,* I said to him in my mind.

Wrythe just told me I needed to help you, and while he's incapacitated at the moment, I'm not going to argue with him.

I appreciated their support. At the thought, pain shot through me. I'd said that about Peter too not that many days ago and now he was dead.

"I know Lily said that if you stayed away she'd let you live, but we aren't going to go as easy on you," Ewan said.

"Choose to have the Devil kill Wrythe," Gage said, appearing abruptly and going to stand beside Ewan.

"I have a better idea," I said, the rage boiling so brightly on my skin, the whole area lit up with the reddish glow.

They took a step back. I matched their pace, coming at them. "You rescind your agreement that I complete the Trial of Three and I'll let you live." Rage seethed from my pores; greater than any anger I'd ever experienced. It seemed to swallow me, and I reveled in it.

Gwen the Gluttony demon pushed her way between them so she was in my face. "Do what we want, Alice, or your friends will die." Her anger lasted until she was close enough to feel the heat radiating off me. Then her bluster died in her throat. She tried to move out of my way, but it was too late.

I grabbed her by the collar of her shirt. "You won't kill them," I said. "Because if you do, then I'll kill you." I shoved her back, sending her to the ground with a thud.

Gage's eyes flashed in the light. "Bow to me, you filthy mutt!"

A single disgusted laugh left my throat. "I will do no such thing," I seethed.

The ground began to shake.

At first, I thought it was because of the depth and breadth of my anger. I would do as Professor Pops and I discussed. I would scare them into submission. They would rescind. These Trials would be over and Wrythe and the trainees would all be safe. I wanted to believe, but as the ground shook harder, something told me I was lying to myself.

"Earthquake," Ewan said, leaning against a wall for support.

"Not an earthquake," a voice said from behind me.

My heart sank. I knew that voice. It was my father's.

"You aren't allowed here," Gwen said, her voice shaking.

"That may be true, but what are you going to do about it?" As he spoke, the Devil clapped his hands together and Gwen turned to ash where she stood. The others scattered, pushing and sprinting around each other, trying to run away.

I faced my father. "Go away," I growled. "You aren't helping." In fact he was ruining everything.

His eyes held mine a moment before he glanced in the direction the other three council members had gone. Then he clapped his hands once more and the three of them turned to ash. There wasn't a scream or a yelp of pain. They were just gone. "Now that's finished, let's you and I talk."

"I still have time before my week is up and I have nothing to say to you." My heart sank. All of my carefully laid plans had been ruined with two claps of the Devil's hands. "Why?" I asked, defeat squashing out the fury I'd felt moments before. How could he treat their lives so callously? I didn't like them, but I hadn't wanted them to die like that either.

“My child. The moment you killed Lily, everything changed. I can’t believe you haven’t figured it out yet.” He came forward, glancing at Kade. “Nice to see you again.”

The rage returned. Roaring, I leapt onto the Devil and ignoring my injuries, I locked my arms around his neck and tried to force his head from his shoulders. A moment later, I was sailing through the air. My head hit the far wall with a dull thud and I slumped to the floor in a daze.

“How dare you? I am your father. I don’t care what you are, you will not disrespect me.” He adjusted his coat jacket and flipped his hair.

With a howl, I rose and charged him again, firing my gun as I went, hoping if I put enough rounds into him, the Devil would die. But he didn’t. The smoke cleared, and he was still standing. “Damn it!” I’d emptied the entire clip into him without effect. “Why won’t you die?” Upon closer inspection, I saw I’d at least drawn blood. I grabbed another clip from my belt and clicked it into place.

Without warning, the gun was ripped from my hand before dropping to the ground with a clatter. The Devil’s smile was pure evil when he spoke. “Trust me when I say you don’t want me to die.”

“Oh, but I do,” I said, pulling the demon orb from my pocket. It was my last hope.

Recognition flared in his eyes and he flinched, taking an involuntary step back. “You don’t want to do anything with that thing. Believe me.”

A smile splayed over my face. I really enjoyed watching the Devil squirm. “You don’t know a thing about me.”

He recovered quickly, and a smile not unlike my own grew on his too-handsome face. “Kade,” he said, looking at the angel. “Shall I tell her, or would you prefer to do the honors?”

My smile faded, and a hundred sick piranha nibbled at my stomach. With great effort, I tore my gaze away from my father, worry

creasing my brow. There was a small flash of light and I glanced down at the bracelet Kade gave me for my birthday—the one with the angel wings. I touched it somberly. “Tell me what?” I whispered, bracing myself.

“Well,” Kade said. “It’s like this.” He ran his hands through his hair, his green eyes studying every spot in the room, refusing to look at me. Finally, his gaze fell to the floor before lifting to meet mine. “This is what I was trying to tell you. The reason for my original orders.” He cleared his throat. “See, if the Devil dies, then you will too.”

OceanofPDF.com

ALICE TAKES DEMONLAND

OceanofPDF.com

"DYING WILL BE WORTH IT, if it means you die too," I said, forcing myself not to look at Kade. He didn't agree with what I said, but the Devil needed to know I was serious. The time for games was over. As I stared into the evil blue eyes of my father, it was clear, my life had never been my own and it never would be. Especially if the Devil had anything to say about it.

We were deep below Demonland and the temperature was sweltering. Sweat beaded along my hairline and trickled down my back. I forced myself to ignore it and quickly glanced at Wrythe. He was still suffering from the troll magic the council members had used to torture him. They'd paid the ultimate price. My heart hurt over all the death, including Peter's, as well as the suffering of my king. But if I didn't deal with my father, none of us would live much longer.

The Devil raised his eyebrows. "Really? You're okay with ending your life before you have a chance to live it?" He sauntered forward, his hands tucked into his front pockets like he had all the time in the world. And before I realized what was happening, he flicked his head and flung me through the air. I crashed through one of the prison stalls, my head smacking against the back wall. I heard Kade yell my name as everything went dark.

But only for a moment.

Before I could force myself to my feet, I was in a place I didn't understand. All around me was stark white, without walls, a floor, or a ceiling. The white just went on and on without a beginning or an end. I gazed around in wonder, torn between the beauty and loneliness of the place, until from somewhere behind me came bright, colorful lights in oranges, greens, reds, purples, and blues. They flashed, buzzing around me like irritating gnats. When the lights droned past my ears, I heard voices. The lights could speak! Some

were words of encouragement. Others, not so much.

What is she?

Where did she come from?

Do the archangels know about this abomination?

I rolled to my knees as one voice cut through the others. *She is the answer. The one we've been waiting for!*

Yes, the prophecy.

What the hell did that mean?

Almost as soon as they appeared, the lights vanished, and I was once again in the dark and dirty stall below the compound. Kade was beside me, his face contorted with worry.

"Can you stand?" he asked, his voice soft.

"I think so," I said, regarding him with renewed interest, not because he was so incredibly handsome, though that was true enough, but because he was backlit by a shining light. It was as though his body was struggling to contain all of the light within him. "You're glowing," I said as he pulled me into a hug.

He smirked. "You hit your head pretty hard, Alice. I'm sure there isn't a glow," he said, feigning innocence.

I couldn't deny that. My skull pounded. *It's an angel thing, isn't it?* I said into his mind. *The glow?* I waited for him to respond. When he didn't, I rolled my eyes. There had definitely been a light emanating off him.

"You two are so in love. It's sweet," the Devil said, jerking me out of my contemplations. "Really priceless." He chuckled.

I ground my teeth. My legs shook, but I forced myself to face him. "Shut up," I hissed.

The Devil ignored me. "Does she know what will happen if the two of you consummate your love?" He crossed his arms, gazing as us in question.

My face turned red with humiliation. Where did that come from?

“That’s none of your damned business,” I said, but some of my words came out slurred. Gross, I thought.

“You are my daughter; therefore, it is my business. It should be Kade’s too. Because sex with you will remove all angelic essence from him,” he said and paused. “That means he’ll no longer be an angel.” His head tilted to one side.

My face burned. I couldn’t believe my father had picked this moment to have “the sex talk” with me. But was he telling the truth? Would Kade no longer be an angel if we made love? Was that the case if he slept with any Dark Moth? Or was it specifically because I was the Devil’s daughter? That seemed more likely, but I didn’t want to believe. “You’re lying,” I said, my breath coming out in rasps. I felt sick, probably from the head injury, but also because I loved Kade and Kade loved me. What would happen if we weren’t able to take that love to the next level? I looked at Kade, hoping he would verify the Devil was doing what demons always do. Lie. “Is it true?” I asked, holding my hands out in front of me.

Kade’s features were anguished. “Yes,” he admitted. “That’s why the other night, when I disappeared…” He ran a hand through his hair, clearing his throat.

“Oh.” It was all I could say. So not only did his superiors not want the two of us together, but if we were together, Kade would no longer be an angel. “What would happen to you if you were no longer an angel?” I asked softly, glancing at Kade from under my lashes.

“I don’t know,” Kade admitted, his voice trailing off.

The Devil laughed. “He’ll die, obviously,” he said.

Kade seemed to want to interrupt, but the Devil spoke first. “If I can die, so can you,” he said, narrowing his eyes at the love of my life. “Immortality means long life, but the end will come for all of us someday. Maybe not in the way you imagine, but it’ll still be death, and I can’t wait to see that day come for you.” He flung the words at Kade and my heart sank. The Devil wasn’t lying. Crap!

I swallowed down the mourning howl building inside of me. “That can’t be,” I whispered, at a loss. Finding my demon sire and destroying him had been my only focus for as long as I could remember. Now, everything I knew about my life, everything I’d trained for, my reason for getting up in the morning, was no longer an option, unless I chose to end my life as well. Worse than that, I now knew that the man I loved more than anything could never be with me in the way I so desperately wanted to be with him.

My rage grew and grew, red light cocooning my skin like a burning embrace. And I realized the Devil really had told those upper level demons to go easy on me. They all had, except one. Had that demon cared that the Devil would die? Or did he want the Devil dead too?

I was breathing heavily as my fury increased.

Stay calm, Kade said into my mind.

I’m trying, I responded, the red flaring brighter.

Try harder, he said.

I took a deep breath, feeling the cooling balm of the silver-white light suddenly race along my veins and snuffing out the red fury. *Fine.*

“Now we’ve settled that,” the Devil went on, “how about we discuss the second trial? Have you decided who will live and who will die? As I said before, there’s no way out, especially now, dear Alice.” He grinned, acting as though I hadn’t just discovered that my entire reason for being was useless.

My shoulders slumped. All I’d done—all the plans, and Abernathy and Professor Pops’ help—it was all for nothing. Nothing! I gripped my hands into fists at my sides, squeezing the demon orb with all my might, begging the thing to spring to life and give me a way out of this mess. But it remained cool in my palm. Finally, I shrugged, exhausted. “Does it matter?”

“That seems a little morbid, even for my daughter,” he said, his words dripping with sarcasm. “How about I give you more time?”

I perked up, hating how good that sounded but wanting it just the

same. “How much more?”

He shrugged. “It’ll be a surprise.”

I didn’t respond. The week wasn’t up. If he gave me more, that could only be a good thing. Maybe I could figure out a way to save both Wrythe and Kade. “Why would you do that?” I finally asked.

“I have my reasons,” the Devil said evasively. “All of them will benefit me most of all, but you might as well enjoy the extra time as well, daughter.”

“That’s not good enough,” I said, flinching at his use of the word that bound me to him in a familial way. “I need specifics.”

The Devil’s smirk grew into a full-blown smile. “You have at least five days.”

I glanced at Kade, his face unreadable. *Why do you think he’s doing this? What’s his end game?*

His designs are a mystery to me, but more time is good. Kade kept his face forward as he spoke into my mind, probably so the Devil wouldn’t guess what we were doing, but I had a feeling my father knew anyway.

“Are the new terms acceptable?” The Devil had his hands clasped behind his back.

“Yes,” I said, gritting my teeth, my body swaying.

“Excellent.” He let out a deliberate breath. “But let me give you some fatherly advice to ponder.”

“What?” I didn’t want to hear another thing from him, but I also didn’t want to be flung across the room again either. Though my bullet wound and stab wound were all but healed, I was still sore. Smacking my head against the wall didn’t help.

“Your heart already knows what choice you should make, but you still refuse to admit it. I can’t imagine why.” He shook his head. “I’ll return in… when I feel like it.” He swirled a finger, pointing it at the ceiling. “You’d better help your king out of here and let the rest know

he's alive. From what I can tell, there's a lot going on in the compound above." He smacked his lips together. "The Dark Moths are in an uproar…" The Devil let the words die and he vanished, leaving me, Kade, and Wrythe alone with the dusty remains of the dead Society members and Peter's corpse.

At the thought of Peter, my heart sank. He'd been a friend. I cared about him. And even though the other Society members hadn't been good, they still hadn't deserved the end the Devil gave them. He'd obliterated them, turned them to dust like demons when they died.

Then I thought of what I'd seen on one of the floors above. The Dark Moth Society minus Peter and Wrythe had been as evil as any demons I'd slain, but it still hurt that they were dead. At least I hoped Peter and Wrythe weren't involved. But that might be naïve.

The Queen of Hearts, that's what the trainees called me. And they were right. I was all up in my feelings. I needed to get a handle on myself and fight through it. Wrythe needed to be saved as did the rest of the Society. Steeling myself, I decided not to think of the bright swirling lights and the voices and all the other crap happening around me, and just focus on what needed to be done.

"Alice," Kade began slowly, but I held up a hand.

"Help me get Wrythe up," I said, trying not to think about what could never be between Kade and I. Determined, I squatted beside Wrythe. "Let's get you out of here," I said.

Stupid life, I thought, ferociously.

Kade tried again. "Please. I wanted to tell you, but I wasn't at liberty to share. My orders—" Kade stopped abruptly and growled.

"I don't give a damn about your orders," I seethed, getting an arm around Wrythe.

Kade put an arm around the king's other side. "Neither do I. Not anymore," he said with finality.

That was something, but I wasn't sure whether it was too little too late, if he could do anything except follow orders.

We hefted Wrythe up together.

The king groaned.

“Be careful,” I said, feeling overprotective.

“I’m going to free him.” Kade moved one of his fingers over the metal cuff shackling Wrythe to the wall. A spark of white light flared from the metal before the manacle broke. Wrythe’s arm fell with a thud and he moaned, the movement snapping him back to consciousness.

“Sire,” I said, keeping one shoulder under his arm to hold him upright.

“Alice? You’re safe?” Wrythe asked, surprised. Now that the troll manacle wasn’t holding him, he began to heal almost immediately.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m fine.” Worry and relief for Wrythe replaced my wrath. “I’m so sorry I got you into this, sire.” I helped him take a step. “Do you think you can make it to the elevator?”

“I can try,” Wrythe said.

Kade put his shoulder under Wrythe’s other side and together we helped him walk.

“Your wounds should heal quickly now. The troll magic in the cuff was keeping you from doing so before,” Kade said, his words labored as he worked to help Wrythe out of the cell.

“I can feel the change already,” Wrythe admitted.

“How did you do that?” I asked Kade across Wrythe, dropping the orb back in my boot.

“I’m an angel. There are things I can do,” Kade admitted. “So can you,” he added softly.

I studied him a moment, hoping he would tell me more. He didn’t.

Wrythe did his best to help us walk him to the elevator. He obviously didn’t enjoy being hurt, not that I could blame him.

At the elevator, I pushed the button. “What should we do about Peter’s body, sire?” I asked, keeping my voice quiet.

“I’ll bring him up, if you think you can handle Wrythe on your own?” Kade said.

“Sure,” I responded, grateful for once that he could teleport. “Take him to Heathcliff’s office. His body will need to be prepared for burial.”

“I will.” Kade strode back the way we’d come.

Inside the elevators, the doors closed and I pushed the button that would take us up to the main floor of the compound. The whirring of the pulley system as we went up forced me to return to the task at hand. My muscles whined as I held on to Wrythe. I was strong, but he was freaking heavy. “Sire, we need to talk,” I said, desperate to lay out the whole affair with the dead Society members.

“We’re way past the sire stage, Alice,” he said, gritting his teeth. “But tell me what’s going on.”

“Very well.” I told him about how the Devil had killed Skye and Ewan and the others. After I finished, Wrythe explained that the other Dark Moth council members had killed Peter. At that, anger burned along my veins, but not enough to bring the red glow to my skin.

“There’s no one left on the council, except you,” I said. Then shook my head. My heart ached. “I’m so sorry, sire. This is all my fault. If I hadn’t insisted in participating in the Trial of Three, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“True, but then I wouldn’t have known about the council’s traitorous betrayal of the Dark Moths. It’s better to know the truth, no matter how bitter, than to remain in darkness, don’t you think?”

I didn’t know. “I guess,” I said wanting to be supportive.

Wrythe tried to stand on his own, then groaned in pain. “None of this is your fault, Alice. You should know that.” He sagged against me.

I grunted, hefting him up further on my shoulder. “I’m taking you to Heathcliff right away. He’ll get you fixed up and then…” I let my words trail off because I didn’t know what would happen next. I was glad I wasn’t in his position. My king had an insurmountable task in

front of him, but I would support him in any way he needed—if he still wanted me around. I'd wrecked everything he'd built. It would make sense that he would want me out of the picture, especially since I still had to choose between his life and Kade's.

I closed my eyes. I just wanted it all to go away! The trials, the Society, even Kade. In that moment, I didn't want to have to deal with any of it. As those thoughts bounced around in my mind, a white light flashed behind my eyes. I blinked furiously, trying to focus.

"Alice." The female voice cut through my mind. The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. I opened my eyes, searching the small elevator for the person who'd spoken. There wasn't anyone else. "Did you hear that?" I asked Wrythe, just to be sure I really was losing my mind.

"What?" His face was ashen, and I tugged at his shirt, anxious to make sure he didn't pass out.

The elevator opened.

"Nothing," I said and hurried as quickly as possible to Heathcliff's office. We'd made it without a single interruption, which surprised me, but I wasn't going to complain. With a grunt, I pushed open Heathcliff's office door. Inside, the Doc was attending Grayson, another Dark Moth. He'd been sired by a Gluttony demon, and he'd given me some pointers during combat training one time which had really helped, but that was all I really knew about him. We hadn't had a real conversation, but he seemed nice enough and I admired his double sword-wielding skills.

I helped Wrythe over to them.

Grayson glanced up, his face filled with pain. It was obvious why. A long gash began at his right shoulder and ran down his torso, ending at his left hip. "Pride demon," he said simply, tapping his chest gingerly. "Don't worry, I took him out." He gave Wrythe a once over. "What the hell happened to you?" It was apparent Grayson had been out on a hunt and hadn't heard what had gone down in the

compound.

I contemplated Heathcliff, unsure what to say.

Heathcliff sent a large needle through Grayson's wound, causing the man to cry out in pain. Then the Doc glanced at Wrythe. "Over there," he said, indicating the unused bed as he tied off the stitches and placed a bandage over Grayson's wound. "You'll need to rest," he said to the Dark Moth warrior. "The more you do, the swifter you'll heal and the less likely it'll be that you scar." The Doc had a serious aversion to Moths he worked on ending up with a scar. I guessed it had to do with him taking pride in his work.

Grayson carefully hopped off the bed he'd been lying on. "Will do, Doc." He grabbed his shredded shirt and tossed it in the trash. "Hope you're feeling better soon, sire."

"Thank you, Grayson. And you as well," Wrythe responded as Grayson stepped out.

Heathcliff helped me get Wrythe up on the bed after it was quickly cleaned. When Wrythe was lying down, Heathcliff glanced at me. "What happened? I never did find Pops."

"The compound is warded against certain supernatural creatures," I said, repeating what Kade had told me. Taking the scissors the Doc handed me, I carefully cut away at Wrythe's dirty shirt. Beneath were several ugly gashes and wounds. They were already beginning to heal, which wasn't good since they still hadn't been cleaned.

"My favorite shirt," Wrythe growled, trying to smile. It didn't take.

"I'm sorry, sire," I said, glancing into his gray eyes a moment before returning to my task.

"It's fine, Alice. I was kidding," Wrythe said, and coughed.

"Either way, though. I've caused you so much trouble. With the council and especially Peter…" At the mention of Peter, my heart lurched.

Wrythe squeezed my shoulder. "Don't do that, Alice. Don't blame

yourself.”

Heathcliff returned with a solution in a silver basin. He tossed a cloth in the solution and then handed the basin to me. “Clean his wounds. I’ve got to make up an elixir.”

“Okay.” I began dabbing at the biggest laceration. Wrythe sucked in a breath and ground his teeth at the pain. The cut went from his left shoulder, across his chest, and ended at his right hip. “Sorry. Sorry.” I tried to be more careful.

Wrythe placed one of his large hands over mine. “Stop apologizing. I owe you my life, Alice Blackburn.” Something crossed his face, an emotion I didn’t recognize. “Thank you.”

I shook my head and went back to my work.

Wrythe’s grip on my hand moved up to my shoulder and he pulled me toward him so my face was directly above his. “Alice,” he said, his eyes trained on mine. “I don’t love easily, but I do love you.” As soon as he finished speaking, he kissed me.

OceanofPDF.com

SHOCK KEPT ME FROM RECIPROCATING. The kiss was so unexpected and his words even more so. After a quick moment, I found myself kissing him back. His lips soft and inviting. But just as quickly, I stepped back.

One side of his mouth lifted in a half smile. “I’ve wanted to do that for days.” He dropped his head back against the table and his eyes closed. “Your lips taste like…” He began to breathe deeply. Had he fallen asleep?

I wouldn’t blame him after all he’d been through. “Sire,” I whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Heathcliff came to stand beside me. “He’s fine. I gave him a solution that possesses magical properties and encourage Moths into an unconscious state.” He gave me a wry smile. “I’m happy it worked,” he said, pressing one of the king’s eyes open to verify the man was actually out. When Doc was satisfied, he went on. “Now he doesn’t have to suffer through the pain while I stitch him up.”

“Magic?” I whispered. He hadn’t used such a mixture on any of the other Moths he’d taken care of in the past—at least not that I’d seen.

“It’s a new discovery thanks to a friend of mine.” He smiled lightly. “Her name is Cinderella though she goes by Cindy. She teaches at a school in another realm.”

“She’s a teacher?” I asked, my fingers finding my lips as I was preoccupied with the way the king’s mouth moved against mine.

“And one of the best witches I’ve ever met,” he added, preparing the needle and then dabbing Wrythe’s wound.

“Okay then.” I had no reason to doubt Heathcliff.

While Doc got to work, I watched, debating whether to ask him if the magical solution would also cause the person who drank it to say

or do things that seemed out of character. But asking might bring up questions I wasn't prepared to answer so I kept quiet.

When he finished, he sighed and gave me a once over. "How's your head?"

I touched the bump, surprised he noticed it. The wound was already healing. "How did you know I hit my head?"

"Kade told me when he brought in Peter's body," Heathcliff said.

I scanned the room. Peter's body was lying on another empty gurney, which meant Kade had been here, but he wasn't around now. "Where did he go?"

Heathcliff shrugged. "He did his angel thing and vanished," he said, studying my reaction to his words. Apparently he'd know what Kade was too. "I know I'm just the doctor," he continued, "but if you want my opinion, you and Wrythe are better suited for each other." He lifted a brow as though waiting for me to argue with him. "Not that you need to listen to me. It's just my opinion as a man of medicine… and magic occasionally."

That surprised me. I hadn't realized he knew Kade and I were together, but I should've guessed. The good doctor seemed to know much more about the compound's inner workings than I did. "Why? Because Wrythe and I are both Dark Moths?"

Heathcliff took the cloth from me and started cleaning another of the king's wounds, scrubbing a whole lot more roughly than I would've. "That's part of it, but also, you and Wrythe have similar backgrounds. The two of you have a lot in common," he said.

True, but didn't all Moths have a similar back story? Dad was a demon. Mom died after childbirth. Child spends time in the system until a Dark Moth finds them and brings them to the compound. What more was there? And sure, Kade was an angel. We were completely different, but none of that mattered. Kade was… everything to me. Not that it mattered. According to the Devil we couldn't be together—unless Kade wanted to give up everything. "I guess," I agreed,

deciding not to share my thoughts with the Doc. He was entitled to his opinion, whether I agreed or not.

Heathcliff shrugged. “I mean, what do I know? I’ve never been in a relationship that lasted longer than a few months. The humans I’ve dated hate the hours I keep and don’t like it that I can’t share this part of my life with them, and the supernaturals I date end up disliking how human I am.” He finished cleaning Wrythe’s wounds and began sewing up another of the many cuts peppered across Wrythe’s body.

I’d been about to ask Heathcliff if he was a supernatural of some kind, but then thought better of it. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me in his own time. “How did you get the job as doctor for the Dark Moths?”

Heathcliff paused, the needle suspended in midair. “Well, that, my dear, is a very long story, but suffice it to say, I didn’t find out about the job in the regular way. There was no resumé or interview process. It was kind of a trial by fire, if you catch my drift.” He finished sewing up the wound, snipped off the thread and then gave me a look. “Have a seat and let me see if you have a concussion.”

I did as Doc asked while he put me through a series of tests. “I can’t believe it, but you seem fine. I’ve noticed you heal faster than the other Dark Moths. Not sure if it’s your heritage, but that’s my hypothesis.” He went back over to Wrythe and prepared to sew up another gash.

“You’re probably right.” I tried to smile, but my parentage was never going to be a comfortable topic.

“When things calm down, I’d love to run some tests,” he said, getting to work on the next cut.

In that moment, I remembered all of the tortured demons on level D13. Did Heathcliff know what was going on down there? My first instinct was no way, but I didn’t really know him that well. “Sure,” I said lightly, standing. “I need to go find your dad as well as Kenmei. Do you know whether they’re still waiting for me in the parking

garage?"

"As far as I know." He threaded the needle and went to work on another gash just below the first one on Wrythe's torso. I had to look away as thoughts of the torture Wrythe must've endured flooded my mind.

"All right. Thanks." I went to the door, opening it.

"Alice," Heathcliff said.

"Yes?"

"You did good. Saving Wrythe. I'm not sure what all is happening with your Society, but Wrythe is a good man."

I swallowed a sudden lump in my throat. "Thanks for saying so, Doc."

He grunted before returning to his work.

I left, heading through the compound. The hallways were surprisingly empty. As I went, I passed two groups of Dark Moths, but they were too involved in their own conversations to notice me, or, if they did, I was of no interest to them.

I needed to go back up into Wonderland and see about Professor Pops and Kenmei. Thankfully, I still had Peter's key as well as the demon orb, though I'd tucked the orb in my boot at some point. I could feel it jiggling around in the right one as I walked, which reminded me that when the Devil flung me, I'd dropped my knife and gun. At some point, I needed to go get those.

The elevator ride above ground seemed to go on forever, but it gave me time to think about Wrythe's kiss. What the hell was that about? I felt something for the man, no doubt about it. And when his lips touched mine, there'd been a wave of heat that rushed through my belly. But I loved Kade.

As uncomfortable as the conversation would be, I would have to explain that to Wrythe—the sooner the better. That led me to my next worry, which was Kade himself. Had he seen Wrythe kiss me? Was he

upset that the king had told me loved me? If I'd seen such a thing, I would've been livid. In fact, just thinking about Kade kissing another woman sent a ruby glow racing along my skin. Once I spoke with Professor Pops and Kenmei, I would speak to Kade and make him understand that Wrythe's kiss meant nothing. But maybe it should. He said he loved me and while I struggled to believe the king, I also knew he and I could be together. In fact, we would make a great match. While my heritage made it so Kade and I couldn't be together.

Guilt punched me. I didn't know what to do, but I knew what I felt. I still loved Kade.

"Hurry up," I hissed at the elevator.

A memory of the lights and voices I'd seen and heard after the Devil threw me across the room came to mind. Sure, I'd hit my head pretty hard, but that didn't explain how real the lights and voices seemed. What where they? And what had they meant when they said I was the answer, the one they'd been waiting for. Who the hell were they?

My mind jumped from those questions to the trials. The Devil was right, I already knew which choice was the right one, but that didn't mean I was ready to make it. Nor did it mean I even could. Both Wrythe and Kade were important to me and I didn't want either one to die. But the Devil had said something interesting. As an angel, Kade was immortal. Did that mean Kade wouldn't die the way I understood it?

The possible answer worried me when I exited the elevator. The parking garage was lit by the occasional light, but it was obviously dark outside. I didn't know what time of night it was, and I didn't care. Succinctly, I moved up through the garage. "Professor Pops?" I called when I reached the top. "Kenmei?"

The night sky twinkled with stars and satellites, but I paid them no attention, searching between the cars for any sign of the vampires. It occurred to me they might have returned to Salem.

Before I had time to fret too much, Professor Pops stepped from behind a large black truck. “Alice,” he said, his voice filled with worry. “Thank goodness you’re safe.” His relieved smile was in stark contrast to the rest of his appearance as he still wore all of his weapons and had a gun in his hand. He quickly holstered it as Kenmei appeared beside him, radiating quiet menace. There was no way I wanted to meet either of these men in a dark alley as enemies.

“Yes, I’m fine.” I walked over to them.

“I am so sorry we weren’t able to assist you,” Professor Pops said, patting my shoulder when I reached him.

“It wasn’t your fault. There are wards surrounding the compound.” I felt bad they’d waited. I could’ve texted or called Professor Pops, telling them they were free to go.

“I should’ve known something like that would be protecting the compound,” he said, obviously irritated with the situation. “But it’s over and you’re safe. That’s what’s important.”

“I told you that would happen,” Kenmei said, his eyes shining in the minimal light.

“Yes, I suppose you did.” Each of Professor Pops’ words came out filled with sarcasm, his features contorted with annoyance. “Is Wrythe safe?” Professor Pops asked, his irritation fading to kindness as he returned his attention to me. He was frustrated, but still ready to help. Before I could respond, a ping came from the phone in his pocket. He took it out, scrutinizing it. Then frowned.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes, fine,” Professor Pops said, but I sensed that wasn’t completely true. “Tell me all that happened.”

I explained about how I found Wrythe and Peter, forcing myself not to break down in sobs when I spoke about Peter’s death. Then I told them how the Devil killed all of the council members, except Wrythe, and that I still had to complete the second trial. “I’m sorry I wasted your time,” I finished lamely.

“Nonsense, Alice,” Kenmei said. “We just wished we could’ve done more, though I’m ready for a nap.”

I narrowed my eyes at the man who was also a dragon and a cat, curious about what else he could be. “Thank you,” I said and meant it.

Professor Pops shook his head at the man beside him. “Yes, we want to be of help in any way we can…” he said as his phone pinged again. Distracted, he glanced at it, then cleared his throat. “If there is anything else we can do, please just say the word.”

“Thank you,” I said, appreciating his continued willingness even after he’d been stuck in this parking garage for who knew how long.

“When I get back to the house, I’m going to do some more research on why you’re shining with silver-white light. I’ll also find out all I can about the demon orb, starting with who created it and what it’s supposed to do,” Professor Pops added.

I glanced at Kenmei. His eyes were closed as though he were sleeping where he stood. “Thanks, Professor Pops, but I already know who created the demon orb.”

“You do?” Kenmei asked, his eyes springing open.

“Of course. It was you,” I said, putting my hands on my hips. “Well dragon you anyway.” I didn’t know how it worked, if he remembered everything after he shifted.

The professor studied his strange friend. “Figures,” he said, flashing his fangs in irritation as he shook his head. “I should’ve known. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Kenmei smiled sheepishly. “Had you asked, I would have, Adam.”

Professor Pops clucked his tongue. “Well then, why don’t you tell us all about it now? And spare no details.” He leaned against the truck as though he had all night to visit.

Kenmei shrugged, clasping his hands behind his back and angling to face up toward Professor Pops. “There’s not a whole lot to tell. There were three orbs in the beginning. Each orb is a last-resort kind

of magic and it gives the user what they need most, though normally it isn't exactly what they want. Two have been used, leaving just the one Alice possesses."

I thought of the woman who watched her demon sire die a thousand times and appreciated Kenmei's explanation. Had that woman still been alive, I had no doubt she would've agreed she hadn't wanted to witness the demon's death that many times. But I guessed it had to do with balance. For every good, there is an equal bad and all that crap. I still believed the Devil should die, but that made me think about why I would die if the Devil did and vice versa. If we were both evil, then that meant two wrongs. Surely, one of us would be fine being gone from this world.

"I see." Professor Pops tore his eyes from Kenmei and focused them on me. "It's as clear as mud what the demon orb does."

I made a face. "Pretty much," I said, grateful they couldn't know my thoughts.

Professor Pops' phone pinged for a third time, and he studied the screen, fighting to keep his expression serene, but it wasn't working. Someone else clearly needed his help.

"You guys should go," I said, tucking my hands in my pockets. "I really appreciate all you've done for me, but I don't think there's much more you can do." It saddened me to see Professor Pops go, but it was true and I needed to get back to Wrythe and speak with Kade.

"You sure?" Pops asked, but I sensed his relief too. He glanced at Kenmei, but the man kept silent.

"Definitely. Sorry I kept you waiting for so long." Without thinking, I ran over and gave Pops a hug. "I hope everything is okay?" I asked, indicating his phone.

"It will be," he admitted, but didn't go into detail as he hugged me back.

"Well, let me know if I can return the favor and help you out." The vampire smelled of peppermint and something smoky that I couldn't

place.

“I will,” he said when I released him.

I debated whether to hug Kenmei, but his held out his arms. I smiled as I embraced him.

He chuckled, patting my back lightly. “Listen to your heart, Alice. All isn’t as it seems within you. Surely you’ve noticed the changes,” he said, quietly.

Had I? “I suppose,” I said and released him. Then studied the two men. It was apparent there was something going on that had nothing to do with the Devil or Demonland. Again, I acknowledged how sheltered my life was and cursed my own ignorance.

We stood there awkwardly a moment.

“Go on then,” Pops said to Kenmei.

“Fine,” Kenmei responded and walked over to a spot that was empty of vehicles.

While we waited, Professor Pops looked at me. “He’s the most infuriating dragon, but he means well,” he said.

“I get that,” I said and smiled.

After a quick glance around, Kenmei stopped and morphed into the enormous golden dragon known as Abernathy.

Professor Pops and I made our way over to the dragon as he shook his mane and blew out a puff of smoke.

“If you need me, I’m just a phone call away,” Professor Pops said and hefted himself up onto the dragon’s back.

Abernathy smiled, revealing all of his pointy white teeth before he turned and leaped into the sky.

I watched as the dragon climb, thinking I would never get used to his transformation. As though he knew I still watched, the dragon did several flips and loops until he was out of sight.

Rolling my shoulders, I walked back down the stairs until I reached the main floor and the elevator. “Kade?” I called, hoping he would

hear me.

“Hello, Alice,” he said, appearing in front of me, his arms crossed. The angel was upset.

At first I couldn’t understand why. And then Wrythe’s kiss came to mind. Kade was more than upset, he was jealous. “You saw what Wrythe did?” I asked, glancing down at my shoes, tucking my hands in my pockets.

“And heard what he said too,” he admitted.

“You know I love you, right?” I asked, moving close and resting my hands on his arms.

“I do,” Kade said, his features softening as he placed his hands on my waist.

“You better.” I relaxed my head against his chest, enjoying the heady cinnamon scent of him.

His thumbs roamed along the skin between my shirt and my pants. My body came to life at his touch, and I sucked in a breath. “And I love you,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

I turned my faced up and his mouth was on mine.

A little moan escaped my throat and he pulled me tight against him, deepening the kiss.

My hands explored his arms and shoulders and I twined my fingers in his hair. When his tongue flicked into my mouth, electricity flooded through me, lighting every up every nerve with desire.

“Get a room,” someone shouted.

Kade pulled away, and I missed him instantly. The color of rage radiated along my skin as I searched for the jerk who’d separated me from the man I loved.

“Easy, Alice. It’s fine. We could go someplace a bit more private, like your room.” He wiggled his eyebrows playfully as he tugged on my ponytail. My head fell back, exposing my neck. He leaned down, kissing it lightly before moving those amazing kisses up to my jawline.

“Keep that up and we won’t make it,” I growled, desperate for him as I pressed the elevator button.

Once we were inside and the elevator doors closed, he pressed me against the wall, his lips on mine again. I clung to him, loving every touch, every brush of his fingers along my body, and the way his mouth moved over mine.

In that moment, nothing else mattered. There was only Kade and me. The world and all our problems fell away. He pressed into me, and that one movement lit a fire low in my belly.

Kade, I cried in my mind, hoping his name told him all that I needed and wanted from him.

His pressed my mouth open. *I know*, he replied, but I sensed his hesitation and knew why. If we made love, Kade would lose his angel essence. I pulled away. “What does that even mean?” I asked, gently biting his bottom lip in frustration.

“What?” he asked, kissing my cheeks and trailing more kisses down my neck to my collarbones.

“What is your angel essence anyway? I mean…” *I want you.* I kept switching from speaking out loud to talking to him with my mind. It was a useful talent to have, especially when we were kissing.

“I’m not sure,” he said between kisses. I hooked a leg on his hip as his lips found mine again.

Would you die? The thought was out before I could censor it.

The question immediately tamped down our passion. Kade stopped, searching my eyes.

“I love you, Kade. I can’t lose you. With all the crap going on in my life, I would die if I lost you,” I said, caressing his chest.

He brushed some hair off my face. “Alice Blackburn, you have my heart and my soul. We’ll figure this out. Somehow. Some way, we’ll be together in every way, always and forever,” he said, stroking my cheek.

The elevator doors pinged open.

OceanofPDF.com

"ALICE?" Wendy's voice brought us back to reality.

I cleared my throat, adjusting my clothes. "Hi." Behind her one of the hall lights sparked, briefly illuminating her face. Her features set in confusion, I wondered how much she knew. Before I could ask, the light fizzled and sparked again before its globe shattered, sending pieces raining to the floor. The empty light socket dangled from the wall like a fried menial demon.

"What are you doing here?" The confusion spread.

She must know something and I had a momentary fear she would try to kill me the way Georgia and Gilbert had, but a quick check of her hands told me she wasn't holding a weapon though she still had to powers.

"I'll meet you in your room," Kade said, kissing my cheek. "Nice to see you Wendy," he said, acknowledging her as he walked by.

"Uh, you too, I think," she returned.

I clasped my hands in front of me to keep them from shaking. My body still hummed and my lips were swollen. *Kade,* I thought, yearning for him.

I'll see you soon. Don't be gone too long, he responded in my mind, causing me to smile.

"What's going on?" Wendy asked when Kade was out of earshot. "Should he even be here?"

"He helped me save Wrythe," I said, trying to regain my composure and hoped that was an adequate answer.

She gave me an odd look. "Are you okay?"

That was a loaded question. "Sure. I mean, I guess." I couldn't decide whether to tell her what had happened with all the council members, including Peter, or not. The memories caused me to flinch.

“Really?” She took my arm, studying me cautiously.

“As okay as I can be,” I admitted, starting down the hall. I needed to speak with Wrythe.

She came with me. As we went, I noticed she no longer wore her trainee clothes but had on the black form-fitting uniform of a Dark Moth warrior. That brought me up short. “Hey, you’re official,” I said. Above her right breast was the Dark Moth insignia, a tribal moth in solid geometric patterns created with thick lines indicating wings, a body, and antennae. Hers had been sewn into the fabric with red thread, indicating her sire was a Wrath demon. Above the moth and to the left was a small silver button representing her rank as an officer cadet. In a year, she would be evaluated again, and her rank would change depending on how well she did. “Congratulations,” I added.

“Thanks.” Her countenance glinted with happiness, more so than I’d seen from her since before Eric died. “I’m sure you’ll receive yours soon.” A shadow passed over her face.

“What?”

“Well, it’s just that Lily said some things about you and about Wrythe. I didn’t want to believe them, but…”

“What did she say?” I tried to act natural and wound up crossing my arms.

“She said that you took Peter and Wrythe with the intent to take over the Society. That you were a traitor and should be killed on sight.” She swallowed, tucking her hands into her front pockets. “And then Gilbert and Georgia told me you killed Lily right in front of them. They said Lily turned to ash like a demon.” Wendy shook her head. “But I watched you battle Eric’s sire and you saved several of us from our demon sires, and if you hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t be a Dark Moth warrior. I’d be dead.” She took a breath, but I didn’t say anything. Just waited for her to continue. “I figured if you wanted to take over the Society, you wouldn’t go around saving us, but would do your best to destroy us, so you had to have a reason for what you did.

Sadly, most of those still in the compound believe what Lily said." She glanced around to verify we were still alone.

I appreciated her honesty and her loyalty. She was turning into quite the friend. "Thank you, Wendy," I said, feeling slightly awkward. Some of what she said was true. I did kill Lily and she did turn to ash, but I'd only defended myself. "I'm sure Wrythe will announce to the compound what exactly happened, but I'll tell you what I know."

She touched my arm. "I'm listening."

I told her about Lily taking Peter and Wrythe and all that had happened between the other council members and the Devil. She listened intently, shocked. When I finished, she took a step back. "So Peter *is* dead?"

"Yes." I nodded solemnly, swallowing down the hurt, sadness, and pain building within. "He was dead when I got there. They'd already killed him." I shook my head, feeling like I might cry. "I didn't save him."

Wendy hugged me. "It sounds like you did the best you could."

I clung to her. I hadn't realized how much I needed her support until I had it. "I appreciate you saying that, Wendy, but it still doesn't change the fact that he's gone and the council killed him for supporting me."

She stood back. "Perhaps it was because of you, but I think it had more to do with Wrythe. Peter supported him fully, and from what you've told me, the council wanted Lily to rule. You couldn't have known what they were up to. I mean, it wasn't that long ago we were just trainees."

She was right, and I knew it, but my heart wouldn't allow me to feel any peace. "Thanks," I said again. It sounded lame, but I couldn't bring myself to agree with her.

"What do you need me to do? I've been assigned to work under Grayson, but he was wounded during a demon takedown." She gritted

her teeth. “I have some time, if you need me.”

My heart swelled with gratitude. “I may take you up on that, but right now, I need to talk to Wrythe and see what he intends to do next. When I know more, I’ll tell you, if that’s okay.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She gave me another quick hug and I tried not to act surprised by the changes. “Find me when you’re done. I’m leading the new trainees in weapons training today, so I’ll either be in the training room or the cafeteria.”

“Will do. See ya.” I went in the direction of Heathcliff’s office while Wendy headed to the training room.

“What time is it?” I called after her, hoping she knew.

She checked her watch. That was new and I guessed it was part of her official Dark Moth warrior gear. “Nine thirty in the evening.”

“Got it. Thanks.” I headed in the direction of Heathcliff’s office. When I arrived, I hesitated as an image of a floundering fish came to mind. That was how I felt. Shaking the thought, I knocked once before opening the door. Inside, Heathcliff was attending to a young trainee who leaned over a puke bucket, her skin pallid.

“If you’re here for Wrythe, you’re in the wrong place. That blasted man left, against my express orders to stay put, saying he had a lot of work to do,” Heathcliff said when he saw me.

“Thanks.” I backed out of his office, my hand still on the doorknob.

Heathcliff called after me, “Try the cafeteria. He mentioned he was hungry.”

“Got it.” I headed that direction after closing Doc’s door. No one wanted to hear someone puke if they didn’t have to. The sound wasn’t pleasant.

Before I reached the cafeteria, I heard the low roar of Moths chatting within. It didn’t matter the time or that the Society was in chaos, we always needed to eat. No one but Wrythe, Heathcliff, and I really knew what was going on anyway. A quick perusal verified he

wasn't among the masses. Without making eye contact, I left and rushed to Wrythe's office.

Before knocking on his door, I paused, listening for voices. The last time I'd been here, the council members and Wrythe had been discussing whether or not I should die. Now there was only silence. I rapped once on the door.

"Come in," Wrythe said.

Semi surprised he was there, I entered, knowing the conversation would be weird to say the least, but probably awkward. He'd kissed me and said he loved me. I still couldn't believe that was the truth and hoped it was part of the magical elixir Heathcliff gave him.

It'd been a while since I'd been in his office and things were slightly changed. I wondered randomly who'd redecorated and how much such things cost the Society. He sat at a large, sleek black desk. Behind him were ebony bookshelves that shone in the light from the masculine chandelier. The crystals from the light gave the room an almost magical glow. The ceilings were high, probably twelve or more feet. In here, it would be hard to guess we were so far underground.

"Alice," he said, standing, his hands outstretched. He wore a white shirt, which set off his naturally tanned body, and his black hair was up in a man bun, causing his features to stand out. I took his hands and smiled, trying to see any sign that he loved me on his demeanor. There wasn't any, but at least he looked better.

"Let's sit," he said, leading me over to a sitting area complete with overstuffed white chairs and a fireplace with shiny black tile trailing from the floor all the way to the ceiling. "Do you want some tea?" he asked, pouring himself a cup from a white teapot. It seemed so small and fragile in his large hands.

"Sure," I said, suddenly very thirsty.

He poured me a cup and handed it over.

I took a sip, noting it was hot and kind of bitter. Not my favorite.

"I'm so glad you're here," he said watching me.

Placing the cup on the table, I caught his gaze and held it. He seemed too calm and like he hadn't almost died. "How are you feeling?" I asked, placing my hands in my lap.

"Fine. Fine," he said, waving the question away. "We have a lot to do and I need your help."

"Of course, sire. Whatever you need." Instinctively, I leaved forward. Maybe he didn't even remember kissing me or saying those words. I hoped that was the case. Then we wouldn't need to have the difficult conversation.

My use of the word sire caused him to wince. "After all we've been through together, please call me Wrythe. I won't accept anything else," he added when he saw me hesitate.

I nodded, taking another sip of my tea. The bitter was better than holding his gaze.

"Good. Now, first off, thank you for saving me." He smiled, his straight white teeth lighting up his face.

"Si-Wrythe, it was my pleasure. Of course. It was the right thing to do." I didn't want him to gush. It was my fault he'd been in that position in the first place and while I knew the council would've tried to overthrow him eventually, I couldn't help but wonder if Wrythe might've changed their minds or stopped them before it led to Peter's death.

He set his tea cup on the black coffee table and leaned back. "As you know, the council is gone." He paused. "Peter is gone. We need to give him a proper funeral. After that, I must select new council members. I'd like your help in the selection process. Most importantly, I'd like *you* to be on my new council."

I was shocked. "But sire—I mean Wrythe—wouldn't you prefer someone older and more experienced?" I was barely past my eighteenth birthday. There were many other Dark Moths more qualified and much more skilled.

"If ever there was a person capable of leading the Dark Moth

Society, it's you. As the current king, I'll reign until such time as I see fit to bestow the Society on you." He spoke with finality, but that couldn't be.

"Sire," I began and paused, knowing he wanted me to call him Wrythe. "I don't want to rule Demonland. You are the king and will be for a long, long time."

Wrythe patted my knee. "And that's exactly why you're the Moth who should rule when I'm gone. You wouldn't be leading for power or glory, but because you wanted good for all Moths. Besides," he paused, his gray eyes piercing mine. "There is no one I trust more than you, Alice Blackburn."

That meant a lot coming from him, but I still didn't think it was a good idea. The question was how to convince him. "I can't be on your council, Wrythe. I'm still just a trainee."

He smiled and stood. "I've already thought of that," he said, and went to his desk, removing a package from the bottom drawer and bringing it over. It was wrapped in brown twine. "Here. Open it," he said, holding it out for me.

"What is it?" I asked, pulling at the bow.

"You'll see."

I removed the tape and carefully unfolded the paper. Inside was a Dark Moth uniform, but what caused my intake of breath was the Moth insignia. I'd wondered what color they would give me, if they ever made me a warrior. If the thread was black, it would be difficult to see. As I'd half expected, the insignia had been sewn in with black thread, but it also had all seven of the colors of the seven deadly sins woven within. "How?" I asked, lifting it from the paper to study it more closely.

"Magic," Wrythe said, sitting beside me. "Heathcliff asked what I would do for your uniform and suggested I speak with the dragon Abernathy. He gave me the spell and Heathcliff worked it over with the thread. Isn't it incredible?"

“Yes,” I breathed, a bubbly excitement and peace overflowing my heart. “Wrythe, I can’t believe you went to all the trouble.”

He scooted closer. “Alice.” His fingers caressed my cheek. “You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met. And if you would be so inclined—”

I couldn’t let him finish. “I love Kade,” I blurted, standing and walking across the room. I needed space because even though I knew I loved Kade, I had feelings for Wrythe. They were deep and strange and growing stronger by the second.

Wrythe clamped his mouth shut, glancing down a moment. “I understand,” he said, all business. “And I appreciate your honesty.” His features transformed into those of a king. “That doesn’t change the fact that I need you on my council. Your inauguration into the Dark Moth Society will be at midnight.”

“What about Peter?” I was stunned. My fingers crushed my warrior uniform as I thought about what would happen tonight.

“I’m announcing an assembly in just a few minutes. Once everyone is gathered, I intend to lay out the treachery within the council as well as share all you did to assist me. I will tell them of Peter’s death and inform everyone that his funeral will be held tomorrow.”

“So soon,” I said, coming back over to him. I could sense his deep sorrow at the loss of Peter and refused to allow him to suffer alone.

“Heathcliff said he would help his wife, Sarah prepare Peter’s body.”

I didn’t know Peter had a wife. Then internally I rolled my eyes. Of course not. It wasn’t my place to know. That aside, I couldn’t believe my inauguration would be tonight and my heart raced. “What do I need to do to prepare?”

He smiled, a sad smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “You might want to rest and get ready for all that’s happening tonight. You’ll be by my side during the assembly and then your inauguration.” He rubbed the back of his neck and I sensed the weight of all he needed to do

hanging heavily around him. “And then tomorrow after the funeral, there will be a celebration.”

“Will we even feel like celebrating?” I didn’t want to disrespect my former teacher in any way.

“It was Peter’s wish that we have a party after his funeral. It will be for him that we celebrate,” Wrythe said shooing me to the door. “Now go. I have much to do.”

“Okay then.” I waited while Wrythe opened the door and went through, but before I left, I turned back. “Wrythe,” I began, not knowing what to say, but wanting to say something.

“Can you meet me in my quarters later?” His eyes were soft.

I swallowed nervously. “All right.” I glanced nervously down at my hands and my uniform. “And thank you again for this,” I said, holding it up. “It’s the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me.”

“Oh?” He raised his eyebrows and I knew he was comparing himself to Kade.

I wouldn’t go into details, but it was true. “I mean it. Thank you.” I left, walking back to my room, lost in thought. It would be so much easier if I could feel for Wrythe the way I felt for Kade. We were both Dark Moths, half demon and half human. Kade was an angel, in every way different than me. Wrythe and I were created from sin while Kade was virtue—at least according to the lore.

That Kade and I were so attracted to each other made no sense, unless the saying opposites attract was literal as well as physical. We were amazing together and I wouldn’t give him up. There was no comparison between the soft, sweet affection I felt for Wrythe versus the passionate, all-consuming need I had for Kade. It was like having a choice between buttery, fresh-baked bread and chocolate cake layered with chocolate mousse topped with creamy chocolate frosting. Sure, the bread was good. Maybe even better for me, but the cake was absolute decadence.

The closer I came to my room, the faster my pulse raced. Kade

waited for me there. And that meant more time in his arms. But as soon as I opened my door, I knew he wasn't inside. Atop my bed was a package similar to the one Wrythe had given me, and I guessed inside were more uniforms since that's what I would be wearing from now on. I hoped they fit. Before I opened the wrapping, I picked up the envelope, thinking it was from our seamstress and it would give me details and instructions. Instead it was a note from Kade.

Dearest Alice,

I wanted to tell you in person, and waited as long as I could, but my superiors were very insistent. I've been summoned back and when they require my presence, I don't have a choice. In case you aren't one hundred percent certain of me, I wanted you to know I love you and though I've been called back, I can't say I've been called home because you are now my home. I'll return as soon as I am able. You, Alice, are the beat of my heart and the pulse in my veins. I know now my existence is only for you.

Always and forever.

Kade

I read his note several times, forcing myself not to get upset, choosing instead to admire the swirls and slant of the hand-written note. I could feel Kade's love for me in every letter, each period and comma. He hadn't just vanished the way he'd done before but had taken the time to write me and let me know what happened. That was growth on his part and I appreciated it. Tucking the letter under my pillow, I got my stuff together for a shower. As I turned on the water, Wrythe's voice over the intercom made the announcement about the assembly. I needed to hurry.

After I showered, I studied my new uniform a moment. I wanted to wear it, but couldn't until my inauguration. Going to my closet, I selected my black camo pants and a black long sleeve shirt. I was hungry but didn't have time. I debated whether to run to the cafeteria for a sandwich when there was a knock on the door.

When I opened it, there was a tray of what smelled like food on

the floor. It was covered and hot. I picked it up and looked both ways to thank the one who'd brought it, but no one was around. My mouth watered as I took it to my bed. Removing the lid, I picked up my fork. Cook had prepared a pork chop covered in pecan and apple chutney. Next to it was a baked potato with a side of green beans. There was also a roll, some butter, and a bowl of fruit along with two glasses of water.

While I ate I thought about what Wrythe had said. He wanted me on his council. Was that wise or would it cause problems between Kade and me? By the time I finished eating, I decided to accept Wrythe's invitation to be on the council and that the feelings Kade and I had for each other were strong enough to survive anything. Besides, I told myself, Wrythe needed me. I couldn't let him down.

During all of my internal debating and decision-making, I continued to avoid the reality of the second trial, but it lurked in the back of my mind. I couldn't accept that either of them would ever be gone.

OceanofPDF.com

AT THE ASSEMBLY, I stood beside Wrythe as he explained all that happened and would be happening over the next few days. It didn't escape my notice that he intended to have the council reorganized in time for me to make my choice for the second trial. And that's when I realized he intended for me to run the Society, not in the years to come, but now. He expected me to choose Kade over him and was taking the necessary steps to ensure the Society survived his death. At that thought, my heart ached. He'd kissed me and told me he loved me knowing full well I loved someone else.

That revelation shook me to my core. Wrythe really did trust me and he was counting on me. When he finished speaking, he opened up the floor for questions.

Georgia, who I noticed wore her Dark Moth uniform with the gold Moth insignia shining bright and new above her right breast, spoke first. "Why should we trust you?" Her question bordered on insubordination and I held my breath wondering if Wrythe would stand for such insolence.

"A fair question, Georgia. You should trust me because I've never given you a reason not to," he said. Then pointed to Grayson, who had his hand raised.

"How will the new council member selection be run?" he asked.

"I have a list of Dark Moths who have served the Society well for many years," Wrythe said, his focus on Grayson. "But," he began, gazing out at all of his subjects, "if anyone would like to volunteer to be on the council, they may submit their name and I will honestly consider them." He cleared his throat. "I may as well tell you that there will be eight members instead of seven as there have been in the past. Alice Blackburn will serve as the eighth member."

That sent the crowd into an uproar. Murmurs and shouts arose like

a giant wave in a tumultuous storm. Wrythe waited several minutes before raising his hand for silence.

“Why would you let that abomination on the council? She isn’t one of us. Not really.”

I didn’t see who made the comment, but Wrythe did.

“I appreciate your comment, Stelvern, but I must respectfully disagree,” Wrythe said evenly, and I noticed his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. It spoke volumes to his self-control that he wasn’t allowing his wrath to rule him right now. “You say she isn’t one of us and I see by the looks on several faces that many agree, but the truth is, Alice Blackburn the culmination of us all. If any one person could ever begin to understand each and every one of her subjects, it would be her. She possesses all seven of the deadly sins within her and has learned how to control them better than any of us could.” He gave me a sideways glance, a grim smile splayed across his mouth.

I blinked back tears, touched by his support. He believed every word he was saying and I worked to believe them as well.

Warrant spoke up next. “If that’s true, then shouldn’t she be locked away? It’s hard enough to handle the power of one demon. What must it be like to try to control all seven?”

“Why would we lock up our best hope for the future,” Wrythe responded. “That she managed all seven so well is a testament to the kind of person she is—the kind of person I want to be. For now, believe me when I say, she possesses more control than most of us ever could.”

“And what of her Trials? How can you let her live knowing she must choose you or that boy?” Stelvern asked, his body language bolder than before.

Wrythe growled, and I sensed his control waning. “She lives, Stelvern because,” he paused and took in each person within the compound. “Hear this and hear it well. If Alice isn’t allowed to

choose, then we all die. Not just me and not just her, but every single one of us." He spoke the last several words slowly, allowing them to sink in. Then he straightened. "It's that simple."

There was a collective gasp from the crowd. I was surprised Wrythe shared the information, but it was fact. The Devil had made it clear. Either I chose Wrythe or Kade, or all Moths would die.

"Is this true?" someone from the crowd demanded.

"I would not say it if it weren't. I can promise you that." Wrythe clamped his jaws together, the muscles in his face flexing and contracting.

"But that can't be," another said.

"I was there when the Devil spoke the words. This situation is as real as you and I, my friend." Wrythe rolled his shoulders, trying to remain calm.

Kade suddenly appeared on the very back row and despite all the people in the oversized room, I spotted him immediately. A distinct light radiated off him. It was faint, so faint I doubted anyone else could see it, but I could, and he took my breath away.

You're beautiful, I said into his mind, my breath catching in my throat. He leaned against the doorframe and light from the hallway emanated all around him.

Thanks, he returned, studying me intently.

The question and answer session continued, but I was no longer listening. My every vein and sinew were tuned to Kade. He was all I could see, hear, and think about. Like an overtaught violin, if I tried to do anything but concentrate on Kade, I might burst or break.

"Alice?" Wrythe asked.

I jumped. "Yes, sire," I said, clearing my throat.

He gave me a quizzical look. "Would you like to say a few words?"

Oh no, no, no. I really didn't want to address the Dark Moths, most of whom didn't like me or pretended I didn't exist. "Sure," I lied,

coming to the pulpit.

Wrythe whispered in my ear. “You can do this. Keep it short and sweet.”

I nodded, swallowing down the sudden fear that had blocked my throat. “I just want you all to know,” I began, the last word cracking. Everyone laughed, and I decided to give into my nerves and go with it. “Obviously this is a new adventure for me,” I said, giving them a wry smile. “But I fully support King Wrythe. My greatest desire is to ensure each and every one of you have a safe and long life, and I pledge to do everything in my power to make that happen.” I placed a hand over my heart and bowed slightly, my forehead bonking into the microphone.

Everyone laughed again.

I was an idiot.

“Al-ice,” someone chanted my name slowly.

“Ali-ice,” another joined in.

Wendy, who stood in the front, lifted one fisted hand in the air, and smiled. “Al-ice. Al-ice.”

Pretty soon the whole room was chanting my name. It was surreal, and I was sure my face had turned the color of Cook’s cherry tartlets.

“Thank you,” I said, when they finished before moving off to the side, desperate to disappear.

“That was perfect,” Wrythe whispered. Into the microphone he said, “We’ll meet back here at midnight for the inauguration.” He stepped away from the mic.

The room erupted as people spoke to each other.

I decided I couldn’t face the crowds another moment and turned my back to them. “If you no longer need me,” I said to Wrythe, “I’m going to go to my room for a few minutes.” I thought of Kade.

“Can you spare an hour, so we can go over those I’m considering for the council? The sooner we choose, the better.”

He was right, and I fought back my disappointment. “Of course,” I said, glancing back to look for Kade, but he was gone. Dejected, I followed Wrythe out of the assembly hall and into his office. I was grateful he hadn’t taken me back to his rooms. I didn’t know why, but those four walls oozed passion and desire. One couldn’t help but think about all Wrythe had done on his oversized four-poster bed. I forced those thoughts away.

Are you coming to your room? Kade asked in my mind. *I’m waiting.*

Not yet. Wrythe wants to go over possible council members.

Kade didn’t respond immediately and I got the feeling my angel was sulking. *We need to talk,* he finally said.

I’ll be there as soon as I can, I responded, not liking the tone of his voice in my head. *Is everything okay?*

I have new orders, he replied simply.

My stomach did flip-flops. *What are they?*

I’ll tell you when you get to your room.

All right. Kade’s superiors had already told him not to see me any longer. Now what did they want? I couldn’t imagine.

“After you,” Wrythe said, opening the door to his office.

I forced myself through the entrance and went over to the chair across from his desk.

“That seems too formal,” Wrythe said. “Let’s sit on the couch.” He sailed past his desk, opening a drawer and retrieving a bulky manila file.

I followed him over and was about to sit when someone knocked on the door.

“Mind if I come in?” Grayson asked, poking his head through.

Wrythe stood, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Grayson, I thought I might see you,” he said, taking the Dark Moth’s hand in his and shaking vigorously.

“Well, sire, I wanted to make sure you knew I was interested in

being on the council. My qualifications are lengthy, as you know."

"Yes, indeed," Wrythe responded. "I know what you're capable of, Grayson, and you're already in contention."

A wave of relieved pleasure crossed his face. "Good. Thank you, sire." His eyes roamed over me in a slick, seductive way. "Alice. Anytime you want a training lesson, come to my room. I'd be glad to work you over."

"All right, Grayson, that'll be all." Wrythe held the door open, indicating the silver-tongued warrior should pound pavement.

"Right." He glanced at me and winked. "I mean it. Anytime."

"Thanks," I responded, forcing myself not to blush at his innuendo. The man was a walking poster for sex. Tall. Dark. Rippling muscles. Like someone plucked the perfect man right out of the sky and allowed him to dwell in our presence.

After the door closed, Wrythe went back over to the couch and pulled out Grayson's file. "What do we think of him?" the king growled softly.

I took a deep breath to clear my thoughts.

Wrythe heard me and looked up. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. This is just a lot," I said. "But I'm sure it's worse for you. How are you healing?" I'd almost forgotten he'd been near death not that many hours ago.

"Better. Fine," he admitted. "I have to be," he said. "There's a lot to accomplish in a very short time."

"Wrythe," I started, but couldn't finish. What would I say? Wrythe, I won't choose you. Or, Wrythe, I'm sorry I'm choosing you. Those thoughts made me physically ill. How could I do that to the Dark Moths? At the same time, how could I live with myself if I sentenced Kade to death instead?

Wrythe seemed to feel my inner turmoil and patted my shoulder. "Tell me your thoughts on Grayson."

I sat back, lacing my fingers together. Glad for something else to worry about. “He’s a great fighter.”

“Agreed.” Wrythe leaned back in his chair as well.

“I’ve only ever heard him say good things about you,” I went on.

“Me too. He’s been loyal for nearly a century.”

Whoa. That was a long time to remain alive, especially for a Moth. “Then I say he’s definitely in the running as the Gluttony council member.”

“So do I.” Wrythe closed the file and set it on the coffee table before moving on to the next.

For the next hour or so, we went over dozens of possibilities. At one point, someone brought us food. We ate and talked, going over the candidates. I voiced my opinions openly and honestly. Wrythe took my thoughts into consideration. When it was time to get ready for the inauguration, Wrythe, shut the files and cleared his throat. “I’d say we did some good work, Alice.” He stacked the pile of rejected contenders and placed them in a drawer. Those he was interviewing went into his top desk drawer which he locked.

He stood, and I followed. “I agree. There are several great choices.” Not that my opinion really mattered. As he told the council members when he made them promise not to kill me, his word overruled all others in the end.

“The first interview will be tomorrow after Peter’s funeral. I’d appreciate it if you were there.”

“Are you sure, sire?” I didn’t feel prepared for such a task.

He came forward, his eyes raking over me before landing on my lips. “Definitely,” he said. I thought he might try to kiss me again, but he didn’t. He went to the door instead. “I’ll see you at the inauguration.”

“I’ll be there,” I said, relieved, a happy smile filling my face.

As I walked to my room, thoughts of possible council members

flew from my mind and were replaced by images of Kade's mouth on mine. By the time I opened my door, my knees were weak.

He was asleep on my bed, lying on top of the covers, hands clasped together on his stomach and booted feet hanging off the edge. His long, sandy hair was splayed out and his face was soft. My angel was stunning!

"Kade," I whispered, going over to the bed and sitting gently beside him.

He opened his eyes and smiled, causing my heart to flutter with need. "Hi," he said, taking my hand.

I hadn't realized how tired I was until I felt his warm energy silt away my tension. "Hi yourself."

"Did you accomplish all you set out to with Wrythe?" He leaned up on his elbows.

I laughed at his turn of phrase. "Yes, we have some good possibilities. Wrythe and I will be interviewing them tomorrow." While I spoke, I straddled him.

Kade's eyes widened.

I leaned down so my face was directly over his. "What do you want to do now?" I asked.

His pupils dilated. "You're too delicious," he said, placing his hands on my hips.

I kissed him then. Soft and slow, loving the way my body stirred against him.

He groaned, digging his fingers into my hips.

I pushed open his mouth, feeling bold as I moved aside his tee shirt, stroking his chest and abs hungrily. He sat up, dragging his shirt over his head. I did the same with mine. He studied me a moment.

"So beautiful," he said, lying back on the bed, taking me with him.

Our kisses turned desperate, hungry, and as with every time before, I felt one with him.

How can this be wrong? I hadn't realized I'd thought it so loud until Kade responded.

It isn't. At least not completely.

That stopped me. He'd taken my hair from its tie, letting it fall around our faces like a curtain. "How do you know?" My gaze strayed from his eyes down his nose to his luscious lips. I licked mine, desire raging through me.

"There's something I should tell you," he said.

I sat up, trying to focus on what he said instead of what I wanted. "Okay. Spill." I climbed off him, my heart aching at his absence. It was almost time for me to leave again anyway.

His body told me he felt the same way I did, but he continued, "I know why you emanate silver-white light sometimes." Awe danced across his face.

"Tell me." I started to shake, afraid of what he would say, but desperate to know the truth. In one motion, I tugged on my shirt.

"It's because of your mother," he said, rolling off the bed and pulling his shirt on as well.

I went to my mirror and brushed through my hair before twisting it up into a bun, securing it with the tie. I waited a moment, thinking he would say more, but he didn't. My legs shook so hard I had to sit. "What do you know about my mother?" Spots danced in front of my eyes. "Is she still alive?"

"After the Devil seduced and impregnated her, she should've died. Some say she is dead, but I think she might not be," he said. "I don't know where she is though." He shook his head.

My mouth fell open, but I clamped it shut. I couldn't have heard right. "I'm confused. My mother might not be dead?" That went against everything the demons did as part of their game.

"I don't know," he admitted. "The rules are sketchy at best, especially given who and what she is."

“What is she?” I asked, already knowing what he would say, but unable to believe it.

“Your mother is an angel,” he said in a matter-a-fact manner. He crossed his arms, his features shifting faster than I could keep up. “And not just any angel either. She was an archangel of death, widely known, and greatly revered for her kindness and dedication to the human souls who died under her watch. Your mom was a human who became something vicious before becoming an angel.” He shook his head and it was apparent he was dealing with his own issues regarding my mother. “How exactly she became one is beyond me, but she is an angel.” He paused. “And more.”

Most of what he said didn’t filter. All I could focus on was that my mom was an angel. “Does that mean I’m an angel?”

“Half angel. Yes,” he nodded grimly.

“And there are different… levels of angels?” My mind kept repeating the phrase *I’m an angel* over and over again. All thoughts of Wrythe, the inauguration, the second Trial, and joining the Society council vanished.

“Of course. Remember balance? There are menial, tracker, and royal demons, right?”

“I get it,” I said, unable to say more. It felt like I was drowning. My arms crossed around myself, I paced, trying to hold myself together.

“It works the same with angels. There are lower, mid, and upper level angels, too. And your mom, as an archangel of death, was an upper level angel.”

By now, the shaking had consumed my entire body. Even my teeth were chattering. I didn’t want to believe what Kade said, but I felt the truth deep in my bones. I thought it explained a few things too—like the light that sprang off me sometimes and the strange power I’d possessed when I shoved Kade away from me in Pasty’s basement. “But that’s impossible. Why would an angel allow the Devil…?” I couldn’t even finish my sentence. “Surely she knew better?” I’d read

plenty of books about the girl falling for the bad boy, but an angel falling for the Devil? Seemed beyond crazy.

"I don't know the whole story, Alice," he said slowly. "Supposedly, a long time ago she was a human who was forced to become something awful. The chayot found her and she was changed again. But the why behind her and the Devil having sex is beyond me. That's something you'll have to ask her, if you get the chance."

I thought my heart would pound out of my chest. "How do I find her? Where is she?" *I'm a freaking half-angel... and half-demon.* But not just half of any demon. I shuddered as my thoughts turned dark. No wonder the lights called me an abomination.

It was the truth.

"I asked around after they gave me my new assignment and it seems that when an angel who's previously been a human is stripped of their essence, they are sent back to Earth. Now whether she has memories of her life before, I don't know, but my guess is she doesn't, which would explain why she hasn't come looking for you." He ran a hand through his hair. "Which brings me to my next assignment." Kade looked away.

"What is it?" Last I heard, his bosses no longer wanted him around me.

"They've decided you truly are the one the prophecy is about and want you to return with me to the realm of angels." He sat back down on the bed.

I snorted, leaning back on my heels. "You don't buy into that prophecy stuff, do you?" It seemed ridiculous. A prophecy was nothing more than a glorified prediction. No one could know what another person would choose. It was impossible. I went to my chest of drawers and flipped the pages of the single book resting atop it.

"Actually, I do. The prophecy was something we learned about almost as soon as we started angel school." He rested his elbows on his thighs. "My superiors want you to come with me now."

My heart beat so fast I thought it would pound out of my chest. I was having a moment—as though I was dreaming I was awake when I was really dreaming and, in this dream, Kade was telling me I was an angel and not just any angel, but a special angel with a super-powerful mom, and it was weird and surreal, and I didn't like it. Not at all. "Look, you've just dropped a bombshell on me. I need time to process and I have to be here for Peter's funeral tomorrow." I shook my head. "I'm struggling to believe any of this, including some nonsense about a prophecy." Another of the strange talking lights had said something about a prophecy, hadn't it? But I couldn't deal with that. I could barely deal with the fact that I was an angel. "I can't," I said, trying to regain some calm. The shaking had subsided, but only just a little. "Wrythe and Demonland need me here."

He studied me intently. "But Alice, the realm of angels is more your home than this place."

"Is the realm Heaven?" I asked, feeling frustrated and scared and more discombobulated than I believed possible.

"Actually, no."

"Wait, there's no heaven?" I dropped the book and faced him. That surprised me and I came to sit beside him.

"There's a heaven, yes, and some angels reside there, but most dwell in the angel realm." Frustration was evident in his features as well as the way he crinkled his brow.

"You're breaking my brain right now." I went back to my corner, the one with the spider in it, and found her sitting in her web like she was listening to every word. She'd spun an egg sac. Soon, hundreds of baby spiders would be born. I studied it, pondering the beauty of life continuing and appreciating the distraction.

"I'm sure, and I'm sorry to dump this all on you at once." He came toward me, but I held up my hand. "It's urgent," he added.

I took a deep breath and walked past him and over to my closet. "I'm not going. At least, not right now. After the funeral, I need to

help Wrythe. I'm the only person he can trust right now, and he needs me. With the end of the second trial coming up in a few days, he needs to get everything in order before…" I let the rest of the sentence die. I'd almost said before I chose him to die, and that made me feel like I would throw up. "Now doesn't work. You'll have to tell your superiors I appreciate their request, but I have to respectfully decline." I went to the door and yanked it open, indicating he should leave with the wave of my hand. Obviously he could just pop in and out, but this was the only way I knew how to tell him to go.

Kade shook his head. "Saying no isn't an option, Alice. If they want to see you, they'll make it happen one way or another," he said, standing and tucking his hands in his pockets.

"Is that a threat?" I asked, a hint of red glittering along my skin.

"Alice." He said my name quietly.

"Please, I need some time to think." And I needed to get ready for the inauguration.

"How long?" he asked, his voice so soft I barely heard him.

"I don't know." I crossed my arms and stared down at my feet, unable to meet his gaze.

After several long seconds, I looked up and he was gone. I sighed heavily, the ache for him pressing against my chest like a weight. I thought about calling him back and covering his face in kisses, but an image of Wrythe in his office telling me I was the only person he could trust came to mind. I couldn't leave him alone. I just couldn't.

OceanofPDF.com

THE INAUGURATION CEREMONY went by quickly. Not many people came, which was fine with me. My head pounded with all Kade told me. *I'm half angel.* I kept seesawing between thinking Kade was joking for some reason and then thinking I must be insane.

During the ceremony, Wrythe got up and said a few words. The audience clapped and that was it. I was officially a Dark Moth, though I didn't feel like one. I felt like a fraud.

When it was over and Wrythe and I had shaken hands with some of my teachers and trainers, including Grayson, Wrythe took me aside. "Are you all right?" Concern shone on his face.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry. Today's just been a lot," I admitted.

"I get that." But he could tell there was more.

"Sire, we need to go over the program for Peter's funeral," Wendy said, coming over to us.

"Okay, sure." He smiled at her. "She's a real go-getter, this one," he said, pointing at Wendy.

"She is pretty amazing," I agreed, smiling at my friend.

"Thanks, Alice," she said, hugging me.

I was really starting to like this new Wendy. "It's the truth."

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow." It looked like he tried to say more with his eyes, but I wasn't sure what. With a wave, he followed after Wendy.

"See ya," I said, and suddenly felt very alone. I wandered around aimlessly for a while until I remembered I wanted to retrieve my knife and gun. In the elevator, I debated what I was doing. Then decided to stop at D13. When the metal doors opened, I braced myself for what I knew was to come and stepped into the room on the far left which had held the upper level demons. But the room was empty, pristine,

like nothing had ever been in there. It was the same for the other two rooms as well.

I got back on the elevator and considered what I could do now that all evidence of the torture chambers were gone. Even if Wrythe believed me, there was no proof, which meant there was no way to reveal who'd done such horrible things to all of the demons. When I reached the bottom floor, I stepped out carefully. It was so quiet, my breathing echoed and bounced off the walls. I went to the stall where I dropped my weapons. They were still there. Relieved, I collected them, tucking the knife in my boot and the gun at my back. I turned to leave but couldn't make myself. Gingerly I sat on the dirt-covered ground, leaning my back against the wall. Closing my eyes, I forced myself to think about all that Kade told me.

My mom was an angel. And not just any angel, my mom was an upper level angel of death. I tried to think about what would've made her choose to have sex with the Devil and came up blank. Most humans weren't even aware demons existed, but angels had to know about them. According to the information in Heathcliff's journal, their sole purpose was to protect humans. At least that was the chayot angels' job. Maybe it was different for the others?

I thought again about the lights that had buzzed around me after the Devil flung me in here. What were those lights? Could they be angels?

"What are you doing down here?" I jumped as Wrythe interrupted my thoughts. My eyes flew open and I realized my face was wet.

"Nothing." I cleared my throat. "I mean, I needed to grab my weapons," I said pointing at the knife and gun. I tried to stand and wipe my cheeks at the same time, hoping he wouldn't see my tears.

Wrythe sat down beside me before I could regain my feet, then handed me a handkerchief. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I'm fine," I lied.

"Then you're doing better than me," he admitted, pulling his knees

up, resting his forearms on them.

“Are you hurting, sire?” It hadn’t been that long ago that he’d been near death.

He blew out a breath. “Not physically. But I am mentally exhausted.” He rested his head against the wall, studying me. “You realize how long I’ve been responsible for the Moths?”

“Yes,” I said. I knew how long he’d been king thanks to my history class.

“I’m tired and could use a rest,” he said, his eyes flicking across my face.

“What, like a nap?” I asked, though I knew what he meant.

“No, Alice. Like when you choose for me to die for your second trial.” His gaze was steady. He didn’t even blink.

I looked away, covering my ears, not ready to deal with anything he had to say about it.

He got up on one knee and gently pulled my hands from my ears. “You need to hear this. It’s important.”

“I can’t,” I said, unbidden tears running down my cheeks. “I can’t choose you any more than I can choose Kade.” A sob hitched in my throat and I ground my teeth. Crying was for humans.

Wrythe pulled me into a hug. “You love him,” he said, talking about Kade.

“I do,” I admitted, tucking my head against his shoulder and under his chin.

“But you love me too. I can feel that,” he added.

As much as I didn’t understand the depth of my emotions, I had to come love him, and I didn’t have the strength to lie. “Yes,” I said. “I do love you, Wrythe, but…”

“I know. It isn’t the same.”

I pulled him tighter against me. “You mean so much to me. You’re my family. I can’t imagine my life without you.” I sniffled, enjoying

the warm, clean scent of his neck.

“And that’s why I want you to choose me. I’ve lived a long time. I’m ready for some peace and quiet.”

At his words, another sob escaped my throat and I grabbed his shirt into my fists. I appreciated he was trying to make the choice easier on me, but it wasn’t helping. “I can’t,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut.

“You can,” he said, forcing me to look at him. “Alice, you have to choose me. Choosing Kade isn’t an option because you would be sad, and I can’t live knowing your heart is broken.” The kindness and gentleness in his gaze and the selflessness of his words pricked at my heart and before I knew it my lips were on his. At first, he didn’t return it. We sat frozen, our eyes locked on each other as though waiting to see what the other would do. But a moment later, his hands went into my hair as his lips pressed against mine and he closed his eyes. Fire licked low in my belly like a smoldering flame, and I realized that if I hadn’t met Kade, these feelings for Wrythe would be perfect. As his lips moved with mine, I felt whole and complete and beautiful. He pulled me onto his lap and I straddled him, my hands running along his massive shoulders and down his amazing arms before making their way to his face. We were right together. That knowledge sank deep into my soul. We could be together without worry of Wrythe losing a part of himself. But if I chose to be with Kade, and we were together, he would lose his angel essence, whatever that meant.

Wrythe growled low in the back of his throat and deepened our kiss, pushing open my mouth and flicking his tongue inside and my desire for him reached fever pitch. At its peak came a scorching flash of what our future would be. A marriage full of love, hot passion, happiness, and children. He and I would have children together! A life beyond the compound filled with hunting trips, vacations, and worldwide travel. Each image urged me on. Our kisses grew more passionate until I gasped, clinging to him and to what the future held

for us.

After several long moments, he released my lips. “Are you sure you love that angel boy more than me? Because that was incredibly hot.” A half smile sat on his face.

I realized how tangled we were in each other and carefully pushed away from him. “I-I should go. I need to get some rest.”

He cleared his throat and stood, pulling me up with him. “You could get some rest in my room. With me.”

If I went with him there would be no rest. Just a glorious night together. And as much as my body wanted to know what that felt like, my mind wouldn’t have it. “I should go to my room,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Very well.” Disappointment hung in his eyes. “Sit next to me at the funeral?”

“Sure,” I said and couldn’t help but wonder how Wrythe would feel if he knew what my mother was.

THE NEXT DAY, after breakfast and a shower, I returned to find a dress and a note on my bed. It was from the woman who ran the team in charge of making the Dark Moth uniforms. She was a mysterious woman who occasionally created something special, not because someone asked for or deserved it, but just because she felt like it. Her name was Haven and she wasn’t a warrior, but a regular Moth. No one knew how she came to be at the compound, but rumor had it Wrythe had brought her with him when he took over as king.

The gossip surrounding Haven hadn’t mattered to me up until I opened my bedroom door and saw the dress lying on my bed. The moment I saw it, I knew it was from her. Tears stung my eyes.

It was completely my style even though before that moment I hadn’t known I had a style. The material was black, made from the same magic as the insignias on my new uniforms. A small white card sat atop it with the words: *Fit for a Queen.*

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed. I would wear it to the funeral.

Still in my robe, I brushed out my hair, letting it fall past my shoulders. Then studied my face. For once I wished I had makeup to accentuate my features, but it was too late to find some now. Once my hair was up in a bun, I slid the dress over my head. It was soft like butter against my skin. The hem reached to just above my knees, the skirt like hundreds of soft, black petals, the bodice skimming over my chest, waist, and hips perfectly. The sleeves were long but see-through as was a portion of the neckline. I went to the mirror and studied my reflection. In the light, all the colors shone, and for the first time in my life I looked at my reflection and felt beautiful. When I got the chance, I would thank Haven. Somehow, I would find a way. She’d also left me a pair of beautiful black shoes, the material possessed of the same magical qualities as the dress. I slid them on and wasn’t surprised they fit. Everything was perfect. Another quick glance in the mirror and I left my room, making my way to the assembly hall.

Everyone liked Peter or at least respected him, so the hall was crowded. I made my way through the throng, saying hello to the few people who waved at me first. My hope was to find a seat near the front. Wrythe had asked me to sit next to him, but he was sitting on the stage, as he should. I didn’t want to be up there again. There was a chair available beside him, but surely that wasn’t for me.

Several teachers sat up there as well, including Grayson. Wendy stood behind him, her eyes puffy and swollen. I wanted to comfort her, but my gaze kept returning to the coffin settled in the middle of the stage. Along both sides and the back of the open casket were bright, beautiful bouquets of flowers looking as though they were begging the grave mourners to find some happiness. The coffin itself was a purple so deep it was almost black. The inside had been lined with a lavender satin. Lying within was Peter Jordan.

Wrythe noticed me and stood, waving me over. He wore a black suit tailored to fit him flawlessly. Underneath was a black silk shirt open at the collar. His hair hung to his broad shoulders, which were

back. As king, he carried the weight of the whole Society.

I tilted my head, shaking it slightly and pointing to a chair near the front.

He put his hands together as though he were praying. Begging me to join him. I couldn't tell him no. There was too much pain on his face. Too much hurt in his eyes. The man was suffering, and I had to be there for him. Offering a small internal sigh, I went around to the right side of the stage and climbed the stairs. He met me at the top and took my hand in his before tucking it into the crook of his arm.

"You look extraordinary," he said, his voice soft and full of emotion, "though your lips are still a little swollen by the looks of it."

I glanced up at him, surprised, but before I could say anything, Wendy ran over and threw her arms around me. "I hate these things, don't you?" she whispered.

I definitely wasn't a fan. "It's hard to say goodbye," I said, hugging her back.

Her eyes roamed over my dress as she wiped at her tears. "You look divine. Where did you get that dress?"

Wrythe saved me from needing to explain. "Dearest Wendy, I'm going to take Alice to her seat now."

"I guess I should get back to standing behind Grayson." She rolled her eyes. "I'm the man's security detail for the night."

Was that code for his date? I didn't know. "Talk to you later, Wendy."

She took her place behind Grayson and my gaze found Wrythe's.

"Haven made that for you, didn't she?" Wrythe asked me, though he already knew the answer. "I didn't want you to have to tell Wendy. She would've been green with jealousy and she wasn't even sired by an Envy demon.

"Thank you." I sat in the chair he'd saved for me, resting my hands in my lap. Wrythe sat beside me. From my vantage point, I watched

the Dark Moths and the trainees amble about, talking amongst themselves, and wondered what they were saying. After a few moments, I decided I didn't want to know.

Finally, Wrythe stood and went over to the podium.

Over the next hour, several people, including his wife got up and spoke about Peter and what an amazing man he was. When they finished, we clapped. It hadn't been planned, but the mood had lifted, making the funeral feel like a celebration of Peter's life.

Finally, Wrythe turned to look at me. "Did you want to say something, Alice?"

I nodded. With effort, I made my way over. Wrythe stood to the side. I cleared my throat, taking a moment to gather my thoughts. "Not too long ago, Peter, Wrythe, and I were out on a hunt and Peter said he didn't know why he came with me since he considered himself nothing more than a sidekick." The audience laughed. I laughed too, then paused, licking my lips. "At the time, I didn't tell Peter how I felt about him and how much it meant to have him there. It seems appropriate I tell him now." I clasped my hands together nervously. "Peter was an amazing fighter. Loyal to a fault. He stood up for me on more than one occasion and he made sure I received the help I needed. Though he was my teacher, I considered him more than a friend. He was my family." Tears pressed against the backs of my eyes. "I still can't believe he is gone and I miss him terribly, but I'll always keep the memory of him in my heart." Without thinking about it, I pounded my fist against my chest and then raised it toward the ceiling, spreading my first and middle fingers apart in the peace sign. I don't know why I did it, but I did. After that, I turned and went back to my seat, trying not to be embarrassed.

No one made a sound and I felt odd, like I'd said something wrong. But then finally everyone began clapping and relief washed through me. Anyone who said they didn't care what others thought of them was lying to themselves—at least a little bit.

Afterward, Wrythe and several of the teachers took the casket above ground by way of the elevator with Peter's wife, Sarah trailing behind. Her eyes were red and swollen. I wished I could do something to ease her suffering, but only time could do that.

As I watched them go, I thought about where Dark Moths were buried. There was a cemetery dedicated to our kind, though I didn't think the owner knew what we were, only that we'd purchased most of the plots. The burial site would be respectable and worthy of Peter, I was sure.

When they'd all left the room, I glanced out at the crowd and saw Kade sitting near the back. Had he been there the whole time?

He started up the aisle, heading toward the exit and away from me.

Kade, I called to him in my mind.

Meet you in your room, he responded.

OceanofPDF.com

WHEN I RETURNED to my room, Kade was there, sitting on my bed. His handsome features twisted with anguish. When he saw me, he stood. “The two of you look perfect together,” he said, heaving a deep breath that sounded almost like defeat.

I knew he meant Wrythe and me. “Kade, he needs me right now,” I said, the words sounding lame even to my ears. “He’s all alone.” I wanted him to understand, even though I still didn’t—at least not fully.

“He isn’t alone, Alice. We were just in a room filled with Dark Moths, many of whom would serve Wrythe well.” The anguish on his face turned sour.

“It’s just… you’re right. They would serve him. But that isn’t what he needs.” I wouldn’t act like I knew Wrythe better than anyone else, but I did know a little.

“I know what he wants,” Kade said, his hands pressed together into fists at his side. The man was jealous. Was that even possible? Could angels get jealous? “Or more appropriately, I know *who* he wants.”

He was talking about me. Images of the future I saw with Wrythe flashed through my mind again. I shook it all away. “Look, Wrythe has lost everyone he trusted. I can’t abandon him too. That wouldn’t be right.”

Kade brushed at a fly. We rarely got them so far down, but when we did, they were hard to get rid of and extremely annoying. Distracted, I went after it, chasing it around the room. Eventually it flew up into the corner where the yellow and black spider had built her web. The fly ambled like he would fly into it, but at the last second swerved away. Frustrated, I grabbed a sock, trying to knock the fly out of the air. Behind me Kade was laughing, obviously amused by my antics. He certainly wasn’t helping. The fly went back over to

the spider's web and flew right into it. I'd barely stopped before the spider went to work.

"'Step into my parlor," said the spider to the fly," Kade whispered, coming up behind me.

"It's gross," I said as we watched the spider wrapped the fly in a white orb before placing it up in the corner of her web. *A treat for later,* I thought, disgusted.

"It's life," he said, his face illuminated. The man was breathtaking and as he stood there with his hands on his hips, I thought about Heathcliff's journal. Page thirty-two to be exact. Without thinking, I pulled him to me. His eyes darkened like he knew instinctively what I wanted, and he leaned down, kissing me passionately. I tried to see a future with him. One that would involve children or at least the two of us living our eternity together, but nothing came. Irritated, I kissed him more deeply. He lifted me into his arms and I wrapped my legs around his hips. Though I couldn't see our future, I felt the oneness, the all-consuming passion, the need for him and only him for the rest of my life. Why couldn't I see a future with him? I pulled away, frustrated.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked, gently probing his lip where I'd bitten him in the heat of the moment.

There was so much. Too much for me to even know where to begin, so I asked the first random question that came to mind. "Do you have wings?"

He stared down his nose at me. "Of course I do."

I hadn't expected that answer. I mean I had, but at the same time... I definitely hadn't. "You do? Why haven't I seen them?" Before I finished speaking, he'd popped them out with a sound like an umbrella opening in a rainstorm.

Gasping at the sight, I covered my mouth. "They're beautiful," I said through my fingers.

He glanced over each shoulder. "They are amazing, aren't they?"

He crossed his arms, rolling his shoulders back, ruffling the feathers before stretching them out slightly.

Our disagreement concerning Wrythe was momentarily forgotten and I dropped my hands. “Do all angels have wings?”

“Yes, we do.”

“But you don’t need them to get around.” It was a statement. I’d never seen his wings, yet Kade had popped in and out of my life just fine for weeks.

“Right. We don’t need them so there are those who just don’t ever use them, especially those of us who frequently interact with humans. It would be very difficult to talk to a human with these sticking out of our backs on a regular basis. Most would react the same way you are, by staring at them. And we don’t want that.”

I hadn’t realized I was staring until he said something. But I couldn’t help it. His wings were magnificent, stark white except at the feathery ends, which appeared to have been dipped in the same emerald color as his eyes.

He tucked his wings against his back. “Seen enough?” He shrugged, nonchalant, but I could tell he was enjoying himself. I was surprised he hadn’t shown them to me before now. He seemed… proud of them.

It was cute.

“No way,” I said, coming closer. “May I touch them?” My hands hovered, waiting for him to answer.

“Well, I don’t know. Have you washed your hands?” He took hold of my fingers, turning them over, studying my palms.

His touch sent waves of desire through my body. “Are you serious?” I swallowed against my need. I would go wash my hands if that would make him happy.

Kade winked. “I’m teasing. Please, go ahead.”

I moved to get a better look at them. They were huge, nearly

reaching the middle of his calves and they had a scent that was hard to describe, like light and sunshine and cinnamon. I reached out, but hesitated. “Why don’t I have wings?” The words came out just as I thought them, so I hadn’t had time to filter the question.

He let out a deep breath as though frustrated. His body shook slightly, and his wings vanished.

“Hey,” I said, stroking the place where the wings had come out. He froze at my touch and I wondered why.

“Our wings are a gift. They represent our differences from humans and are symbolic of heaven, not to mention…” He let the words trail off. “There’s so much you need to learn about the angelic part of yourself, Alice.” He shook his head as though overwhelmed with all I still needed to know.

“Is that why I don’t have wings? Because I’m the Devil’s daughter?” It made sense. If wings were a gift from Heaven, surely demon offspring wouldn’t receive such things.

“Well, let’s see.” He walked around to my back, his fingers running along my spine. His touch sent a wave of longing crashing through my body, but no wings appeared. “Interesting,” he said. “I would’ve thought you didn’t have wings, except I felt your response to my touch just now.” His fingers moved along the same spot at the other side of my back. Again, my body reacted to him. But I couldn’t help it. The feel of his fingers against my skin was sensual, but that could’ve just been because I loved the feel of his touch. “Wings may be in your future, Alice Blackburn. You just need some training.”

I faced him, trembling in confusion and hungry to have his mouth on mine again. “How do you know?” I asked, my throat parched.

“Your reaction. It’s an angel thing. We are extremely sensitive to any kind of touch at the area where our backs connect with the wings.” He smirked, beaming with happiness.

“That’s a good thing?” I relaxed a little.

“A very good thing,” he said, taking my hand. “But hey, the reason

I'm here is because I want to take you somewhere. Like on a date."

I cocked my head, studying him. "Really? Do you think we have time?" That hadn't been where I'd expected things to go and my stomach flip-flopped, unsure of his abrupt subject change.

"We've established we love each other but we've never been on an official date. It's about time I took you on one, don't you think?"

He was right, of course. I'd never been on a date, period. With anyone. "Okay, sure, but can we go tomorrow?" I still needed to attend the interviews with Wrythe for the new council.

He pulled me into his arms, wrapping his hands around my waist. "I suppose." He peered down his nose at me. "I'll be back in the morning. Wear something comfortable." He gave me a quick kiss and vanished.

Had I hurt his feelings? I hoped not.

I changed into my new warrior uniform, unable to help but think of Wrythe and our kiss as well as our conversation. *Are you sure you love him more?* After tugging on my boots, I tucked my knife and the demon orb down the side of one. I'd tried putting the orb in my sock drawer or someplace else safe, but it seemed to call to me. I decided it was best to keep it close at all times.

With a heavy sigh, I left my room.

THE CLOCK SAID seven in the morning, but it felt like I'd just closed my eyes. I rolled onto my side, away from the clock, wishing I could go back to sleep.

A knock came at the door. I hoped I could ignore whoever it was, and they'd go away. Instead I heard the light whoosh of paper being slid under the door. I sat up and climbed out of bed. It was an envelope with the king's insignia stamped in red wax across the opening. I ran my fingers underneath until the wax cracked free.

Inside was a red and black invitation inviting me to the coronation of the new council members. He'd already picked them? We'd done

the interviews yesterday after Peter's funeral and up until the party that night. After each interview was over, we discussed who he thought would be the best fit, but I hadn't realized he would decide so quickly. Why had he rushed it? I read the names. The seven he selected were good Dark Moths. I knew them, some better than others, but all would do. They were the ones I would've selected.

According to the invitation, we would meet in the assembly hall at five o'clock where there would be the induction ceremony in front of all Dark Moths and trainees. Afterward was a dinner followed by a private ceremony only the eight of us would attend. There had been a lot of freaking ceremonies and parties and a funeral the last couple of days and I was exhausted, but it was also a little exciting. The ceremonies were necessary. The Society's way of doing things. Everything was happening so fast. I wasn't ready to be a council member any more than I was ready to go to the angel realm.

I took a deep breath, resigning myself to the events that would occur later today. And then I thought of Kade, and my pulse raced. He was going to take me on a date!

As I dressed and got ready, I tried to tamp down the nervous energy in my stomach. While tying the laces of my boots, I heard a tinkling bell. Then Kade suddenly stood directly in front of me, a small bell in one hand. I jumped, and a small scream escaped my lips.

Kade smiled big and I wanted to punch him in the face. "What?" he said innocently. "I rang the bell."

I couldn't help but smile too, and I did punch him, but in the arm and lightly. "You still scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry," he said, though it was obvious he wasn't. "Ready to go?"

I hadn't eaten, but realized I wasn't hungry. "Sure, let me just put this over here." I placed the invitation on my bedside table.

"What is that?" He picked it up. As he read, his face turned serious. "Today? He wants to induct you today?" His words sliced through the air like razorblades on paper.

“What’s the big deal? If not today, then in the next couple of days. There isn’t a lot of time until…” I couldn’t finish.

His anger dissipated and he rubbed a hand over his face. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” He placed the card back on the table and came over to me, wrapping his arms around my waist. “I want to kiss you.”

“I won’t stop you,” I said, breathing in his heady scent.

He leaned down, pressing his lips against mine. That was all it took to send all thoughts from my head. There was just Kade and how much I wanted him.

After several long minutes, he released me, and I sighed, opening my eyes to discipline him for stopping. And I realized we were no longer in my room, but above ground, outside, behind an RV.

“Where are we?” I asked, stepping from his arms.

He took my hand. “Come on,” he said, pulling me.

“Are we still in Arizona?”

“We are,” he began, indicating the view.

I stopped, admiring it. The blue sky went on forever.

“It’s called Monument Valley,” he said. “Haven’t you heard of the place?”

It thought I had, but I couldn’t remember where. “Are we camping,” I asked, thinking it might be fun. Wendy had told me about the one fun experience she had growing up with her foster family, which was roasting marshmallows over a campfire. I’d always wanted to try that.

“Not today. We’re taking a tour, if you’re up for it.” As he spoke, he took my hand and led me over a grassy knoll to where a large group of people waited. At the front of the group stood a man with short black hair and copper skin. He was tall and muscular and wore a beige tee shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. His voice had a lilt that made me want to get closer in order to hear what he was saying.

“Come on,” I said, moving past Kade, pulling him toward the

group.

“There will be six to a jeep, including your tour guide. Please keep your seatbelts buckled at all times unless myself or one of the other guides tells you it’s okay to get out.” The man had his hands tucked in his front pockets. “Now, are there any questions?”

“Can we take pictures on the drive?”

“Of course.” He smiled genially. “We’ll take our time and give you plenty of photo opportunities. Plus, we’ll make plenty of stops, I promise. Anything else?”

No one responded.

“Very good. As you get in, be sure to present your tour guide with your tickets. We will be checking that your tickets are for this time as well as that you are in the right place with our touring company.” When he finished speaking, he walked over to the jeep closest to him. “Saddle up, boys.”

“Do we have tickets?” I asked, watching the tourists hand over their tickets to be checked by the guides.

Kade winked, pulling two tickets from his back pocket. “It wouldn’t be a date without them.”

“Cool,” I said, curious whether he retrieved those tickets by angelic means or come out here and bought them. “How did you get those?”

“I know what you’re insinuating, but I can assure you, I got them in a completely lawful and ordinary way.”

“I believe you,” I said, though it was only half true. We were the last two to get loaded in the vehicles. The first four had already taken off down the hill as Kade and I walked to our driver.

“I guess it’s just us,” Kade said.

“Great.” The man took the tickets Kade handed him. After viewing them, he scrutinized Kade. “Are you sure?” he asked, glancing at me.

Kade nodded.

The two men stared at each other for several long moments. If I

didn't know any better, I would think they were talking to each other in their minds the way Kade and I could. At that thought, I studied the copper man more intently. Did Kade know him? Before I could ask, the man tucked our tickets in his back pocket then held open the closest passenger door. "Climb in and buckle up."

I did as he said, curious about what was going on. If Kade knew him then did that mean the man was an angel, or was he a friend from when Kade had been living like a human and working at the Caterpillar Place mechanic shop?

Kade climbed in on the other side. "Do you know that man?" I asked.

"No," he said, but didn't elaborate.

A lightbulb went off in my head. I'd read about Monument Valley in one of my human history classes. According to what I'd learned, it was considered hallowed ground, making it impossible for demons or even half demons to step foot on the land without excruciating pain or death." At that thought, my heart raced. Would I burn up? I was half demon, after all. *You are half angel too*, I thought and that calmed me down a little.

The tour guide climbed in the jeep and turned on the engine. "My name is Toby Gardner. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask." Toby caught my eyes in the rear-view mirror. "You ever been here before?"

"First time," I said, glancing out the window. Enormous sandstone buttes rose from the red desert sand. One in particular reminded me of a castle I'd seen in a book when I was little. It was magnificent, and I couldn't pull my eyes from it.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" Toby asked, a small smile on his lips.

"Yes," I admitted, tearing my eyes away long enough to study Kade. His face was a mask and I couldn't read him. "What are you up to?"

"You'll see," he said, giving me a secret smile.

“Our tour today with include the lesser known caves on the eastern side of our most popular butte,” Toby said, using his tour guide voice. “There will be a small hike involved as well, but I’ve got plenty of granola bars and water in my pack if you didn’t bring anything.”

Maybe I had the whole situation wrong. Maybe Kade just wanted to take me on an amazing first date. He was doing well so far. “Can’t wait,” I said to Toby and then in a lower voice, I spoke to Kade. “I have to be back by three, so I can get ready.”

“We have plenty of time. Promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I said and then relaxed as Toby continued his tour-guide speech, sharing information about the area, the Navajo people who lived there, the land itself, as well as the buttes.

I only half listened until we arrived in front of the butte that reminded me of a castle but was actually called Elephant Butte.

Toby turned off the jeep. “We’ll have to hike the rest of the way.”

By now it was a little after eight and I was hungry. “Mind if I have one of those granola bars now?” I asked Toby sheepishly.

“Not at all.” He handed it to me as he filled a pack with water and granola and then handed it to Kade. “What about you? You hungry?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Kade hefted the backpack.

Toby held out a water bottle. “You’ll probably need this too.”

“Thank you.” I followed after him and Kade. They were moving quickly, and I had to speed up.

The early morning air was still cool, which surprised me for Arizona. “What’s the temperature this morning?” I asked, between bites. I wasn’t a fan of eating and hiking, I decided.

“Fifty-eight degrees,” Toby admitted. “If you’re cold, trust me, it won’t last long.

I nodded because I had a granola bar in my mouth.

We hiked for a while and Toby was right. The sun quickly warmed my skin and soon a light sheen of sweat covered my face, neck, and

back, but I didn't mind. I was actually enjoying the hike. Outside in general was still a bit of a novelty for me, considering where I lived on a daily basis. When we reached a small landing on the castle butte, Toby stopped. "Let's take a drink and then we'll continue."

We sat on some rocks to rest and had some more water. The view was almost indescribable with the never-ending blue sky and the salmon-colored sandstone as well as the amazing rocks or buttes randomly coming out of the ground.

"It must be so amazing to work here every day," I said.

"I enjoy it very much," Toby admitted, after taking a swig from his canteen.

"What's the story of this place? How was it created?" I asked, sipping my water.

"Do you want the scientific version, or would you like to hear a Navajo legend?" He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

"Definitely the legend," I said, eyeing Kade for confirmation.

"I'm all about the legend too," he agreed.

OceanofPDF.com

"THE STORY GOES that my ancestors come from the Winged People," Toby began.

That perked me right up. He didn't say Winged as one syllable, but with two. Wing-ed. I found that interesting and wondered if there was a reason or just the way he'd heard it pronounced.

"My people," he continued, "believe that every one of the buttes and mesas you see is alive and if you listen closely, you can almost hear their hearts beating." He stopped, pausing for dramatic effect.

I leaned back, enjoying the cool rock against my sweaty back. Kade sat beside me and did the same. He took my hand, intertwining my fingers with his.

"Listen," Toby encouraged, though it sounded more like an order.

I tilted my head to the side, straining to hear a heartbeat, but all I heard was the wind whistling through the rock crevices. "There—"

Toby held up his hand and I clamped my mouth shut. "Listen." This time he spoke softly.

I closed my eyes, forcing my mind to focus on a heartbeat. After several minutes, I heard something.

Thump. Thump.

Thump. Thump.

"I hear them," I said, astonished.

Toby seemed stunned too. "I told you," he said recovering quickly. "The reason is because trapped within each of the buttes is a demon."

"What?" I sat up, opening my eyes. That wasn't what I expected.

"It's true," Toby said, glancing nervously at Kade. "But perhaps you'd prefer to hear about how this valley used to be a sea, and over time the wind dug out the buttes?"

“No, keep going. I’m really interested in hearing the end of the story.” I actually wondered if Kade had put Toby up to this. With a quick glance, I realized he had. This was a date, but Kade had ulterior motives. He wanted me to hear this.

“It’s just a legend, Alice,” Kade said, rubbing my back. But his face revealed that wasn’t true. His fingers fondling the sensitive area on my back distracted me, sending slow, curling tendrils of desire through my body. *Stop it,* I shouted into his mind.

Sorry, he replied, but winked, letting me know he really wasn’t.

Jerk, I returned, but winked back before returning my attention to Toby. “Please continue, Toby.”

“It goes like this. Our parents came from another world known simply as The Original. There they were nothing more than entities with no way to move on. One day, two bright lights appeared, admonishing them to travel through the nine worlds in order to reach their final destination. The lights explained that travelling through the worlds would allow them to become who they were meant to be. Many followed, hungry for more, but some stayed. Those who travelled to the second world were given sight. Entranced by all they could see, some remained behind, happy with only their sight. The remainder went to the third world where they received their hearing. Some settled again. In the fourth world, they received the ability to communicate. Yet again some remained. By the fifth world, they were given bodies, and this is where it gets interesting. Many settled there, so taken with their form that they couldn’t believe there was more. In this world those who stayed behind became demons.”

I glanced at Kade, my mouth suddenly dry. *Do you believe this,* I asked. *Is this why you brought me here?* I had to know.

I wanted you to hear a little bit of the angel histories. It isn’t completely accurate, but it’s interesting, don’t you think? He gave me a reassuring look.

Toby continued speaking, oblivious to our byplay. “In the sixth

world, they were given wings and the angels were created. Now they could fly, and many made their home there, happy with all they had. The entities tried to encourage them on, saying there was still so much more, but they refused to leave. In the seventh world, those continuing on received the ability to feel. They were given emotions." Toby cleared his throat. "Things got chaotic there. The entities encouraged them to keep going. When those who continued reached the eighth world they received the ability to think. Now that they could choose what to do, some went back to the other worlds and became archangels and archdemons. They ruled over those worlds. In the ninth world, they were given the power of creation. But instead of using the gift for good, there came greed, power, and corruption.

"The bright lights were devastated, unable to believe that after all they'd given the beings, they would use their gifts in a corruptible way. As a last resort, the bright lights offered to send the precious few still following them to a new world with the promise that they would keep balance and treat the land and those around them with respect. They came into this world from the cave we're in now and referred to themselves as the Winged People.

"Before they left the ninth world, the bright lights said they would destroy all of the previous worlds, but my ancestors believe something must've gone wrong because a hundred years or so after the Winged People arrived in this valley, creatures began leaking into our world. Some were gruesome and pus-riddled while others were devastatingly glorious and too beautiful to behold. The Winged People fought against them, but the creatures' powers had grown too strong. As a last resort, the queen of the Winged People went to the dragon Abernathy, and asked him for help. The dragon agreed to help in exchange for her people's wings. One spell turned those creatures who'd already crossed into our world to stone, which are the buttes you see within this valley, and the other was used to permanently close the gate between our world and the others."

"Wait," I said, holding up my hands. "This is crazy." My eyes

darted between Kade and Toby, hoping one of them would tell me Toby made up the story.

Toby crossed his arms. “Alice, it isn’t crazy. It’s the legend of my people.” He was dead serious.

“And your people are?” I asked, trying to stay relaxed.

Toby glanced at Kade. I could see he was conflicted.

“Are you an angel?” I asked, deciding there was no point skirting around what I knew to be true.

“I’m a chayot,” Toby said, nodding, obviously more than a little frustrated.

I glared at Kade. He knew I wasn’t ready for the angel parts of myself, yet he brought me to speak with an angel. “Why?”

“It’s important you know something of your heritage, especially since you won’t let me take you to the angel realm.”

I stood, ready to go. “I want to—”

“Hello?” A woman with bright red hair the color of fire came up the trail we’d walked, a cheerful grin on her face. She was petite, shorter than me, with creamy skin and blue eyes. She had on khaki shorts and a black tee shirt. A black bandana covered some of her hair and on her feet were thick socks and hiking boots. *She looks the part,* I thought.

Toby stood. “Hey, what are you doing up here?” He put his hands on his hips and moved toward her. “You shouldn’t be here,” he said when he came to a stop.

“Sorry,” she said, sheepish. “I was busy taking pictures and got distracted. By the time I realized what I’d done, the rest of my group was gone. Do you mind if I hang out with you?”

Toby regarded us before facing the woman. “I suppose that’ll be fine. We were going to check out one of the lesser known caves.”

“Awesome.” She stepped around Toby and came over to me, sticking out her hand. “I’m Joannie.”

I stood, taking her hand. “Alice,” I said, shaking it. “And this is Kade.”

“Nice to meet you.” She gave him a bashful wave.

“And my name is Toby,” our chayot guide said. He seemed flustered as he walked over to us. “Which guide were you with?” he asked. “You look familiar.”

“Oh,” Joannie said, placing a hand on the back of her neck, trying to think. “What was his name?” She fanned herself. “Gu— Gle— Gan… Oh, I’m feeling dizzy.” She started falling backward. I was closest and caught her. She blinked up at me. “Thank you. I think I’m a bit thirsty.”

Toby handed her a bottle of water. “Have you been on the tour before?”

She opened it and took a large drink. “Yes, I come probably once a week.” She poured some water on the back of her neck. “I don’t know why, but I’m happiest when I’m here.” She smiled.

Toby gave her a strange look, as though he might know why.

Was she an angel too?

“When you’re ready, Joannie, we need to continue,” Toby said.

I helped Joannie over to the spot where I’d been sitting and eased her down. “How much farther to the caves?” I asked Toby, ignoring the amused look on his face.

“Not far.”

I was still having a hard time believing Kade put Toby up to that story of the Winged People and Abernathy, but I didn’t feel right arguing the point further with Joannie around, especially since she hadn’t been there for the story. She might think talk of Winged People and dragons a bit crazy and who could blame her, unless she was an angel too.

A few minutes later, Joannie said she felt better and we started back up the trail. Toby led the way and Kade followed him. Behind

them, Joannie and I made small talk.

“So, Alice, is this your first time visiting Monument Valley?”

“It is,” I said.

“How are you liking it? Like I said, I’ve come out here many times, but I’ve never been up this far.” She lowered her voice. “It might sound weird, but it feels like this butte is calling to me.”

“Oh?”

Her face turned the same shade of red as her hair. “I mean I know that sounds crazy, but it’s true. That’s why I left my group and came up here. I wanted to find out why.” She paused, observing the whole valley. “Regardless, the views are really spectacular.”

“It doesn’t sound crazy at all,” I said, then paused. “I’m supposed to be on a date.” I should’ve been embarrassed, but even though she was a complete stranger, I was instantly comfortable around her.

“It isn’t going well?”

“No,” I admitted, studying Kade’s back as he walked.

“Well, when you get a moment between the two of you, perhaps you could play twenty questions,” Joannie said, smiling lightly.

“Twenty questions?” I’d never heard of the game, probably because the only games I ever played involved slaying demons.

“Yeah, it’s where you take turns asking each other questions you want to know. Like, if you and I were playing, I would ask where you were from?”

I smiled as understanding of the game dawned on me. It was quite simple, and I felt foolish for my confusion. Nothing new. I had a way with weapons and demon hunting, but real conversations with other people were sometimes a struggle. “Arizona. You?”

“Same. I live in a small town called Wonderland.” She shook her head, sending her flaming hair over her shoulder. “You’ve probably never heard of it.”

I stopped, scrutinizing her. “I’m from Wonderland too.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “No way. Small world.”

“I guess so,” I said, and started walking again.

“Next question,” Joannie said, giggling. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Black,” I said quickly and then hesitated. “Well, you know, I’ve never really thought about it.” I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess black. What about you?”

She tugged on her hair. “Red or a variation of it. How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

I felt my lips turn into a frown. “Only child,” I said after a moment. “You?”

“I-I had brothers and sisters.” She didn’t seem sure of that answer and I raised my eyebrows. “They died,” she finished, dropping her gaze to her boots. “I think so, anyway.” She ran a hand over her face. “Lately, I’ve been struggling to know what’s real and what isn’t.” She eyed me as though I would run away screaming.

“I’m so sorry. Did something happen to you?” She did seem a little off.

She shook her head. “Everything was fine. I had a job, uh, working as a nurse, and then sometime in the last week or so, I started having these dreams—or visions—I’m not sure.” She tucked her hands into her back pockets. “I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the truth.” She shook her head, looking mortified. “Probably too much information, right?”

“Not at all,” I said, giving her what I hoped was a dazzling smile. “What happened sounds awful. Maybe you should see a doctor. I know a good one. Maybe he could help.” As soon as I said it, I regretted it. How would I even bring up the subject with Heathcliff. Plus, it wasn’t like he was my personal physician. The man had a life outside of Demonland.

She laughed. “That might be a good idea,” she said. “Next question. Where were you born?”

I didn't know what to say. I guessed Wonderland, but I wasn't sure. I hadn't ever seen my birth certificate. No time to hunt one down when you're training to fight demons all day every day. "Wonderland," I offered, figuring it was the best answer. "You?"

"Same," she admitted, though by the look on her face, I wasn't sure she really knew. The woman, though she seemed kind and sweet, was also having a hard time determining the difference between reality and fiction. Or maybe she was an angel, the same as Kade and Toby, but was acting. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked.

The question punched me in the guts. Until a couple of days ago, I'd believed I knew that answer. Now though, I had no idea, and I wanted to be done with the game. "Thanks, Joannie. I'll definitely play the game with Kade," I said, sidestepping her question.

Her face fell in disappointment. "Okay. Good."

We caught up with the guys just as we came to the cave's entrance.

"I've got headlamps for the three of us, but I don't have one for you," Toby said to Joannie. "I do have a regular flashlight though." He handed them out. I put mine on my head and Toby turned it on.

Kade put his on, and I chuckled. "If I weren't so frustrated with you, I'd think you were hot," I admitted.

He gave me a lopsided grin. "Well if we weren't here with other people, I would totally make out with you," he returned, eyeing my head gear. He stood directly in front of me. "There, that's better," he said, brushing his thumb across my cheek. "You had some dirt."

"Thanks." I pulled Kade off to the side. "Do you know Joannie? I think she might literally be going insane," I whispered.

He gave the woman a once over and I did the same. Then shook his head. Toby was speaking softly to her, but he didn't seem to know her either.

"I don't think so," he said. "But it's strange. She feels familiar, if that makes sense."

“Could it be an angel thing? Could she be an angel and you not know it?” I didn’t think it likely, but then I didn’t know how many angels existed. If there were billions of humans, there could be that many angels or more.

He shook his head. “No. Angels can see the auras of other angels.” He studied her more closely. “I don’t know,” he said. “It’s like she had an aura, but it was burned away.” He tilted his head to one side. “I don’t think she’s human either—at least not any more.”

“What could she be?” There was still so much I didn’t know about supernaturals and life outside of Demonland.

“Let’s go,” Toby said before Kade responded. “Stay close and remember to listen to what I say.” His eyes lingered on me.

“I will,” I said, feeling defensive. Sheesh.

Joannie moved beside Toby as he entered the cave while Kade and I followed after them.

I fixed the lamp on my forehead, so it shone straight forward again as I stepped into the dark opening alongside Kade. The four of us were just beyond the entrance and we all stopped a moment, waiting for our eyes to adjust to the dark.

“You can explore the grand entrance on your own for a few minutes, but don’t go beyond. Understand?” Toby said, heading farther in.

Kade shifted beside me. “I’m going to talk to Toby for a minute. Enjoy and study the walls. I believe you’ll find the hieroglyphs most interesting.” As he walked away, I reminded myself to be grateful he didn’t just vanish, like he had before. For him, that was progress. Who knew? Maybe in a year or ten we might be able to spend an entire morning together without him disappearing on me.

“I will?” I asked after him.

“Most definitely. Start there.” Kade pointed to my left

I went that direction, figuring I could go around the circular cave

clockwise. When the light struck the red clay, the first thing I noticed was what appeared to be a black smudge. I continued on, walking the cavern slowly, allowing my light to shine over each drawing. After a few minutes, I understood that the drawings were a depiction of the story of the Winged People.

"This is so weird," Joannie said falling in beside me. "Am I right?"

"It's interesting," I admitted, crossing my arms. The air inside the cave was much cooler than outside and my skin prickled with goosebumps. And it smelled… like what I wasn't sure. Dirt. Death, maybe. And sulfur. At that, I paused. Had Toby been telling the truth? Was there really a demon imprisoned within this butte? After all I'd read and seen lately, anything was possible.

"Pictures of angels?" Joannie pointed at the person with wings drawn in white. The image stood out starkly against the red wall.

"Looks like it," I said. When I reached the depiction of the seventh world, I saw an opening in the cave wall. Curious, I peered in, but the passage was black as night and curved, making it impossible to see what lay beyond.

"What do you think is back there?" Joannie asked the question I'd been wondering.

"I'm not sure, but I believe we're going to get to find out." I searched the cavern for Toby and Kade, but it was so huge and so dark, I couldn't see anything beyond where the beam of my headlamp reached. "Kade," I called. But he didn't answer. *Kade,* I said in my mind.

It's all right. I'm with Toby. We'll be right back.

Where are you?

Hang on, he said.

"Men," I griped out loud, stomping my foot.

"You're so right," Joannie said, putting her hands on her hips.

"You want to have a look and see what's beyond the cavern?" I

asked, feeling rebellious. Toby told us to stay put, but I wasn't having that. I could do what I wanted.

"Yeah, I do," Joannie said, totally willing to go against our guide's orders. I should've known. She hadn't listened to her first guide, either.

"Follow me." I stepped into the corridor. It wasn't wide, nor was it very tall. Kade and Toby would be able to walk it without issue, but Wrythe would have to stay bent in order to traverse its length. I reached out my hands, touching the cool walls on either side as I led the way. The walls were rough and left dirt on my fingertips. After travelling several minutes, I was about to tell Joannie to turn around when the path opened into another cavern. I couldn't tell how big it was, but it felt enormous. "Let's check it out," I said to Joannie.

"Lead the way," she said. I studied her reaction to make sure she was serious. She smiled, encouraging me on. It was odd, but I felt a real connection to this quirky woman. She didn't look much older than me. Maybe late twenties or early thirties. Giving myself a mental shake, I brought my brain back to the task at hand. It seemed logical to begin by searching the walls the way we had in the grand cavern. There weren't any drawings until we reached the deepest point in the cave. There I saw the first drawing. It was like the one of the angels in the first cave. Beside the angel stood an enormous monster with green light drawn around it. "An Envy demon," I said, recalling the seven deadly sins and their corresponding colors. Pride equaled purple. Greed was gold. Wrath manifested as red. Lust was represented by pink. Gluttony was orange, and Sloth demons were represented by the color blue.

"A what?" Joannie asked, coming in closer with her flashlight. Then she pulled back. "That's gross."

"Agreed." I moved along the back wall and realized all seven of the deadly sins were represented along with their color, including the Devil who was drawn in black. As I went on, there was a picture of an angel and the Devil standing together holding a baby. I drew in a

sharp breath. Holy crap! Was that a depiction of what happened between my mom and dad? Or was I being arrogant. Perhaps the Devil had hooked up with many angels over the millenniums.

"What is it?" Joannie asked, coming over. She shone her light on the picture.

I couldn't move, unable to stop the images and conversation Kade and I had where he told me I was half angel as well as the Devil's daughter. Kade's date had been less about hanging out with me and more about following orders. I was getting a lesson on my angelic nature whether I liked it or not.

"This…" Joannie shook her head. "Something's wrong," she said, her hand falling to her side, her light aiming at the ground.

I followed her light, shining mine at the ground as well. "What the hell?" The ground was moving, like writhing snakes.

"Oh my heck," she said, jumping onto the closest rock.

The light seemed to have woken the snakes because they began bucking and slithering in earnest. A serpentine head, complete with eyes and a mouth, rose up from the ground. "Alice," it hissed. "Alice, you've come."

"I think we should get back," I said, grabbing Joannie by the hand and dragging her behind me.

She didn't argue.

We followed the wall until we found the cavern entrance and high-tailed it back to the main cave.

"Alice," Kade yelled as soon as we returned.

"What's wrong?" I felt only slightly guilty that we'd left the cavern without our guide.

"Where have you been?" He came forward and wrapped me in a big bear hug. "I was worried sick."

I shifted so I could face him. "Kade, I'm fine. We weren't gone that long."

“You’ve been gone for hours,” he said, sweat drenching his hair along his hairline.

“There were snakes,” Joannie said, her face white.

“Snakes?” Toby took Joannie by the arm and the four of us exited the cave.

Relief washed over me now that we were back in the light.

“We’ve got to get back,” Kade said.

“Agreed,” Toby added. “Let’s go.”

We walked down the trail silently, Joannie and I sandwiched in between Toby and Kade as though we were trapped animals and the men refused to let us go. In this instance, I was grateful. As we hiked, I mulled over what I’d seen and heard. Finally, I had to verify with Joannie. “Did you hear anything when we were in the second cavern?” I whispered.

“No, but I did see the snakes.” She paused. “It’s weird because that was the first time I’ve seen any of that, yet the whole time I felt like I should’ve known everything about the cavern.” She shook her head as though trying to find the right words to explain. “Like the whole story of the cavern, the snakes, and the reason I feel like this is home is on the tip of my tongue… except I don’t know why.”

I’d felt a longing not because it felt familiar, but because I wanted to know more. “It’s okay, Joannie. I’m sure it’s just the strangeness inside the cavern.” I was glad she’d seen the snakes too. At least I hadn’t gone completely mad.

“I mean I think I did,” she continued. “Did you see snakes?”

“I most definitely did, and they were freaky.”

Joannie sighed, crossing her arms tight against her chest. “I’m so glad you saw them. I-I thought I might had been seeing things again.” Her voice was shaky. “Should we tell the guys?”

I shook my head. “I think it’s better if we don’t.”

Kade barely spoke two words until we were back at our starting

point. After exchanging numbers and saying goodbye to Joannie and Toby, Kade, and I walked until we came to a spot behind the hotel where no one could see us. With one final glance to make sure no one was watching, he grabbed my arm and we were back in my room.

“Tell me what happened and leave nothing out,” Kade said, dropping his hand. He began pacing, his biceps and chest muscles taut, his hands clenched in fists.

But I was frustrated with him. “I can’t believe you pretended to take me on a date, but really you were just doing your job.” I crossed my arms in irritation. “You say you love me, but I think you love your job more.”

Kade grabbed me by the shoulders. “You deranged idiot.” Then he paused. “I’m sorry.” He let out a shuddered breath. “I love you more, I swear, but I’m an angel and I wanted you to see we are more alike than you think. That’s why I took you.” He shook his head. “But I am sorry.”

His words placated my frustration. “I appreciate that and I do want to know about the angel side of me, but not like that. I need you to be honest with me,” I said, still feeling sensitive, even though I would tell him what happened.

“You’re right. It’s just…” He ran his hands through his hair. “I was freaking out. The demon within the butte could’ve killed you,” he growled. “Toby told you not to go into another cavern without him.”

I crossed my arms, defensive once again. “True, but I’m sick of doing what I’m told constantly without being given a reason. Why don’t you tell me why else you took me to that place.”

Kade gritted his teeth, his eyes flicking over my face and body, verifying I was okay. “I thought if you were able to hear something of the creation, you might be interested in learning more about angels and decide to come with me.”

Once again following orders. I rolled my eyes. “I am interested, Kade. I never said I wasn’t.”

“Yeah, but you refused to go with me to the angel realm.” His worry turned to dejection.

“Not because I didn’t want to know more. I do. But like I told you, I need to be here for Wrythe.”

Kade nodded solemnly. “So you’ve said.” He sat down heavily on my bed. “Tell me what happened.”

I sat beside him and took his hand. “What’s your favorite color?” I asked.

He shot me a look like I was deranged. “What? Why does that matter?”

I shrugged, bringing his hand to my lips and kissing it lightly. “I just want to know.”

He heaved a deep breath, his eyes searching mine. “Blue,” he said with a smile. “The exact shade of your eyes.”

I blushed, unable to meet his gaze. “Good answer,” I said. Then I told him about the pictures I saw and the writhing snakes and what one of them said.

As I spoke, Kade’s eyes grew wider. “Okay, that’s not good.”

“What does it mean?” I asked, my stomach tangling with worry.

“I’m not sure,” he said, swallowing. “I need to talk to my superiors.” He glanced at the clock. “And you have to be to your Society coronation in forty minutes.”

“Holy crap!” How had I completely forgotten about that? I stood, pulling Kade with me.

He took my other hand, pulling me against him. “Kiss me, Alice Blackburn.”

My angel didn’t have to ask me twice. I reached up, pressing my lips to his. It only took a moment for all of the day’s events to fade away so there was just Kade and me and our love for each other. The moment didn’t last long enough before he pulled away.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said, caressing my cheek.

“See you,” I said to the empty room. I stood there for I don’t know how long, a lingering feeling of irritation and doubt settling over my heart.

OceanofPDF.com

I SHOWERED and put on my Dark Moth uniform, admiring the insignia above my right breast as I stared in the mirror. Haven had somehow captured the colors of the seven deadly sins, but what was even more incredible was the subtle glint of silver throughout. It was remarkable.

My blue eyes seemed brighter than normal. Or it could've been the dark circles under my eyes were making them pop. I braided my hair out of my face. Then I tucked the demon orb in my boot along with my blade. My uniform was a form-fitting jumpsuit made of a smooth material that I knew consisted of organic armor created from elven magic. The problem? There wasn't a place to tuck my gun. I would have to get a thigh strap, which didn't excite me since I preferred to keep my gun hidden. Frustrated, I left the gun on my dresser before making my way to the assembly hall.

Upon entering, I realized every seat was full, causing the overflow of people to take their places along the walls. I made my way over to the stairs. The other seven council members, including Wrythe, were already there. They spoke to each other, standing in a circle.

I tried not to focus on the pang of awkwardness that automatically filled my chest. Perhaps with them, I wouldn't be an outcast—the Queen of Hearts—the way I'd been with the trainees. Hope urged me up the steps to the stage. One of the new council members, Pratt, noticed me, giving me a once over. A smirk lifted one side of his mouth. From what I'd read and heard of Pratt, he was definitely prideful and tended to brag about his incredible hunting skills, but his boasting was justified. He was also loyal and wouldn't give up a fight easily. In all of his demon hunting expeditions, his team had only lost one battle and that wasn't because the demon didn't die. It did, but so had one of his teammates. Still, I didn't appreciate the way he was ogling me. Annoyance trickled through my veins.

Great first impression, I thought, debating whether to run back to my room. Each of the others wore formal attire, suits or dresses as they preferred, the colors representing their demon sire. Pratt wore a deep purple three-piece suit with a white shirt and a lavender tie. Under his gaze, I paused. Why had I worn my damn uniform? I should've put on the beautiful black dress Haven made me. That would've been much better.

I stopped, debating whether I had to time rectify the situation.

"Alice," Wrythe called, leaving the group and walking across the stage. He gave me a once over and I felt my bottom lip quiver. "You look… amazing," he said, touching my arm.

My face warmed. "I should've worn something else." He had on a black suit with a red shirt open at the collar. Handsome, regal and gorgeous.

"No, you're perfect. You'll stand out and be remembered, as you should be." He wrapped me in a hug.

"Thanks," I said, hugging him back and feeling better.

"Anytime. Now, come and sit by me. We're about to start."

I followed him over to the line of chairs situated next to each other on the stage. There were eight chairs total, all with padded seats and intricately carved high backs. Seven of the chairs had seven gems matching the seven vices forming a straight line near the top, while my chair had black gems along the back. The gems were a gift for serving on the council. Once the ceremony was over, they would be extracted and delivered to each council member.

Wrythe's chair had a string of seven rubies and was situated in the center of the stage. He sat and I joined him. The other council members quickly followed.

While we waited for those in the assembly hall to settle down, Grayson came over. He was wearing a tailored charcoal suit with a matching shirt and a bright orange tie to represent his status as the newest Gluttony councilmember. He took my hand and kissed it. The

man had a way about him. He drew you in and made you feel special. He did it to every person he came in contact with. Wrythe called him genuine. I could see that.

“Alice, it’s nice to see you. And don’t you look amazing,” he said.

I wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not. “Thanks,” I said before changing the subject. “How’s your wound?” It’d been large and deep when I’d seen it a couple of days ago.

He touched his chest gently. “It’s nearly healed. Heathcliff is a wizard with a needle and thread. I doubt I’ll even have a scar.” He rolled his eyes and we both laughed. Heathcliff and his aversion to scarring was a running joke, but in the best way. We all appreciated and respected Doc.

“That’s great news,” I said.

“It is. Thanks for asking.” His brows scrunched together. “Can we talk at dinner? There is something I’d like to discuss with you.”

That was a strange request. We hadn’t ever had a real conversation. “Of course, Grayson. I’ll look for you.”

“Great.” He went over to his seat on the other side of Wrythe, and sat.

I took stock of the other council members. Besides Grayson, Wrythe, and Pratt was Summer, the Sloth council member. She was incredibly beautiful and always kept her hair up in a plaited crown braid. I’d heard her hair was so long, it went all the way down to her feet, but I’d never seen it out of the braid. A blue ribbon wound through her braid and matched her powder blue suit and a black button up shirt. Her skin was deeply tanned because she spent a lot of time above ground and while she was a slower fighter, she was also concise and brutal—at least from what I’d seen during training sessions. She also had a real way with animals.

Then there was Luke. The Dark Moth had a lust for life, especially when it came to working out and physical fitness. Overly muscled like he spent too much time in the gym, he’d chosen a gray suit and wore

a pink shirt underneath, but he also had on a pair of pink dress shoes, which shouldn't have worked, but he made them sexy. The man wore an easy smile and always had a compliment to share. He loved challenging the other Dark Moths as well as the trainees in an annual fitness competition he'd aptly named the Luke Challenge. In it, he would complete a timed series of tasks, then throw down the gauntlet. If anyone could beat his time, he would present them with a prize. I didn't know what the prize was, nor did I care. That sort of contest wasn't my thing.

Sired by an envy demon, Eleanor had on a gorgeous emerald green dress that contrasted beautifully with her rich brown skin. Her hair was held up by two emerald combs. She worked with plants all day long and seemed to like them more then she liked people. But she always had an easy smile and a kind word.

Last was Glenna. Sired by a Greed demon, she had on a long skirt that appeared to have been made of gold thread. It trailed out behind her. Her hair was super short, cut in a pixie style that somehow made her appear more feminine. She specialized in the martial art of muay thai. I'd taken her class one year and learned a lot but still preferred my katanas to hand-to-hand combat. She moved like she floated and every one of her movements had intent.

As soon as the council members were all seated, Wrythe walked over to the podium. "Good evening, friends," he said, his warm voice booming through the room.

Everyone quieted.

"Thank you," he said. "I promise not to keep you all too long. I know Cook has prepared an amazing feast for all of us and I don't know about you, but I can hardly wait to get to that."

The crowd cheered.

"So, let's get started. I will now present each of the new members to you. Some of you may be questioning my choices or the selection process. I understand why, especially since the previous council

sought to take my crown and my life. Until very recently, I considered those men and women my colleagues and friends. What you must understand is that it's difficult to fully know a person, as we are always changing. Without a doubt, I believe that when they were selected, their greatest desire was to serve the Society. I know that. What I don't know is when that aspiration changed. If anyone has knowledge pertaining to that particular issue, please make an appointment with my office. I'd be grateful to hear what you have to say." He clapped once. "Enough of that," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Are you ready to meet your new council?"

The whole assembly hall roared to life.

"Excellent." Wrythe turned, studying us. "Grayson," he said.

The Dark Moth nodded and walked over to stand beside Wrythe. "Many of you may not know this, but Grayson and I became fast friends over a difficult game of pool, which he won, and I lost. There was a part of me that wanted to shout, 'Off with his head,' but I refrained." He paused while the crowd laughed.

For the next forty minutes, Wrythe spoke about each of the Dark Moths he'd chosen for the new council. He saved me for last. When he called my name, my heart jumped into my throat, and I couldn't breathe.

When I stood at his side, he put his arm around my shoulders. "By now, many of you know Alice saved my life as well as the lives of several of our newest Dark Moth warriors. She is incredibly intelligent, capable, diligent in completing her tasks, and beyond loyal. To know her is to love her. She is a friend and considers others before herself. I feel lucky to know Alice Blackburn and am grateful she agreed to be on our council."

"Is that a good idea?" someone from the back shouted.

"Having her as a member of the council is one of the best decisions I've ever made." Wrythe's expression was full of confidence and I appreciated it.

“Then I question your ability to lead the Dark Moth Society,” the man continued. He’d been leaning against one of the doorframes, his face in shadow, and I didn’t recognize his voice. When he came forward, I narrowed my eyes, trying to recognize him. But I couldn’t. I’d never seen the man before.

“Seth, you were banished from the Society. How did you get in?” Wrythe’s body went rigid. The muscles in his back and shoulders immediately tensed. At his reaction, my body tensed as well. If there was going to be a fight or some sort of conflict, I would be prepared.

If this man was the Seth we studied in school, he’d been banished for treason over three decades ago. If memory served, he’d tried to overthrow Wrythe after Seth’s twin brother Scott was brutally murdered during one of their hunting expeditions. Seth blamed Wrythe and swore revenge.

Seth smiled, slow and thoughtful. “There are those still loyal to me.”

Grayson and the other council members suddenly stood, flanking Wrythe and me. I let out a small breath. It felt good to have strength in numbers.

“Leave, Seth,” Wrythe growled. “You are not welcome here.”

Seth came fully into the light. “You may have banished me, but some within the Society still remember what you did to my brother. Now that you’ve placed that abomination on your council, even more will turn on you. The crown will be mine as it should be. Just you wait and see.”

“Allow me to go after him, sire. We can imprison him so he can do no more harm,” Grayson said.

“Thank you, Grayson, but I made Seth a promise, and I intend to keep it.” His voice was low and menacing. A chill ran up my spine.

We watched as Seth left the assembly hall. No one said a word to him. Some might still have been loyal to him, but they weren’t so loyal that they wanted to reveal who they were. Cowards! I glanced at

Wrythe. Did he feel guilt over the death of Seth's brother? I guessed he did. My king had a kind heart, despite his incredible wrath.

After Seth's interruption, Wrythe finished up quickly and we filed into the cafeteria which had been decorated to look like a great banquet hall in an enormous castle rather than a cafeteria in an underground compound. Cook had outdone herself with roasted turkey, ham, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes and gravy, fresh baked rolls, green beans, corn on the cob, fresh fruit, and chocolate mousse cheesecake topped with raspberries and cream. I ate until I thought I might pop, it was all so amazing.

Turned out Grayson had only wanted to discuss Wendy with me. He was curious how she had handled Eric's death and my personal opinion of her. I told him all I knew, stating that I couldn't sing her praises loud enough. He thanked me for my time and went back to his seat to eat.

Wrythe sat beside me, but we didn't get much of a chance to talk to each other. Over the course of our dinner, there was a non-stop stream of people coming by to congratulate him or me or both of us, and it was nearly eight o'clock by the time we finally got out of there.

I walked with Wrythe and the others to the elevator that would lead us down to the secret ceremony. Once inside, I eyed the elevator's keypad curiously. The button for level ten had a glass case over it. I hadn't remembered seeing that before, but it was there all shiny and new. When Wrythe pressed his thumb against it, tiny needle-tipped tentacles extended out from the case, angling toward his thumb. Before I could warn Wrythe, they stuck his thumb in ten different places. "Access granted," a female voice said. It came from the plastic case as the tentacles retracted.

I held my breath, waiting for Wrythe to howl in pain, but he didn't even flinch as ten beads of blood appeared, dotting his skin.

It seemed I was the only one to notice. "You'll find out soon enough," he mouthed.

“Fine,” I responded, clasping my hands together in front of me, debating whether I really wanted to find out.

The elevator pulleys whirred to life and the eight of us rode down together in silence. I wondered if the others felt as nervous as I did about what would happen in the secret ceremony. Only Wrythe knew what we were walking into. I guessed it was a secret for a reason.

At D10 the elevator stopped. I’d been in this elevator on multiple occasions, but this floor hadn’t been one of my stops. For some reason, I held my breath, worried about what I might see or hear or feel. When the doors pinged open, it was very anticlimactic. There was nothing. Literally. Beyond the elevator stretched a vast expanse of emptiness. It was rather freaky.

“What am I seeing?” Summer asked.

I was thinking the same thing.

I glanced at Wrythe as he spoke. “Only I can see the truth beyond this elevator. What you’re seeing is nothing, if I’m not mistaken,” he said with a hint of a smile.

“Yeah, is that what we’re supposed to see?” Grayson asked. His voice sounded much calmer than I felt.

“You are the elite, the most important members of the Dark Moth Society. From now on, your life is to serve the Moths, all Moths. But to do that, you must understand and be taught all of the inner workings of the Society. You’ve accepted your call and now must vow to never reveal what you are about to see. Once you do that, you will place your finger on the disc where Dora will verify you are worthy. Only then you will be able to see all there is to see.”

My eyes widened and my heart hammered against my chest, but I couldn’t back out.

One by one, Wrythe asked each new council member the same question. “Do you vow never to reveal what you’re about to see?”

One by one, the answer was the same.

Summer went first. She flinched a moment when the tentacles came out of the box, but she wasn't fast enough to pull away before they caught her. "A Sloth sire," Dora said. "Your blood moves slowly but precisely through your body. Your heart is pure. Access granted."

"Cool," she said, peering out of the elevator. Then she gasped. "What the hell?" She took a hasty step backward, passing me to press her back to the rear wall of the elevator.

"Good plan. Stay there, Summer," Wrythe said, unperturbed by her odd reaction. "That way I can explain to everyone at once."

Pratt went next. Dora pricked him. "A Pride Moth. Hmmmm, can I trust you? The last Pride I tasted was bitter, but he became one of Wrythe's most favored council members. Your blood is filled with more arrogance than his, which I wouldn't have believed was possible. But…" she paused a moment. "You are trustworthy. Access granted."

She pricked Eleanor, Luke, Glenna, and finally Grayson.

"Oh my," Dora said when she tasted the Gluttony Moth's blood. "You are delectable. My favorite so far. Access granted."

There was only me left. Wrythe's face softened when his gaze met mine. "Alice, do you vow never to reveal what you're about to see?"

Did I? My purpose had always been to serve the Moths, and despite the recent knowledge about the angelic part of myself, I still believed I wanted to serve them. I still considered them my family. "Yes, I promise."

"Good. Place you thumb on Dora." He pointed to the clear, plastic bubble over D10.

The tentacles stabbed into me ten times at once. It was quick but didn't hurt. "Oooh," Dora hummed almost as though she were purring. "Your blood is beautiful, full of light and darkness, a combination I've only ever tasted once before. But somehow yours is stronger. You are a born leader, meant to do many great things. But I wonder, is your heart with the Moths?" She paused, and I wondered if I was supposed to say something.

“Most definitely,” I finally admitted, and I meant it, though if I were honest there was a part of me that wanted to know about the other half of myself. What was being an angel like? I pushed the question aside. I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

“Indeed,” Dora said. “I knew it from the moment I tasted your divine blood. Access granted.”

I touched my thumb, thinking it should be hurting, but it wasn’t, and went to stand beside Grayson. The elevator doors normally didn’t stay open for so long, yet these had stayed throughout the whole process.

“Now that you’ve all agreed, and Dora has vetted you, have a look,” Wrythe said, waving his hand in front of the expanse.

I stepped forward with the others, peering out of the elevator. The cavern was no longer filled with great emptiness, but as I stared, my mouth fell open, and I wished it had stayed empty. “What am I seeing?”

“Exactly what you’re supposed to see,” Wrythe said cryptically.

“But this can’t be,” Elanor said.

I had to agree. Dozens of menial demons were bustling around as though they had places to be and jobs to do. Strangely, none of them were gnashing their teeth. Instead, they were all dressed in human cloths—pants to cover up their pus-riddled legs and long-sleeved shirts to cover up their arms and torsos. Some had scarves tied over their heads while others wore hats. It was a sight I never would have imagined. Had I entered an alternate reality?

“Clothes to make,” one of them whispered. It wore pink and carried several bolts of fabric in its arms.

“Shoes to shine,” another said. It was clothed in gold and he had six pairs of shoes flung over his shoulders.

“Floors to scrub.” This one wore blue and carried a mop and bucket of soapy water.

“Toilets to clean.” It was dressed in purple and carried a toilet brush and cleaning rags.

OceanofPDF.com

I BLINKED several times thinking I should pinch myself.

“How is this possible?” Glenna asked, her hands clutching onto Summer’s arm.

“Why are there menial rats dressed in human clothes running around the compound?” Summer asked her expression a confused mix of awe and disgust.

“Just making sure I’m not the only one who’s crazy,” Glenna agreed.

“It seems we’re all mad here,” Grayson said, patting Glenna’s shoulder.

“Is this real?” I asked Wrythe.

“Very real.” His face grew serious and he studied each of us in turn as he spoke. “Look, I know you’ve been taught something completely different over the years and for the most part that information still holds true. Ninety-nine percent of all demons are evil and must be destroyed. But the first secret of the Dark Moth Society is that not everything is as it seems. Just as its been revealed that there are Dark Moths filled with corruption, you must also understand and therefore keep the secret that there are demons who want nothing more than to do good.” He paused, allowing us a moment to let that piece of news sink in.

I watched the menial rats scuttle by, anxiously engaged with their specific tasks and they did seem like different creatures… almost.

“As you can imagine,” Wrythe continued. “Demons who desire to do good are considered traitors and atrocities to their own kind. Many, if they are discovered, are tortured and killed in the most grewsome manner.”

At his words, I remembered all of the tortured demons on D13.

Someone or several someones within the Society felt it necessary to torture demons as well. “These,” he paused, indicating beyond the elevator doors, “are the demons who’ve rejected what they were born to be. In here, we’ve created a sanctuary for them. We teach them how to live and become productive members of our secret society.”

“Don’t you worry they will betray us?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off them.

“They’ve been rejected by demons and, if spotted, will be killed on sight by their own kind. Loyalty has never been an issue.” Wrythe stepped out of the elevator. Almost instantly, those menials who saw him stopped what they were doing and fell to their knees.

“Rise, little ones,” he said. “Better get back to work.” He smiled genuinely.

They did as he commanded as the remainder of us exited the elevator. I was the last one out and heard the doors hum closed.

“This way,” Wrythe said, moving down the hall.

I brought up the rear, unable to help staring at the demons. I kept expecting to see one of them doing something evil, but none of them did. In every direction, they were busy making clothes or cleaning. All of them doing something constructive. Strangest of all, they seemed happy.

Wrythe stopped us at a door.

I waited for him to tell us that the world was square instead of round and that we needed to keep that a secret as well, but he didn’t.

Instead he smiled. “The elevator access and your initiation with Dora was all the meeting we will do for tonight. Now’s the time for some fun,” he said, his smile growing until it filled his handsome face. “Tomorrow is a new day, one that will be occupied with choices and accountability, but for tonight, we get to relax and enjoy.” He pushed open the door and it was like walking into a circus. Color and music were everywhere.

Again, it felt like my eyes were deceiving me. A creature

reminiscent of an orange house cat walked on two legs toward me. It wore a white dress and carried a tray full of sparkling drinks. “Care for a bubbly?” she asked, her voice a combination of growl and scratch.

“Sure,” I responded, automatically taking one.

Summer and Glenna were beside me, taking a glass from the tray as well.

“How you holding up,” Grayson asked, suddenly on the other side of me.

“Fine,” I lied. “You?”

“Damn super,” he said, his eyes roaming over everything.

The music changed to a loud and repeated thumping. Creatures I’d never seen before danced and swayed and laughed. There were acrobats, jugglers, elephants carrying other creatures, and creatures breathing fire. I couldn’t help but wonder whether I’d been drugged. Setting down the drink, I went in search of Wrythe. He was speaking with a group of menial demons.

“Wrythe,” I shouted over the music, keeping my distance.

He saw me and held up a finger, asking for another moment. Then went back to talking. I crossed my arms as my shock wore off and filtered into irritation and finally turned to anger. How could he be supporting demons? The longer I thought about it, the angrier I got until a red hue of light pulsed around me.

Wrythe said goodbye and came over. “Alice, get ahold of yourself. You don’t want anyone to see you.”

“I don’t give a damn whether anyone sees me. Do you think they’re going to care with all of this going on?” I waved an arm around the room, still stunned by all that was happening.

“You’re upset.” He crossed his arms. “I get that, but you have to understand there are two sides to every story. That’s what ruling means.” He watched me intently.

“How can you say that? We were literally created as a way to save our species. From them,” I shouted, motioning toward a mid-level demon serving drinks behind one of the bars.

“Not these demons, Alice,” he said, grabbing my arm and walking me over to a set of curtains. He pulled the thick, red drapes back to reveal a booth. It was occupied by an odd couple heavily making out. “Sorry, but I need you to leave,” he barked.

They were going to complain, but then noticed who he was. “Yes, sire,” the one said.

They looked to be half human and half fox.

“Thank you,” he said as they left. Then he helped me into the seat and closed the curtain. His jaws clenched together as though he was chewing on his anger. “You more than anyone should understand that not everything is as it seems. You’re half angel for crying out loud. Surely you can have a little compassion for those who’re different from us.”

I froze. “How did you know?” My mind raced at the knowledge.

“It’s my job to know everything that goes on within this compound and the sooner you understand that, the better,” he said. “Before Peter died, he said he believed that’s why you occasionally glow the silvery-white color. I didn’t want to believe it because I would never ask someone to go through that again, but it didn’t take much to recognize Peter was right.” He sighed heavily.

“Wait,” I began, knowing I was changing the subject, but I didn’t care. “You knew someone else who was half demon and half angel?” Hadn’t Dora said something to that effect in the elevator?

He ran his hands over his face, suddenly tired. “Yes, I’ve met another. Not quite like you. He wasn’t sired by the Devil, but a demon. His angel powers began to manifest around his eighteenth birthday, the same as yours did.” He leaned heavily on his arms, resting his elbows on the table.

I nodded. “Where is this Dark Moth? Can I meet him?”

“No,” Wrythe said. “He no longer exists.”

Something about the way he said it made me think he wasn’t being truthful. But I changed the subject again. “Why support demons? How many thousands of our kind are suffering—Moths who need our help—while we’re wasting our resources on… rats!”

“Who do you think makes the packs we give those Moths we help, Alice? The clothes. The socks. The mittens, coats, scarves, and shoes? Trust me when I say these demons are an asset to the Society. We couldn’t accomplish all we do without them.”

I sat back, flabbergasted. “You’re serious?”

“Yes, I’m dead serious. And when I’m gone, you’re going to have to take over for me.”

At his words, I suddenly felt sick. The bubbly I’d drunk and the food I’d eaten at dinner pressed against my throat. “I need a bathroom.”

“Why don’t you go to your rooms instead?” He stood and held out his hand.

I stared up at him, ignoring his request to send me away, though that was exactly what I wanted. “What are these creatures? Why are they here? And Dora? What is that thing?”

“They are the downtrodden and castaways. They are the abominations among their species and like us, they need someone to believe in them, to watch out for them and keep them safe.” His face softened, his eyes pleading with me to understand, but I couldn’t. I doubted I ever would. “Alice, they need us, and we need them. You must see that while this place it’s strange, it’s also beautiful.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I can’t be here another moment. I’m exhausted. So, if that’s all, I’m going to go to bed.”

He nodded. “Very well. I’ve had your new rooms prepared.” He motioned to someone and a woman appeared at his side. She was tiny, not even five feet tall, and beyond waifish. If a brisk wind caught her, she might blow away. “This is Styx. She’ll be happy to take you up.”

“My rooms? Where’s all my stuff?” I wasn’t thrilled by the prospect of someone going through my few personal belongings. What if they’d gone through my borrowed journal of the supernatural? What about my gun with the angel essence bullets? I had secrets I didn’t want revealed.

I had secrets! The realization dawned on me, and I took a step back as though smacked in the face. I was no different than Wrythe. “Did you know about the torture happening to demons on level thirteen?” The words were out before I could sensor them.

“What are you talking about?” He appeared genuinely confused. “D13 is our genetics testing lab, but all that goes on down there is testing of our own kind. I’ve authorized a team to find the gene that separates the Moths from the Dark Moths. My hope is to give them a serum that will allow every Moth the opportunity to defend themselves. The breakthrough could save a lot of lives. The only test subjects down there are Moths who’ve agreed to have their blood used and the serums tested.”

I shook my head, unsure whether he was lying or if he’d been deceived the same as the rest of us. “That may be what you thought was happening down there, but I can personally testify to the fact that your team was torturing demons. And not just some little prick of a finger.” I shuddered at the memory. “They were tortured to the point of death but kept alive, so they wouldn’t turn to dust. Their suffering… was despicable, a disgrace to the Dark Moth Society.”

“I haven’t been down there in quite some time, but I’ll look into it. If what you say is true, the perpetrators will be tried, convicted, and either banished or killed according to our laws. I promise there should’ve been none of that.” It was obvious he was innocent and had no inclination about what had been going on down there. Unless he’d told his team not to tell him what they were doing. That would give him plausible deniability. “I swear to you, Alice. I will get to the bottom of it.”

A wave of exhaustion washed over me. I didn’t even have the

energy to tell him that whole level had been wiped clean and no evidence remained to back up my claims. He would either believe me or not. “Thanks,” was all I said as the Moth named Styx indicated I should follow her.

“Goodnight,” I said, passing Wrythe.

“Night.” He didn’t say another word and I was grateful. I needed time to discover how I really felt about the situation I now found myself in.

I followed Styx through the crowd toward a door on the opposite wall we’d entered through. For years, I’d believed there was only one way in and out of Demonland. Turned out that wasn’t even close to the truth.

Another secret, I thought.

At the elevator, Styx pressed a button before stepping back to stand beside me. “Hello, Alice. I’m Styx. It’s an honor to be of service to you.”

“Thanks,” I responded, distracted. The remainder of the Dark Moths were clumped together laughing and talking.

Always an outcast, I thought mournfully.

The doors opened. “After you,” she said, signifying I should get in.

I crossed my arms. “Lead the way.”

She entered first and I followed. Styx pressed a button. It didn’t escape my notice that unlike the main elevator, there was a T next to the numbers on this keypad.

“What does the T stand for?” I asked as the elevator moved.

“Towers,” Styx said, her bobbed blond hair moving as she spoke. I was about to ask what exactly that meant when she went on. “It’s a little difficult to explain until you’ve seen it. We’re going to the top now, so you can take a look.”

I gulped but didn’t speak. Tonight was full of secrets and I was a little nervous about what I would see. How could there be towers

underground? And how big was Demonland, exactly? I always thought it was just the compound.

The elevator stopped. The doors slid open. And for the third or fourth time that night, my mouth fell open. We were in an enormous cavern. In my limited vision I could see something, but I wasn't sure what. It looked like an island covered in all manner of trees, flowers, and greenery, except at the very center, there sat a rectangle box made from what, I wasn't sure. Through the center of the box was a metal pole that went all the way to the ceiling.

"Now then," Styx said, stepping out. "We are at the top of Tower one. Come have a look."

I stepped out onto a grated walkway and stopped beside Styx, resting my hands on the metal railing. I glanced over the edge and felt dizzy. The chasm below kept going until there was nothing to see.

"What do you think?" she asked.

I glanced at her, swallowing back the bile rising in my throat. To take my mind off it, I studied Styx.

"What exactly is this?"

"Tower one," she said pointing, and clearly confused by my question.

"Yes, I get that, but what *is* it?" I tried again.

"Each island is a council member's residence," someone said from behind me. I jumped. I hadn't expected anyone else to be here.

He sidled up beside me and I caught the glint of something metallic in his hand. At his nearness, a feeling I couldn't explain came over me. I bent over, pulling my knife from my boot, wishing I had my gun. "What do you want?" I asked, pointing the knife at him.

In answer, he brandished his gun. He was obviously a Dark Moth, sired by a Sloth demon according to the tattoos on his hands. Tall like the rest of the males, he seemed familiar. I realized after the flash of a moment it was Seth Rutherford, the man who'd interrupted earlier

today. “Hello, Alice,” he said. “I’ve been dying to meet you.” He pointed the gun at me.

Without thinking, I dove at him, slashing his gun-toting arm. His eyes flashed with excitement. “It’s true what they say about you then.” He held the gun up and I snatched it from him.

“I don’t care what they say about me,” I responded, turning his own gun on him.

“What are you doing down here?” Styx asked, her voice raised an octave.

“Don’t you dare speak to me, mutt,” he said, his words lashing at her like a whip. Styx huddled behind me.

“Her question is valid. What are you doing here?” I found my center, knowing if I had to, I would stop Seth permanently. At the thought, angry red glittered off my skin.

Seth’s eyes got wide. “Amazing,” he said and for the briefest moment he reminded me of Pasty. He had the same look on his face, as though he wanted to collect me and take me apart, so he could see what my insides were made of. “I told you. I wanted to meet you. When I am king, it’ll be good to know who my enemies are and what you’re capable of… unless you can be persuaded to be on my side?”

“You can be certain that will never happen,” I said, moving toward him.

“You say that now, but there are things about Wrythe you don’t know. If you did, I think you might feel differently about him.” He eyed me curiously. “Or not. It’s difficult to read you, especially with that beautiful red glittering around your body.” As he spoke, he took me in, until I began to feel uncomfortable.

“Wrythe can decide what to do with you himself,” I said, coming forward to take his wrist. But before I could make contact, he sidestepped me and took off running.

I went after him, my boots clanking on the metal grate under my feet.

Seth spoke, but sounded very far away. “I may have been banished, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still go wherever I want to go within Demonland.”

I whirled back around, standing beside Styx. “Did you see him?”

She shook her head, mouthing the word *no*.

Seth’s voice seemed to emanate from the walls around me. “All of Demonland’s secrets have been revealed to me. I even know a secret about your king and it’s a doozy.”

“Where are you?” I shouted, running around the elevator again until I was back to Styx.

“Everywhere and nowhere,” he said. “Until me meet again, Alice Blackburn.”

I felt his presence leave the catwalk. “Hey, wait,” I shouted.

“Where did he go?” Styx asked, hugging herself, fear plastered across her features. “He’s evil, that one.”

“We should tell Wrythe,” I said.

“I will, as soon as I get you settled, Alice.”

But I realized after Seth had appeared during the ceremony earlier, Wrythe hadn’t had anyone go after him. He hadn’t even mentioned the Dark Moth. That was strange because I figured he would use all his considerable resources to find Seth.

“Come on,” Styx said, waving me back into the elevator. “Let’s get you to your rooms.”

“All right.” I followed her, tucking my knife back in my boot and waiting quietly until the elevator stopped again. I had a multitude of questions, but my nerves were shot, and I thought if I opened my mouth at that moment, I would scream and be unable to stop. So I gritted my teeth and held on until the doors to the elevators opened again.

“Right this way,” Styx said.

I followed, taking a tentative step forward. Instead of my boots

striking a metal walkway, they landed on the greenest grass I've ever seen. "Is this real?" I bent to feel it and the soft blades brushed against the palm of my hand. "How is this possible?"

"Magic," Styx said.

The scent of lemons and fragrant flowers filled the air. I breathed in deeply, and some of my stress faded away. Birds fluttered from tree to tree. A bramble of rose bushes lined the garden and grew up and over my head in a dome shape. The bushes served as a barrier to the empty darkness that I knew was out there, beyond the roses, but that I couldn't see. *Thankfully!* Lemon and cherry trees grew around the rectangular box I figured housed my rooms. One of the birds flew in front of me and turned. And she wasn't a bird at all, but a humanish creature with large wings.

"What are you?" I asked.

She put her hands on her hips, shaking her face at me. "I am a pixilette," she said in a high voice. "My name is Daya." Her blue wings fluttered behind her.

"Daya, it's lovely to meet you. Do you take care of this garden?" I was so beyond freaked out by all I'd seen since becoming a council member that the cute pixilette didn't even phase me.

"Myself and my family care for it," she said, flourishing a hand. I realized that the garden wasn't filled with birds as I'd first believed, but a dozen or so pixilettes, all with different colors of wings.

"Well, thank you, Daya. This garden is beautiful."

Her skin turned a light shade of pink. "It's our pleasure, Alice." She flew away.

"Right through here," Styx said, opening the large wooden door.

I went in, stopping just inside. "But, why have I been put out here?" Almost like I'd been banished, the same as Seth. Peter and Wrythe both had rooms in the main compound as did many of the other teachers. Before that moment, I'd believed all the teachers and society members did. But as I thought about it I realized that would be

impossible. I'd walked all of the hallways and there weren't nearly as many rooms as there were trainees and Dark Moths.

"Some of the teachers have a smaller room within the compound as will you, but these quarters have been prepared for you for when you need a break from everything else."

"Oh," I said, surprised by the luxury. "I don't need all of this. The room I had was fine."

Styx smiled, obviously trying to placate me. "You feel that way now, but how will you feel after you've been doing your job for six months or a year? Constant questions. Problems to solve. Choices to make. I have a feeling you'll be grateful for these rooms before too long." She tucked some hair behind her ear nervously. "Let me at least show you around," she said, and I could tell she was already weary of me.

I couldn't blame her, though I refused to apologize. "Thank you, Styx." I walked into a luxurious great room complete with a sitting area, dining table, and kitchen. "Holy wow! This seems like too much."

"No, it isn't. It's perfect." She led me through the rooms decorated in black and gold with accents of white to the enormous bedroom complete with a king-sized bed, a reading area, a walk-in closet, and a master bathroom. Within was a shower, and a separate claw-foot tub as well as two sinks and the toilet. "Why would I ever need two sinks?" This felt wasteful and excessive.

"Company," she answered simply. That single word filled me with mortification because I knew what she was implying.

I walked back out to the great room. "Where's my stuff?" I asked.

She led me back into the walk-in closet. I hadn't really studied the interior the first time, but now I took it all in. There were a dozen uniforms and boots as well as dresses and matching heels. Drawers were filled with socks and under things. Underneath was a box and in it were my journal, gun, and a few other items. I sighed with relief,

picking up the box and setting it at the foot of my bed before going back into the great room.

“Found it. Thank you, Styx.” I stifled a yawn. “I think I’m going to bed. Thanks for everything.”

She bowed. “I’m yours, madam. Whatever you need, please don’t hesitate to ask. Just press this button.” She indicated a button next to the door.

“Hmmm. What do you mean mine?” I didn’t like the sound of that.

“Whether you need help dressing, a make-up artist, a hairstylist, an assistant, or whatever, I’m available to you twenty-four hours a day.”

“That isn’t necessary. I can dress myself.” I didn’t want someone feeling beholden to me.

Tears filled her eyes and her bottom lip pushed out before she began to cry.

“I’m sure Wrythe can find another place for you to work,” I said, falling onto a chair, too tired to continue standing while we argued.

She shook her head, wiping her eyes. “Wrythe told me that if I couldn’t convince you to keep me then I was to leave the compound and never return.”

“What? That’s ridiculous,” I said, sitting up.

“He knew you would turn down any help, but I told him I could convince you. I know what you are, and I can help.” She knelt in front of me and began unlacing my boots.

“Stop that.” I stood, walking away from her.

“Please. I beg you. Don’t make me leave the compound. I-I can’t survive on my own.” Tears fell from her cheeks in droves.

“I— Fine.” I went over to the bed and bent over to remove my boots. I wasn’t in the mood to fight her or Wrythe or anyone else. I needed sleep.

Styx jumped up, her curly hair bouncing as she moved. “Thank you, Alice.” She bent in front of me.

“No,” I said. “You can stay. You’re my assistant or whatever, but I don’t need your help,” I barked.

Her face fell and her bottom lip trembled again.

“I just mean tonight,” I said, my voice softening. “I don’t need anything more from you tonight, Styx. Except that you tell Wrythe about Seth.” If he wasn’t going to be concerned about the man then neither was I.

“I’m going now,” she said with a salute. “Goodnight, then.” She bowed, and left, quiet as a mouse, closing the door behind her. I triple locked it before getting out of my clothes and taking a shower. I felt dirty for some reason and needed to wash all I’d seen off me.

When I’d dressed in silk shorts (my only option as they’d thrown my favorite albeit well-worn clothes away) and camisole before climbing into the giant bed. The sheets were gold and so soft I felt as though I was lying on cool water. I put my hands behind my head and studied the ceiling. It was then I remembered my spider. I suddenly missed her as loneliness seeped through my skin. It was in the moments just before I fell asleep that it occurred to me what Styx had said. She knew what I was!

Did she really? I would question her tomorrow morning… if it mattered. Everyone in the compound probably knew about my half angel status. Now if only someone could tell me what that status meant.

OceanofPDF.com

SLEEP WAS FILLED with horrible dreams about menial demons dressed in human clothes attacking me, their sharp teeth slashing away my flesh, skin dangling from bloodied mouths.

"Alice," one of them said. Something seemed familiar about it. Perhaps it was the green of its eyes.

"Wake up, Alice. I need to talk to you," it continued. "Alice!" It screamed, showering bloodied spittle all over my face.

I woke at the same time I pulled my knife from under my pillow and held it at Kade's throat.

He swallowed, his eyes twin emerald pools of worry.

"How do you keep finding me?" It was a question he answered before, but one I needed to ask again.

"Why don't you put down the knife and we'll talk?" His hand covered mine, filling me with warmth. I hungered for him, like a starving animal. I needed him.

"Fine." As I tucked the knife back under my pillow, my fingers brushed against the demon orb. On instinct, I fisted it, knowing whatever happened, I needed to keep it nearby. I sat up.

Kade leaned back, his lips twitching as though they were desperate to smile but couldn't. "You know I can always find you," he said, crossing his arms.

"It does seem that way, but why?" I kept my voice quiet, desperate to slow the rapid beating of my heart.

"As I've said before, we're bound together, you and me. Where you go, I go." He leaned over me again and I sucked in my breath, desperate for his touch, drugged by the scent of him.

I wanted to ask why we were bound, but that wasn't what came out. "Kiss me," I commanded softly.

He moved so until we were close, our noses touching. Then he pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “He’ll come for me soon and I need to talk to you before that happens.”

I sucked in a breath, confused. “Who will come for you?”

He eyed me, his gaze telling me I should know.

And I suddenly did. Kade was talking about the Devil. The time for my second Trial had run out. “But it isn’t time yet,” I said, flatly.

“After so many years in contact with him, I know.” He brushed his thumb across my cheek, sending a wave of desire over my skin.

“Can’t you resist him or something? You’re an angel, he’s a demon. Isn’t your light more powerful than his darkness?”

He shook his head. “Not even close,” he said, and I could tell it pained him to admit that. “But there is something I need to say to you.”

“What is it?” I took his hands in mine, forcing away my need to scream.

“When the time comes, Alice, I want you to choose for me to die,” he said.

I wasn’t ready to have this conversation with him. “No, Kade. You can’t ask me to do that.” I pulled away, going over to my bed and getting under the covers. Surely they would offer some protection.

“You must.” He bent down, kissing me passionately, his lips bruising mine. *I love you, Alice*, he spoke into my mind. And then he was gone. Tears fell from my cheeks and dripped into my ears. “Kade,” I whispered. “I love you, too.”

I curled into a ball, determined to lie there in brooding suffrage for the rest of forever. In that moment, I’d given up hope. Life wasn’t fair. In fact, it sucked rocks!

My phone rang.

I ignored it, letting it go to voice mail.

Then it rang again.

Again, I ignored it.

By the third time, I was ready to huck the damn thing in the toilet. I went to my dresser, turning my phone over so I could see who was bothering me.

It was Joannie, the woman I'd met at Monument Valley. She was coocoo, but she was also sort of a new friend and obviously in need of something. "Hello?" I said, answering the call.

"A-Alice, is that you?" It sounded like she'd been crying.

"Yes. Is everything all right?"

"I…Alice, I've been having these dreams since we visited the cave. And I can't really make sense of them. Can you meet me at the entrance to Monument Valley? I need to talk."

"Well." I didn't want to do anything except continue to sulk, but she was so upset. I couldn't let her suffer on her own. I guessed she didn't have anyone else since she was calling me. "I'll be there as soon as I can," I said.

"Thank you, Alice."

"Sure." I had no idea how I would get there unless I spoke to Heathcliff. "I'm going to bring that doctor friend I was telling you about. Is that okay?"

"That's fine. See you soon." She hung up.

I got ready and then headed over to Heathcliff's office. After a quick knock, I entered. Per the usual, Doc was seated at his desk, peering into his microscope. "Hey, Doc. Are you busy?"

"Always, but what's up?" He spun away from his desk to face me.

I studied all the things on his workstation, including more of the bullets in totes that I guessed had been dipped in angel essence. What stood out was the tote filled with ladybugs. There was no lid on it and I wondered why they didn't fly away.

"Alice?" he asked, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Right, sorry. I came to ask… See, I have this friend. Her name is

Joannie and she's having a hard time distinguishing the difference between dreams and reality. I'm worried about her and hoped maybe you could help me help her?"

"I'd be glad to help. Where is she?"

"Monument Valley," I said, hoping he knew how to get there and beyond relieved he was so willing to help.

"Oh, okay. We'll need to go by portal," he began. "When are we supposed to meet her?"

"Right now," I said, feeling sheepish.

"No problem." He stood and went over to his desk drawer before removing his lab coat and grabbing his medical bag. "You ready?"

"Seriously?" I hadn't expected him to drop everything like that. It was probably because I was so emotional over what'd just happened with Kade, but tears pressed against the backs of my eyes at his willingness. "Thank you." I cleared my throat. "I'm ready."

"Anytime, Alice," he said, moving toward a back room. "In here. It's better if we go through the portal in private."

"Makes sense." I followed him into the room and he closed the door. Then he threw something into the air and millions of twinkling lights exploded around a dark hole. "After you, my dear."

It was the same as when I'd gone in with Professor Pops and Kenmei, only that time we'd taken the portal into the parking garage above Demonland. "Thanks," I said, stepping forward into the darkness. When I came out the other end, I recognized that we were in Monument Valley. It was the views. It occurred to me there was no other place on earth as beautiful as the wide-open skies here.

Heathcliff appeared right after me. "Where to?" he asked.

"This way." I led him out from behind the trees, past the hotel and toward the entrance. Joannie was there, her arms crossed as she paced nervously, her gaze on the ground in front of her. There were others milling about, some giving Joannie nervous glances. I spotted Toby

before checking out the three guides. Were they angels too? I had a thought. *Toby, can you hear me? Toby. It's me, Alice. Can you hear me?*

The man didn't even look in my direction. Obviously, the speaking into each other's minds thing wasn't normal between angels, just something special between Kade and I.

At the thought of Kade, my heart broke. Where had the Devil taken him? And why? Why so soon? I wanted to get angry, and felt the rage burn. But as the red glow began to permeate my skin, I took a deep breath. It wouldn't do to let strangers see me sparkling like a ruby gem.

"Alice," Joannie called upon seeing me. "It's so good to see you," she said, giving me a hug.

I hugged her back and then introduced her to Heathcliff. "This is the doctor I was telling you about—Heathcliff Henry."

Heathcliff came forward. "Hello, Joannie. It's nice to meet you."

"You too," she said shyly, her eyes taking him in. Then her nervous gaze fell on me. "You're really here, right? This is real?"

I pinched her lightly on the arm. "It's real," I said, reassuring her.

She rubbed the part of her arm I pinched. "Good. Thanks."

Heathcliff gave me a look that said I was right to have called him. But there was something else too. Almost like recognition. "Why don't you come with me? We'll get you someplace safe."

She studied him hesitantly. "Alice?"

I put an arm around her shoulders, hoping to ease her worry. "I've known this man more than seven years. He's good and kind and if anyone can help you figure out what's going on, it's him."

She hesitated a moment, thinking it through. "All right. Where are we going?"

"This way," he said, walking quickly back the way we'd come.

I went after him, but Toby said my name and I stopped, glancing back at him. Joannie stopped too. "Go on without me. I'm going to

talk to Toby and then I'll be right behind you."

"Okay." She seemed unsure.

"I promise, I'll be right behind you." I waved her on in the direction Heathcliff had gone.

She nodded once and took off at a jog after the Doc. "Wait up," she called.

I turned in Toby's direction just as he ran over. "What's going on with Joannie? She's been here every day for the last two weeks. I spoke with the other guides. They've all seen her as well. Sometimes she just talks to herself. Other times, she seems perfectly lucid. At least that's what the guys said." He indicated the guides behind him.

"Heathcliff is a doctor. We're going to try to help her out. Thanks for checking though."

"Sure. Of course." He put his hands on his hips. "What about you? How are you?"

"I've been better," I said, giving him a wan smile. "But I can't discuss it now. They're waiting for me."

"All right." He patted me on the back. "I hope to see you again soon, Alice Blackburn."

"I'm sure you will," I responded, though part of me wasn't sure. Without Kade I didn't feel like myself. I wondered if I'd ever want to see another angel as long as I lived.

Toby jogged back to his perch in the front of the readying tourists.

I hurried over to where I was sure Heathcliff had led Joannie. Sure enough, I saw him there, but something was wrong. Joannie was on the ground with Heathcliff hovering over her. "Doc. Hey," I yelled, picking up speed until I reached him and slid to a stop. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing. I just gave her a sleeping draught. No sense freaking her out even more when we go through another portal." He closed his bag and stood. "Can you carry her? I need to open the portal."

“Yep.” I stooped low and lifted her. She was light as a feather and easy to maneuver.

Heathcliff opened the portal and stepped in. I followed after, expecting to arrive back in his office, but that wasn’t where we were. The room looked and even smelled familiar. It was the room I’d stayed in with Professor Pops. My heart leaped with joy, excited to see the old vampire.

“Put her on the bed,” Heathcliff said. “She’ll be out at least an hour and I want to speak with Professor Pops before she wakes. I want to get some advice.”

I did as he asked, tucking a blanket carefully over her. It wasn’t cold, but blankets always brought me comfort. It was the weight of them. I figured Joannie might feel the same.

“Want to come down and say hello?” Heathcliff left his bag next to the door before opening it.

“I think I’d better stay here with Joannie, just in case she wakes before you get back. I don’t want her to be even more confused than she already is.”

“Sure.” He studied me intently. “You’re a good friend, Alice.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be here,” I returned, walking over to the window peeking out over Professor Pops’ expansive land.

Grateful for the time alone, I thought about all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. It almost didn’t feel real and a part of me totally understood where Joannie was coming from. I still couldn’t believe Wrythe provided a sanctuary and employed demons! Sure, they were supposedly “good” demons… I’d seen them working, their disgusting rat bodies covered in clothing as they bustled about. But I couldn’t believe it. And then there was Styx and my oasis, complete with a garden and a full luxury suite of rooms. How had that become my life? Not to mention my angel status. My mother had been an

angel of death—an archangel—and yet she'd somehow decided to make a baby with the Devil. Beyond that was a prophecy I was supposed to be a part of.

I also pondered over what had happened between Wrythe and me. Why I'd seen a future with him, but not with Kade. Was I supposed to choose my head or my heart? The Devil… my father had said that. As much as I didn't like it, I could see what he meant. In every way, Wrythe and I belonged together and when we kissed I felt desire for him. But he wasn't Kade.

"Alice?"

My shoulders rose as anxiety riddled my body. What would Joannie think happened to her? I took a cleansing breath before facing her. "Hey, Joannie. How'd you sleep?"

She sat up, rubbing her hands along her arms. "Fine, I guess." She scanned the room, taking in our surroundings. "I don't remember falling asleep."

"No worries. Heathcliff and I brought you to his home. He'll be back to examine you in just a few minutes." I hoped that was true. I didn't know how long I'd stood at the window, debating the unjustness of my life. "Are you feeling okay? Cold? Hungry? Can I get you something to eat?"

"Some water might be nice."

"You got it." I went to the door. "I'll be right back. Don't move," I said.

"I'll be here." She climbed out of bed and I decided just to hurry.

I ran down the stairs and into the kitchen where I opened the fridge to retrieve a water bottle. Professor Pops and Heathcliff were seated at the bar, talking. "She's awake," I said, heading back up.

"We'll be right there," Heathcliff responded behind me.

When I reached the bedroom, I opened the door. Joannie was standing at exactly the same place I'd been only moments before. She

had her arms crossed, her body turned slightly so I knew she could see me and still study what was happening beyond the window.

"Here you go," I said, bringing it to her.

"Thanks." She opened the bottle and took a sip. "This place seems really nice. The doctor must do well for himself."

"Well, it technically isn't his house, it's—"

While I'd been speaking, I heard Heathcliff and Professor Pops come in. Joannie turned away from the window and peered over my shoulder. Her gaze met Professor Pops' and a tremor visibly shook her body. She dropped the water bottle and her eyes grew wide. "Adam," she said, covering her mouth with both hands.

"How do you know Professor Pops?" I asked, moving out of the way of what was obviously a moment between the two of them.

Professor Pops was usually easy-going and nonchalant, but now he stood gaping at her like he'd seen a ghost. "Red," he whispered. "I've been worried sick over you."

"She's been missing a few weeks," Heathcliff said, filling me in.

I was confused. "You know her?"

"Yes," Heathcliff whispered.

Professor Pops and Joannie crossed the room toward each other as though they were two ends of a magnet. I didn't understand what was happening. How did Joannie know Professor Pops?

The two of them stopped just out of reach of each other. Professor Pops lifted his hands as though desperate to touch her, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. "You disappeared," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "And I thought I lost you again."

"I did," Joannie admitted. Her entire aspect had changed at the sight of him. She no longer seemed crazy or confused, but I couldn't help thinking the two of them were batty. What they were saying was impossible. Heathcliff told me Professor Pops had fallen in love with Joan of Arc, but that woman died nearly six hundred years ago.

Joannie couldn't be the same person. It was impossible.

"Where were you?" Professor Pops' fingertips brushed her face. Gentle, oh, so gentle. Then he kissed her, and the intimacy between them made me feel like a stalker.

Moving quietly, I went over to Heathcliff. "Should we give them a few moments alone?"

Heathcliff eyes danced between them and his expression seemed angry. Stomping forward, he shoved Professor Pops and Joannie apart and took a protective stance in front of Professor Pops, facing Joannie. "I don't know what the hell you're playing at, but you'd better stay away from my dad." He was breathing heavily, and in that moment, I didn't see a respected doctor but a child afraid someone was going to hurt his father.

Professor Pops smiled at him, placing a calming hand on Heathcliff's shoulder. "It's okay, Heath. Son, she really is my Red."

Heathcliff wasn't buying it. "She took off. Again. Who's to say she won't do it again." He glared at Joannie. "Explain yourself, vampire."

Vampire? That was interesting. She hadn't tried to drink my blood. But then Kenmei and Professor Pops hadn't either.

Joannie laughed. "I don't know what happened to me. One minute I was here with Adam and the next I couldn't remember anything about my life and I kept having these strange dreams or visions—like before." Her gaze bounced between Pops and Heathcliff pleading with them to believe her.

I did.

Heathcliff's face went white as a sheet. "Why?"

I decided to see if I could help. "Joannie," I said, taking a tentative step toward them. When she saw me, her eyes went wide.

"I would recognize you anywhere," she said and wrapped me in a tight hug.

I was confused. Who did she believe me to be? "Joannie, it's me,

Alice. We met at Monument Valley.” I hugged her back, wondering if she’d totally lost her mind.

“I know exactly who you are,” she said, and I could swear she sniffed me.

I gently pushed her off. “You do? Are you sure?”

OceanofPDF.com

I HELD ONTO HER, positive her head had cracked open and all the crazy was flying out. “What should I do?” I mouthed to Heathcliff who was looking at Professor Pops.

The Doc sprang into action, clearly still wary of this bizarre woman we’d brought into his dad’s home. “Joannie, why don’t you come over to the couch and have a seat?” He took her by the shoulders, gently pulling her from me.

“Sure,” she said, reaching for Professor Pops’ hand and tugging him along with her.

A quick glance at the professor revealed his former certainty had transformed into worry. Was this what had him worried the other day? It was obvious Joannie looked exactly like Joan of Arc, the woman he’d fallen deeply in love with in the fourteen hundreds, before he became a vampire and she went off to defend her country.

At a loss as to what I should do I followed after them, taking the lone chair off to the side of the couch Joannie and Professor Pops sat in. Heathcliff perched on the coffee table in front of them, his stethoscope out.

He approached his new patient cautiously, looking as if he expected her to attack him any second. “I need to listen to your heart, if you don’t mind.”

Joannie smiled, scooting in closer to Professor Pops. “I’m fine now, really. I remember everything.” She looked at Professor Pops. “Adam, I’m so sorry I ran off. There is much I must tell you,” she said, her eyes soft as she studied him.

“I’m willing to listen, my love,” Pops said.

Joannie looked at Heathcliff. “I’m okay now, but perhaps you can discover why I couldn’t remember her.” She eyed me.

I sat up. “What do you mean, Joannie?” There was something strange going on. I wasn’t sure what, but I knew the answer would change my life forever.

Joannie’s eyes softened as she regarded me. “You are even more beautiful than I thought you’d be,” she said, not answering my question.

I sat back. Maybe she wasn’t as lucid as she seemed. “I haven’t changed all that much since the last time you saw me.” My heart had been ripped from my chest at the loss of Kade, but otherwise I was pretty much the same.

She shook her head. “The last time I saw you, *mon petite,* you were tiny, so small I thought I might break you.”

My emotions ran the gambit at those words. What was she saying? She’d seen me as a baby? Did that mean she’d taken care of me after my mom died, or…” I froze, my gaze catching hold of hers.

She nodded as though she knew what I was thinking. “That’s right, Alice. I’m your mother.”

I thought my heart might beat out of my chest. “That’s impossible,” I said, fanning my face, wishing I could talk to Kade. *Kade!* I shouted into my mind. *Kade, I need you. Please. Kade!*

And then I understood why the Devil had taken him early. He knew what I would face today, and he wanted me to do it alone. The bastard!

Heathcliff was going through his medical bag like he could find something in there that would make everything go back to normal.

Professor Pops was the only one who seemed unruffled. “Why don’t you tell Alice your story and then fill in the gaps with what you need to tell me about your having a daughter.” His calm was a façade and he wanted answers as much as I did.

She swallowed and nodded, folding her hands neatly in her lap. “Where would you like me to begin?”

“How about the day you died?” His eyes narrowed, and I felt the air shift around him. I knew Professor Pops could be intimidating, but the way he turned on Joannie was down-right deadly. There was no question he was the most dangerous being in the room.

“The day of my death was May thirtieth, fourteen hundred and thirty-one. It had rained, making the square muddy. The stench of town filled—”

“Stop.” Professor Pops leaned in, somehow menacing and serene at the same time. “What happened *after* you died?” His fingers brushed against her arm, caressing.

She blinked innocently up at him. “For years, I went through life as a revenant.” She looked at me. “That dear, is someone not quite human and not quite vampire.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“One day I met a woman and we became fast friends. After a decade together, she tricked me into drinking some of my true love’s blood.” She swallowed as anger and sadness crossed her features. “Then I became a vampire.” She shook her head. “After that, I did horrible things, including killing several innocent humans for their blood.”

She didn’t look strong enough to kill anything, but vampires were different than humans, though they looked the same.

“Around that time, I was taken by the chayot and about to be put to death, but when I met Raphael, an archangel, he didn’t kill me. Instead he thanked me for my service and leadership in serving the army. He said I fought valiantly, and that what happened to me wasn’t my fault. He promised that my time of rest would begin, saying I’d earned it.” She shook her head, making a face. “But you know how I am, Adam. I spent one full day walking in a meadow filled with sunflowers and was done. I needed to do something.”

Professor Pops nodded. “I know, my love.”

I glanced at Heathcliff who’d moved away from the coffee table

and sat quietly in the chair next to me, his hands in his lap. Worry etched within his features.

Joannie continued, “I called for Raphael and asked him to put me to work. It took a long time to convince him, but eventually he allowed me to work in the angel school as a teacher. After a several years, I went to him again, telling him I needed to be doing more—that surely the human race still needed me. He agreed to talk to his superiors. I waited another decade before he finally returned stating that if I wanted, I could become an angel of death. That my job would be to help those passing from mortality. I accepted readily. For many years, I loved my job and served those who died well. Until one day I met a man…” Her voice trailed off.

I leaned forward, interested despite myself.

“He wasn’t like any other being I’d ever met. He explained who he was and what he wanted from me.” She shook her head. “At first I blatantly refused. He was the father of all demons. Surely, an angel and a demon couldn’t be together. We spoke off and on for several years until I finally began to understand.”

I was on the edge of my chair.

“You and the Devil?” Professor Pops said, his face unreadable.

I had to agree. What would’ve possessed her to do such a thing?

“Dearest, I knew you and I could never be together as I was. It is forbidden for a vampire and an angel—”

Professor Pops stood abruptly. “But an angel and the Devil were perfectly acceptable?”

“No,” she whispered, swallowing. Tears glistened in her eyes and my heart ached at the pain reflected in them. “But just as I received revelation to help my country against our enemies while I was on earth, I began to receive it again. It was as though God himself commanded me to do this thing. How could I refuse?”

Professor Pops didn’t look convinced. “So you and the Devil were together?” The words came out desperate, as though an elephant sat

on his chest.

"*Mon amour*, it meant nothing. I did what I thought was right." Her eyes went dark. "Nine months, I carried you," she said, studying me. "Nine of the happiest months of my life. The angels couldn't decide what to do with me, so finally Raphael sent me to earth where I lived in an apartment, got a job, and created a life for myself. I didn't know what would happen to me once you were born, but I was determined to make the best of our lives together." She gave me a watery smile which I returned.

This woman was my mom! I could feel it just as surely as I could feel my own heart beating in my chest.

"Once you were born, it was like a curtain had been pulled over my eyes. I woke one morning in an apartment I didn't recognize, with pictures of a life I didn't remember on my fridge, and a job I didn't recall ever going to. The doctors called it an erratic amnesia episode. Several psychologists said I'd had a psychotic break. My memories had simply vanished. There were pictures of me huge with pregnancy, but when I tried to figure out what had happened to you, there was nothing. I even hired a private investigator, but it was all to no avail. I tried everything the doctors suggested to recall my life before the episode, but never received a glimpse.

"Then my friends from the League of Huntsmen found me and told me I was a vampire still. I returned to my life's work as the memories flooded back—except for the time I spent with the Devil and then carrying and having you." She indicated me.

"Mom," I whispered.

She covered her mouth as her emotions got the better of her.

Then I found you again," she said looking up at Pops and I figured the holes in my memory meant nothing and I was so very happy." She held out her hand.

Pops took it. "Red," he said softly.

Joannie wiped her eyes. "A few months ago, I started to receive

the visions again." She paused, and Pops encouraged her on with a nod. "I kept feeling I needed to be in Monument Valley, which is why I went there every day. But the more I was there, the more I felt like I might remember something important. I didn't understand why until the day I met you and we went into that cavern. That night, my first memory of you resurfaced." Her voice trailed off as if she struggled to find the words. "Even though you were just a baby the last time I saw you, I knew who you were." She shook her head. "You must've felt so alone," she said, tears falling from her eyes. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. "I'm so sorry, Alice."

Professor Pops, who stood during her story, now returned to his seat beside Joannie. He was still perplexed, but not like he had been a few moments before. "There are no more holes in your memory?" he asked.

She shook her head, meeting his eyes. "I would have told you my love. But I'm here now and if you can forgive me." She paused glancing at her hands. "It's always only been you, Adam."

"But what about the angels and their rules?" Pops asked.

She shrugged. "I'm mostly a vampire, same as you, though I still work with some angels in the League. But the angel rules don't apply any longer." Hope brimmed in her eyes as they met his.

He took her hands. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again." He kissed her soundly.

Heathcliff and I exchanged embarrassed looks. I stood, thinking to leave, but Joannie came over to me before I even realized she'd stopped kissing Professor Pops.

"Alice. My sweet Alice. Can you forgive me for abandoning you?"

"I—" I cleared my throat. "I mean there's nothing to forgive," I said, still trying to wrap my brain around the fact that I was standing in front of my mom. It shouldn't have been possible.

She hugged me again.

And I returned it.

“You’re much too skinny,” she said taking in my appearance. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

Heathcliff laughed. “I guess everything is fine?” He looked at Pops for confirmation.

Professor Pops clapped his son on the back. “Thank you for bringing her here. Yet again, your instincts were spot on.”

“Anytime,” he said. “But I’d better get back to the compound. I didn’t tell anyone I was leaving, and they might be worried.”

“Right. Do you still have enough ingredients to get you there and back again?”

Heathcliff rolled his eyes. “Yes, Dad. I’m good.”

“Alright. Just checking. It’s my job to worry, even if you are a grown man.” He brought Heathcliff into a tight hug.

“Thanks,” he said, his voice muffled by the fact that his dad was hugging him so thoroughly. Then he released him and followed Joannie out of the room, but I stayed beside Heathcliff.

“Alice,” Joannie called. “You coming?”

I shook my head. “You have no idea how much I want to stay and sit at the counter while we talk some more, but I really need to get back to the compound too.”

Joannie shook her head. “No,” she said. “Please. Not yet. I just got you back.”

I didn’t want to hurt her feelings and I didn’t want to go, but I had responsibilities. “The only way for me to return home is through the portal Heathcliff can make. Otherwise, I’m about three thousand miles away from the compound and I’ve recently been made a member of the Dark Moth Society, plus…” I let my voice die in my throat. I didn’t want to tell her about the Trials. Professor Pops could fill her in.

Her bottom lip poked out. “None of that matters now. I’m here and you’ll always have a home with me, if you want,” she said, and I sensed her vulnerability.

“Mom,” I said, and a throaty noise escaped her throat. I had to pause and take a deep breath. It felt good to say the word and have it mean so much. She was alive! “I do want to spend time with you, so much, but like Heathcliff, there are people relying on me. I can’t just abandon them.”

Professor Pops wrapped an arm around Joannie. “I’ll fill her in on what’s happening,” he said.

“Thank you,” I responded.

Joannie shook her head and I saw a little of what I imagined Joan of Arc might have been like in her time—commander of an army. Ferocious. But then she took a deep breath and nodded. “I don’t like it, but I understand. Of course I do.” She hugged me again. “Don’t be gone too long, okay?”

“I won’t. Besides,” I gave the two of them a sly grin, “the two of you have each other. I’ll be back when I can.” I thought about Professor Pops being my father and that send a shiver of joy through my heart. I wouldn’t mind in the least.

AFTER REACHING the compound and saying goodbye to Heathcliff, I went to my new rooms. I felt like I was living in a dream. But as soon as I walked in, Styx was there, her face angry. “Where have you been? I thought you’d been taken. I even went to tell Wrythe, I was so worried.”

“What did he say?”

She waved her hands in the air. “I couldn’t find him. Grayson said not to worry, but I’m worried.”

I sank into the nearest chair.

“What’s wrong, Alice? Are you hurt?” Styx asked.

“No, I’m not hurt,” I said, but I had a feeling I would be before too long. If Wrythe was missing, that meant the time had come when I would have to make the worst decision of my entire life. Whatever I decided would ruin me. I knew that.

“Let me make you something to eat. You look pale.” Styx went into the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

I didn’t respond, just sat in the chair, feeling beaten as I let the day’s events wash over me.

Kade, I thought, desperately wishing he could hear me.

I wasn’t surprised when he didn’t respond, but I did sink deeper into despair. A part of me believed this day would never come. In order to function, I’d put the choice in the back of my mind, forcing myself not to think about it. But it’d come anyway or it would be here soon.

Styx fed me something. It was tasteless, but I ate it knowing I needed the nourishment. Then she put me to bed. Before I knew it, morning came. With dread eating my insides, I climbed out of bed and dressed in one of my new uniforms as well as my boots. Then I tucked the demon orb and my knife in my boot as I always did. Afterward, I took Seth’s gun and emptied it of the bullets it held and replaced them with the angel bullets Heathcliff had prepared. I tucked the gun into my boot as well since I had no place else to put it. Walking was a bit awkward, but it was better to go prepared then empty-handed, especially with Seth wandering around Demonland.

Once I was finished, I waited, figuring the Devil would take me at any moment. I practiced my knife skills, then did push-ups, and went through some hand-to-hand combat moves. After three hours, he still hadn’t come for me and I began to question whether it was the Devil who took Kade or his angelic superiors. I went to the door, determined to find Wrythe. When I opened it, I excepted to see Styx. Instead, the white rabbit stood there wearing a formal red jacket and blue pants. He held his pocket watch, his foot beating on the ground with impatience.

“Alice, I’ve been waiting out here for hours. Let’s go. We’re late.” He turned, hopping through the garden. When he reached the rose bushes, he went through to what lay beyond. And I already knew

what that was. Emptiness. I was on an island basically and everything past the climbing rose bushes was nothingness. The rabbit would fall to his doom.

"Wait," I yelled. "Don't go that way!" I didn't want to follow because I knew doing so would mean I was that much closer to the end of my second trial. But I didn't want the irritating rabbit to die either. Damnit! When I reached the rose bushes, there wasn't the supposed nothingness, but a rabbit hole. Just as the other times I followed the blasted rabbit, this hole was filled with dirt, brambles, and probably more bugs. I shuddered before going in. This time I went quickly, keeping up with the rabbit. He seemed surprised each time he ogled back and saw I was right behind him.

"Oh, my. Mustn't keep him waiting," he would say before speeding on.

When we reached the door, I was sweaty and covered in dirt. The rabbit put his hand on the doorknob and stopped, adjusting his waistcoat. Then pulled out his pocket watch. "This is not good. So not good. We're late. We're late. We're late."

I stood up straight and wiped the cobwebs off my face. "Why? I'm here aren't I?"

"Yes, but we're late." He went through the door.

I followed, keeping close to him. As expected, my father was sitting on his throne. To the right of him was Wrythe and on the left stood Kade, their hands were tied behind their backs and their mouths had been covered so they couldn't speak. At the sight of them, my heart went into my throat. It was thick, so thick I felt like I might suffocate.

When the Devil saw me, he stood, and walked over. "Finally." He clasped his hands together in front of him. "So, tell me, have you made a decision or are you going to allow all of the Moths to die?"

I growled, not ready for what was coming. "I… Are you sure I need to do this?" Could I procrastinate the inevitable?

The Devil huffed, obviously disappointed in me again. Not that I cared. At all. “Alice, yes. You need to do this.” He turned, heading back to his throne.

With his back to me, I took the orb from my boot, clutching it in my hand like it was my lifeline.

“Choose!” He turned on his heel, his face contorted into such anger, it was frightening.

I crossed my arms, desperate for the orb to do something that would make me believe now was the time to use it. *Please,* I begged in my mind.

Alice, can you hear me? My heart tried to beat out of my chest at the sound of Kade’s voice in my head.

Yes, I said, trying not to look at him. I wouldn’t give the Devil any more ammunition to use against Kade or me.

Kade’s voice was composed as he continued speaking. *Here’s the thing, my love. I want you to choose me.*

Panic filled me until all I wanted was to run from the room, screaming. *I can’t. I won’t.*

Kade went on. *If you don’t choose me, then you’ll have to pick Wrythe. Is Wrythe dying an option?*

No! *I can’t do that.* Tears filled my eyes. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t choose. I loved them both.

You have to choose me. If you don’t, Wrythe will die and the Dark Moth Society will rip itself apart from the inside out. Wrythe must continue to lead. I know he wants to pass the Moths onto you, but you aren’t ready, Alice. I love and support you always, and I believe you can do anything, but Wrythe is the foundation that holds the Dark Moth Society together. They can’t afford to lose him, especially now. You know that’s true.

I did know. Especially after what I’d seen last night. My head still reeled when I thought of demons working for the Dark Moths and the creatures who’d roamed that floor as well as the pixilettes. Hell, even

Dora still caused me to shudder.

“Alice, you have five seconds.” The Devil brought both of his hands up in preparation to clap. It terrified me to realize that was all it took—one clap of his hands, and all the Moths would die. “Four.” He sat in his chair. “Three.”

“Please. Give me more time.” I knew Kade was right, but speaking the words… saying his name…

“Two,” the Devil said, shaking his head. “On—”

“Kade!” I shouted. “I choose Kade.” My eyes went back and forth between him and Wrythe. The look on Wrythe’s face told me he was as shocked as I felt. But there hadn’t been a good choice.

The Devil stood, his disappointment turned to surprise. “To clarify, you choose Kade will live? Or die?”

I didn’t want to say the words.

“You’ll have to be specific, my dear, otherwise I might make the wrong decision.”

I glanced down at my feet, unable to meet his piercing gaze. “Kade must die,” I said.

“No!” I heard Wrythe yell around the gag in his throat.

You did good, Alice. You made the right choice. Kade’s words inside my head were soft and accepting. There was no anger, no disbelief, or sense of betrayal. Only peace and conviction. He really did believe what he was saying. That knowledge tore at my insides with such force, I thought I might die.

“Amazing,” the Devil said. “You chose your head over your heart. I didn’t think that was possible. Very good, Alice.” He clapped his hands and Kade burst into white flames.

My angel groaned as his body blackened and turned molten before becoming white hot and exploding into a million pieces of sparkling dust.

Kade was really gone. I didn’t want to believe it. He was immortal,

so it shouldn't have been possible. But I'd seen it happen with my own eyes. I fell to my knees as a sob tore from my throat. It literally felt as though my heart had been ripped from chest and I heaved from the agony.

"I can't say I'm sad to see the angel go. He was a thorn in my side, though I did enjoy eating tacos with him and talking football." The lack of emotion in the Devil's voice made me want to punch him.

"Shut up," I screamed. "Stop talking about him like he was your friend. You did this. It's all your fault!"

"I didn't do anything except follow your orders. He's dead because of you, dear Alice. I may have been the executioner, but you were the one who condemned him to die."

I didn't respond, unable to turn my devastation into words that would express exactly how I was feeling.

The Devil sighed, disappointment apparent on his face yet again. With the swish of a hand, Wrythe vanished. I guessed he'd been sent back to Demonland. "Now then," he said, ignoring me. "On to the third challenge. This is the one I'm most eager about because if everything goes the way I think it will, then you will discover your true self, which will lead you back to me."

"I will never serve you," I spat, as tears ran down my face in angry droves.

"Never say never, darling." He went back to his chair and sat. "For the third trial, you will be required to give up the most precious part of yourself in order to save someone you love." An oily grin rose on his lips.

I heard him but didn't acknowledge that I had. Instead, I closed my eyes, letting my body fall to the ground as I curled into a ball. More than anything, I wished to be wherever Kade had gone. We could traverse death as one. If he were with me, I believed I could do anything.

"So dramatic," the Devil said, his voice directly above me.

With a start, I opened my eyes to glare at the Devil, but I was no longer in the throne room. I was back in my new bed in my new room. The pillows were so comfortable and the covers so soft. It felt wrong to be lying on something so amazingly indulgent when Kade was no more. But when I tried to stand, I found I didn't have the strength. Giving in to my exhaustion, I closed my eyes again.

I'd survived the second trial. I'd made my choice. One that sucked beyond belief, but it was done. The Dark Moth Society would survive. The Moths were safe. That knowledge should have stirred something in me, but I didn't care. And in that moment, I knew misery would be my guiding light for the rest of my unhappy life.

OceanofPDF.com

ALICE IGNITES DEMONLAND

OceanofPDF.com

"PASS THE PEAS," Wrythe said, giving me a quick wink before his eyes found my mom's.

I smiled and took a bite of mashed potatoes.

My mom picked up the bowl of creamed peas and handed them to me. "Here you go," she said kindly. She wasn't the biggest fan of Wrythe. It didn't matter that he was a king. He was half-demon, and that made him not good enough for me in her eyes.

We were sitting around the large dining room table in Professor Pops' house. Okay, it was a mansion. The luxurious table could seat twenty, though tonight there were only Professor Pops, my mom, Wrythe, and me.

Eating together once a week had become a habit in the last eleven months. And while spending time with my mom and Professor Pops wasn't awkward, it was sometimes weird. Probably because they didn't eat, but sipped human blood from silver goblets. I was curious where they got the blood, but I hadn't dared to ask.

More than that, I still wasn't used to having my mom around. She'd been human once, nearly six hundred years ago. Then she'd become a revenant and finally a vampire. After killing a lot of people, the chayot discovered her and were ready to kill her, but somehow instead, she'd become an archangel. During her time as the angel of death, she got busy with the Devil, and nine months later, she had me.

After that, they stripped her angelic powers and all memory of me. She was returned to her vampire state, though she still carried some angelic residue. Now that she had Pops back and remembered me, she was happy.

Happy to have me in her life. Happy to be with Professor Pops.

My mom reached over and squeezed my hand lightly. “You look lovely tonight, Alice.” Her face glowed with warmth.

I glanced down at my black dress, the one Haven made. After I became a council member, she created seven more, one for each of the sins. Each dress was divine, and I cherished them. “Thank you, Mom. So do you,” I returned. And it was the truth.

She was a stunning woman with fiery red hair and skin so creamy it looked like milk. Tonight she wore a sleek emerald dress that accentuated her slight form. Her long hair was down, and she wore makeup as well as jewelry, including a ruby and diamond engagement ring on her left hand. Everything about her appeared soft, but it was all an illusion. At one point, she’d led the armies of France to victory against England. And for years, she’d commanded the League of Huntsmen, a group of chayot and humans dedicated to hunting down rogue vampires and evil supernaturals. Sitting like she was now, at the dinner table beside Professor Pops, she looked like a regular, ordinary, albeit stunningly happy woman.

Me, on the other hand?

Well, I wasn’t unhappy.

“You should ask Haven to make you a white dress,” Joannie said.

I lifted a brow in question.

“Or at least a gold one.” She sipped her blood and swallowed. “To represent the angelic part of yourself too,” she added, as though she shouldn’t have to explain herself.

I wouldn’t ask Haven to make me a dress. That just wasn’t done. She was a busy Moth. That she made me eight already went way beyond what she did for most Moths.

Before I could tell my mom that, Wrythe answered. “I’ll be sure to mention that to Haven,” he said kindly. “Alice would be stunning in a white or gold dress.” He caressed my face with his eyes.

“That would be very good of you,” she said, her voice holding only a slight chill.

After so many months together, I'd hoped she would take to Wrythe the way I had. Professor Pops liked him. Why couldn't my mom?

"Did you watch the game last night?" Professor Pops asked Wrythe, changing the subject.

I wanted to kiss my vampire soon-to-be-step-father.

"I did," Wrythe answered, wiping his mouth with a napkin before cutting into his steak. "Can you believe Adams threw that interception right before the half?" he asked, then stuck a bite into his mouth. Even when he was chewing, he was hot.

"Ridiculous," Pops said, then took a big drink.

For the next fifteen minutes, the talk was all about football. My mom joined in as well. She liked the sport nearly as much as the men did.

That gave me time to think. Something I tried not to do, but sometimes it couldn't be helped.

As always, my mind went to Kade. After he died, I didn't think I would ever feel anything but misery. Each day I woke, and every moment until I slept, my thoughts lingered on what I'd done: killed the man I loved. Styx tried to keep me fed, but I refused. Not only that, but I refused to see anyone, including Wendy. It wasn't until Wrythe started showing up daily that I began to open my heart and live again.

He saved my life when I didn't believe it was possible. Tenderly, he'd encouraged me to get back to work. My job was weapons training for the new trainees. Not only that, but Wrythe asked me to be the liaison for the demons who worked for us on level D10. At first, I refused, but Wrythe finally won me over, and truth be told, I enjoyed working with them. The demons there were different than those I'd battled and killed, in more ways than one. They weren't mindless rats like I believed, but possessed thoughts and feelings and even gentleness.

“Alice?” Wrythe touched my hand, giving it a little shake.

“Sorry, what? I missed the question.” I put down my fork and smiled.

His eyes met mine, and they overflowed with so much love.

My beating heart picked up speed. The man was glorious to behold. Long black hair. Piercing gray eyes. An incredibly muscled body and kissable lips. But he was more than that. He was generous and loved me in a way I sometimes struggled to comprehend.

But I loved him right back. When I finally opened my heart, I’d clung to Wrythe. He became my everything. And loving him was as natural as breathing.

He smiled. “Are you ready for dessert? Your mother made it.”

“Oh,” I returned his smile with one of my own. “Definitely.” I pushed away my plate.

“I’ll go get it,” Professor Pops said and stood.

“I’ll help,” my mom added and followed him out of the dining room.

“Did I drive them away?” I asked, my tone only slightly teasing.

“Doubtful. They’re probably going in there to get a moment alone.” Wrythe took my hand and kissed my fingers, sending a different kind of hunger shooting through my veins.

Before I could act on my needs, Pops and Mom were back. She carried a bottle of non-alcoholic bubbly since the alcohol didn’t affect us anyway. Her face was unreadable. Pops had two glass bowls filled with something that looked like pudding. He set down mine first.

“For you,” Pops said, giving me a strange smile.

“Looks delicious,” I said, picking up my spoon. It looked like chocolate mousse topped with raspberries and whipped cream.

“Hopefully, it tastes as good as it looks,” Mom said. “I’m still practicing my cooking skills, and sometimes the directions are a little tricky.” She rolled her eyes nervously. Her trepidation was endearing.

“I’m sure it’ll taste great.” I waited until Wrythe had his, and then we dug in together. I put the bite in my mouth and was shocked by the bitterness of the chocolate. It tasted like she used too much. Not wanting to hurt her feelings, I worked to swallow. A glance at Wrythe told me he was struggling the same as me. “It tastes good,” I lied, grateful for the raspberries and cream to cut through.

“Are you sure? I thought I might have used too much of the chocolate.” Mom’s features were taut with anxiety.

“Maybe just a little,” I admitted but took another scoop. Mom wasn’t a cook, and it didn’t help that she couldn’t sample what she was making. To her, it all tasted like ash. At least that was what she told me once.

Pops wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “You are amazing, my love.”

Wrythe scooped more onto his spoon but didn’t have the stomach to put it in his mouth.

I figured I’d just gulp my bite down quickly, but as it touched my tongue, I felt something hard. I sucked and swallowed all, but whatever it was and then pulled it from my mouth. “What’s this?” I asked, looking at Joannie and Pops before glancing at Wrythe.

All three were watching me intently.

Surprised, I glanced down at the thing in my hand, my pulse quickening. Using my napkin, I wiped it off. Was it what I thought it was? “A diamond ring?” I asked, confused.

Wrythe pushed out his chair and got down on one knee. With his seven-foot frame, we were nearly face-to-face. He gulped, and I saw a whisper of what looked like fear on his face. “Alice,” he said, taking the ring and dipping it in his water glass. Then he swirled it around until the water was brown and the ring was clean.

I thought my heart would pound out of my chest. “What are you doing?” I asked, pressing the back of my hand over my mouth. Was he about to propose? It sure as hell looked like it.

He gave me an enormous smile. “Alice Blackburn,” he started again. “I love you and have loved you for months.” He licked his lips. “It was after you slew that demon in the parking lot of the Mexican restaurant that I first knew my feelings for you had become something like love. During that week, as I watched you, fought beside you, and got to know you, my feelings grew. You are so beautiful, determined, committed, and, might I say, kick-ass.” He chuckled, and I laughed with him, releasing some of the tension. “That was all it took for me to fall head over heels. Since then, I’ve done my best to show you what my love looks like, and I think you love me too.” He paused, shifting his weight slightly.

I found myself nodding my head. “I do. Wrythe, I love you very much,” I responded, feeling like I’d tumbled into a tub of ice. I was awake and alert as never before because I did love him. With all of my heart. Or at least as much as I could. But wasn’t love like a flower? With water and if given enough sun and nutrients, the bloom would last longer and would be much more vibrant. Wrythe was worth the time and effort, and we would be great together.

“Then will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Queen of Demonland. To rule equally at my side?” Had I heard a tremor in his voice? This moment was a big deal for him. He was showing all of his cards and doing it in front of my mom and Pops.

“Wrythe,” I started and cleared my throat. Was saying yes the right thing to do? I bit my bottom lip as I debated, but only for the briefest second. “Yes,” I whispered, leaning in and kissing him.

His mouth on mine was delectable, and as his hands gripped at my hips, it was just him and me and all the love and passion our kiss possessed.

Pops cleared his throat.

Embarrassed, I leaned back.

Wrythe took my hand and placed the grand and sparkly oval diamond solitaire on my finger. He noticed my hand was shaking and

held my fingers. “You’ve made me the happiest man in the world,” he confessed, kissing the palm of my hand. It was intimate, and I shivered. “I love you,” he said.

My eyes met his. I was still tingling with an electric fire. “I love you, too.”

After my Mom and Pops offered their congratulations and several toasts, we used magic to port back into Demonland and right into my bedroom. The door was already closed, and Wrythe took the opportunity to spin me around to unzip my dress. “We’ll announce our engagement tomorrow after dinner,” he said, kissing one shoulder and trailing more kisses across my naked back.

At the feel of his lips and his five o’clock shadow against my skin, I sighed. His mouth was distracting, but I couldn’t help a small worry over what he’d said. Sure, most of the Dark Moths had accepted me and were even friendly, but if I were to marry their king? I didn’t know how they would take it. “Are you sure that’s wise?” I asked, reaching around to touch him. “Maybe we should keep it a secret for a while.” Turning, I unbuttoned his shirt, running my hands over his broad chest. His cologne was a heady but subtle combination of leather and ginger. Evocative enough that I wanted to taste his skin.

I was desperate for him. To love and be loved by him. It was time. Tonight we would take our love to the next level. There was no doubt about it.

Wrythe’s eyes went dark, like thunderclouds before the rain. He lifted me onto the bed. I moved back until my head reached the pillows, and he followed, his eyes holding mine until he was above me. “I couldn’t keep our engagement a secret even if I wanted to. You’ve made me the happiest Moth that ever lived.” He bent and kissed each of my eyes, cheeks, and chin before his lips crashed into mine.

I arched into him, clinging to his shoulders.

OceanofPDF.com

THE NEXT MORNING, when I woke, Wrythe was already gone, but his scent lingered. A red rosebud lay on his pillow with a note that was simple yet perfect. *I love you,* it said. A flood of love for the man filled my chest. Loving him was a gift, and I felt blessed having him in my life.

I picked up the flower to smell the bud, and my thumb caught on a thorn. “Ouch.” A dot of blood appeared on my skin. Climbing out of bed, I went to the sink in the master bathroom and rinsed it off. By the time I looked at it again, there wasn’t any proof of a jab.

My ring caught my attention, and I turned my hand back and forth, allowing the diamond to sparkle in the light. Then I held it up so I could see it in my reflection.

“I’m getting married,” I whispered at the woman looking back at me. A bubble of excitement raced along my veins. My reflection appeared eager, and I leaned in closer, looking for signs of the girl I’d been a year ago. At that time, I’d just turned eighteen and believed all that mattered was the Devil's death.

Things in my life had changed dramatically.

I’d changed.

Removing the ring, I set it on the counter and went over to turn on the shower. As the warm water rushed over my body, I thought about last night. It had been magical, better than I could’ve imagined. Wrythe was tender and so very giving. At the thought of his mouth on my skin and our lovemaking, desire coursed along my belly. Yes, he and I were right together.

After I dried myself off, I braided my hair back, so it was out of my face and dressed in my Dark Moth warrior uniform, tucking my knife and the demon orb into my boot.

In the kitchen, Styx was singing softly while she prepared breakfast.

When she saw me, she smiled. “Alice,” she said. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” I said, going over and getting some water.

“I’ve made you eggs, bacon, toast, and Cook sent over some fresh strawberries. Food will be ready in just a few minutes.”

“Sounds amazing,” I said and went to the front door. “I’ll be back.”

Styx smiled. “You’re too sweet to those pixilettes. They don’t deserve you.”

I didn’t respond but went out into the garden. The roses were always blooming, and the garden smelled so good thanks to the pixilette Daya and her family. When she saw me, she flew over, landing on my outstretched hand. “Alice, did you have a nice time with your mother?”

“Really good. The company, the conversation—”

“How was the food? Did your mom burn it again?” She tucked her blue hair behind one tiny ear as her matching wings fluttered.

“No, actually, it was good.” I’d told her how my mom was learning to cook, and I appreciated that Daya remembered. “Except, the dessert was a little bitter until…” I gasped. “My ring,” I said, looking at my hand. My ring finger was bare. I’d left it in the bathroom.

“Ring?” Daya asked, concerned.

Should I tell her? If I did, would all of Demonland know before Wrythe made the announcement later that night? “Can you keep a secret?” I asked, deciding I had to tell someone. Might as well be one of my dearest friends.

She glanced around, her hair flipping back and forth. Then she took off and flew in a circle before facing me. “Of course I can, Alice,” she whispered, and it sounded like the soft tinkling of a bell. Then she crossed her heart with her pointer finger. “What is it?” Her lashes

batted as she spoke.

“Wrythe asked me to marry him,” I whispered, forcing myself not to laugh. It was hard because she was seriously so cute.

“What?” Styx threw open the door before Daya could respond. “You’re going to tell the pixil your news before you share it with me?” She stuck out her bottom lip, pouting.

I bumped into her with my hip. “I was going to tell you over breakfast,” I said.

That appeased her. “Alright, then.” She smiled big. “Food’s ready anyway, so come inside.” She disappeared back through the door.

“Have a great day,” I said to Daya.

She hugged my finger. “Congrats Alice.” Then she bowed. “Queen of the Moths.” She giggled. “I like the sound of that.”

“Thank you, Daya,” I said, feeling only a little uncomfortable. As a trainee, I was called the Queen of Hearts. It was a name that stuck. What would everyone say about my becoming a real queen? Was I even ready? I guess I had time. It wasn’t like we would marry anytime soon. I felt sure there were lots of things to be done before Wrythe and I became official.

Once I finished breakfast, I returned to my room. I debated whether to wear my engagement ring. It would be dangerous since I was teaching weapons training, and I didn’t want to lose it. Instead, I tucked it into my top drawer under my socks. Then I took the walkway over to the elevator and rode it over to the next one, which took me up into the Demonland compound. There was I greeted by several trainees and Summer, the Sloth council member. We exchanged pleasant greetings.

“Any idea why Wrythe is in such a damn great mood?” Summer asked, her brows raised in question.

“I’m not sure,” I said, sidestepping.

“He announced a meeting after dinner. You wouldn’t happen to

know what he intends to say?" She crossed her arms and eyed me carefully.

"Again, I'm not quite sure." I shrugged and tried to smile; grateful I hadn't worn my engagement ring. "I guess you'll have to wait until tonight to find out." I wasn't fibbing, just giving a neutral answer.

"I guess." She continued down the hall.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Dinner was in nine hours. Surely I could make it until then. There was plenty to do.

I TAUGHT two classes back to back. Each lasted two hours, and by the time I finished, I was hungry. Heading over to the cafeteria, I hoped to see Wrythe, and we could eat lunch together. I wasn't disappointed. He sat with Elanor and Pratt.

I quickly got my food, which was meatloaf and mashed potatoes, as well as a drink, and sat across from Wrythe.

As soon as I was sitting, his eyes went to my ring finger. There was evident relief on his face, and he nodded. "Alice, how were your morning classes?"

"Really good. There are a couple of amazing trainees," I said, before cutting into my meat. As I spoke, Wrythe's booted foot found mine under the table, and he tapped me lightly. Just that little movement, even in such a non-intimate way, had butterflies in my stomach fluttering. My hunger grew, but not for food. I needed my fiancé. Something in my face must've revealed what I was thinking because his eyes darkened.

"There is something of importance I need to discuss with you in my office. Care to finish your lunch there while we talk?" Wrythe asked. He sounded professional, his voice not revealing anything except what he said.

I was impressed. After swallowing my bite, I wiped my mouth. "Um, sure. If it's urgent." I glanced over at Eleanor and Pratt. They were busy discussing their own thing and barely noticed.

“Extremely,” he said and stood, taking his tray.

I did the same, but before I could follow, Wendy showed up.

“Hey, Alice,” she said, sitting down. “Leaving already?”

I took a quick breath to steady my nerves. “Wrythe needs to discuss something.” I shrugged but noticed my voice sounded way to eager. “Who knows with him,” I added, rolling my eyes.

She giggled. “I wouldn’t mind spending alone time with King Wrythe.” She bit her bottom lip.

A flash of jealousy slashed through my heart. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. He isn’t bad to look at,” I admitted.

Immediately, I knew I’d said too much.

Summer looked over at me, glaring. “He is still the king,” she snapped.

“You’re right,” I admitted.

Wendy was oblivious to my gaffe and said goodbye. I returned it before following after Wrythe. As I went, I said hello to those I passed. Many responded cordially. Now that I was on the council, it appeared that most everyone had accepted who and what I was. But some still ignored me. If I wanted, I could bring charges against them, but doing so would go against everything I was trying to accomplish.

At Wrythe’s office door, I knocked.

He opened it immediately. In one movement, my food was on his desk, and I was in his arms, his mouth on mine.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, pulling him to me before running my hands along his back and moving to his chest. It was ridiculous there was so much clothing between us. I wanted to rip his shirt off.

He felt the same way, unzipping my uniform down the front.

“I’m going to make love to you right here and right now,” he said, his voice hoarse as he kissed along my jaw to my ear.

I shivered at the thought. “You better,” I pleaded, my fingers

fumbling over the final button on his shirt.

“Wrythe,” someone called from the other side of the door. The handle jiggled.

“This is why I lock it,” Wrythe growled, trailing kisses across my collarbones. “They’ll go away,” he said.

But whoever it was knocked louder. “Hellooooo, it’s Summer. I need to speak with you,” she said in a sing-song voice.

She’d been at the lunch table with us, which meant she knew we were in here.

“Damn,” I said, leaning back so I could see Wrythe’s eyes better.

“Double damn,” he added, before pressing my lips open, kissing me deeply. He was also buttoning up his shirt.

I sighed, knowing our moment was over and zipped up the top of my uniform.

“Just a minute,” Wrythe said, tucking in his shirt and adjusting his pants. Then he ran his thumb across my bottom lip, his hand resting against my neck.

The way he touched me—like I was already his—set my stomach aflame. Also, I wanted to smack Summer for interrupting us.

After one more quick check of himself and me, he opened the door.

“Thank you, sire,” I said, keeping my head down as I casually pushed passed Summer.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” she said, which was so obviously a lie.

No matter, though. After tonight, everyone would know we were engaged, and then making out with the king would be perfectly acceptable.

“No worries,” I called, but didn’t turn around.

There was still time until my next class, but I went early to practice. It was always good to stay sharp. Peter told us that all the time. At the thought of him, my heart saddened. I selected the katana,

my favored weapon, and went through several drills until the bell rang, telling the trainees they had five minutes to get to class.

A sheen of sweat ran the length of my back, but I didn't stop the drills, using the effort to help me forget about how much my body longed to be with Wrythe.

When the final bell rang, I stopped and was surprised to note that the class was all there and were watching me.

I bowed.

They returned it.

"Let's begin," I said. Then I went to work, giving them instructions about how to hold the katana and the benefits of using the weapon to slay menial demons.

Once classes finished, I was covered in sweat and took a quick shower to rinse off in the women's locker room before changing into a clean uniform and letting out my hair. It had dried with waves in it from the braid, and I left it down before making my way over to the elevator.

"Alice," Wendy called, running to catch up with me.

"Hey, Wen, how's your day been?" It was still such a pleasant surprise that we'd become friends.

"Fine," she said, but her features clouded.

"Trouble with Grayson?" Wendy was still assisting the Gluttony council member. From what I could tell, he kept her always busy, so she rarely had time to go out on demon hunts.

The elevator opened, and the two of us entered together.

"He is…" she paused and pursed her lips, her gray eyes looking troubled. "Needy," she finally finished.

I had wondered if she and Grayson were together, but she hadn't said, and I didn't feel it was my place to pry. "What do you mean?" I asked, trying to keep it light.

She crossed her arms. "Have you ever dated someone?" she asked.

“Yes,” I said as the doors closed. “Where to?”

“Oh, I don’t need to go anywhere.” She pressed open the elevator doors and got out. “I wondered if you wanted to go to the club with me and some friends tonight.”

“How thoughtful,” I said, stepping between the doors to keep them open. “I would love to.” It’d been weeks since we’d hung out.

“Cool.” A natural smile curved her lips. “Meet me in my room at ten?”

“I’ll be there.” I stepped back inside the elevator. As the doors closed, I waved.

“See ya,” she said.

When I was in the elevator alone, the plastic over D10 appeared, and I pressed it, waiting for the tentacles to appear and taste my blood. The creature who vetted me was called Dora.

“Hello, Alice,” she said

“Dora,” I replied, leaning against the rail and wondering if I would ever get used to my new life.

As the elevator went, I thought about what the menial demons wanted to discuss with me. For the most part, everyone did their part without incident or trouble. Occasionally though, there were little squabbles and in-fighting, and it was up to me to help them solve their problems.

As soon as the door pinged open on level ten, I was surrounded by a dozen or more menials.

“Come, Miss Alice. You have to see.”

“See?” I was confused but allowed them to walk me through the common area and down the walkway to a small park created for the menial children to play.

“Look,” another said, and pointed.

In the center of the park stood a grand tree, probably four feet wide at the base, that reached more than a hundred feet in the air. I

was aware that it didn't make sense. Level ten was in between two floors, and they didn't seem to be so far apart, but after everything I saw since my inauguration into the Society, I didn't question the magic of the place.

As I studied the tree, I noticed something odd attached to the trunk. "What is it?" I asked, thinking they wanted me to play a game. Pin the tail on the Dark Moth trainee was a massive hit with the younger menials.

"Death," one of them shouted and moaned.

"They've found us," another said.

My pulse quickened as I saw that a tracker demon's stomach had been sliced open, his guts spilling out. Each hand and foot had a dagger shoved into them. On his forehead was painted a single word in what looked like the demon's own blood.

Traitor.

Fury rose like bile in my throat, and I rushed forward, yanking the knives from his appendages. As I carefully eased the demon's broken body to the ground, he moaned.

"I've got you, Soreth," I said, quietly. This sloth demon worked in the laundry and was very particular about keeping clothes clean. He moved a bit more slowly than others on his team, but there wasn't a better launderer among all the demons. Plus, he was kind. He'd been one of the first mid-level demons on this level to show me any kindness.

Soreth tried to take my hand. His lips moved, and I leaned in, careful to avoid a particularly oozing sore on his cheek, and took his bloodied hand in mine. "What did you say?" For the first time, I realized there wasn't a demon doctor. That must be rectified.

"He was here. Betrayed." Soreth closed his eyes, and his hand dropped before he turned to ash.

My demon power roared red as my wrath pulsed through my veins. I whirled around, scaring the demons who'd brought me. "Who

did this?" I hissed, making eye contact with each of them.

Some shuffled their feet while others looked away.

"Come on. Someone had to see something," I said, ignoring the fact that I was covered in Soreth's ashy remains.

"A man," came a response, but I didn't see who said it.

"Which man?" I asked, searching through the group. "I need a name. Step forward and tell me what you saw."

A small lust demon carefully made her way to the front of the group. She looked terrified, and I knelt in front of her so that she didn't feel so intimidated.

"What's your name?" I asked, softly, so as not to frighten her further.

"Launa," she said quietly, staring at her hand.

"It's okay," I said, and took a deep breath, shoving away my demon power. "I'm not upset with you. Soreth was a friend, and I'm angry someone did that to him." Sometimes it helped to keep it simple.

She smiled, showing off her sharp black teeth. "That is what we love about you, Alice," she said and relaxed.

"Good, now tell me all you know."

She started picking at a scab on her arm. I wanted to tell her to stop but resisted and ground my teeth together, trying to be patient. "The man appeared and met Soreth. They were talking, and I believe Soreth said the man's name was Seth."

My head began to pound. At the council member ceremony, Seth had appeared and threatened Wrythe and all of us. He'd also spoken to me before vanishing. But since then, no one had seen him. We'd kept guards by all of the elevators for months until eventually, we decided Seth no longer intended to bother us. But now, he was back. "Thank you, Launa. You've been most helpful." I stood and saw there was a vast crowd of demons all around me. The old me would've seen

them as a challenge and been excited to see how many I could slay. Not anymore. These demons were good, just as there were Dark Moths who were bad.

Spinning in a circle, I spoke. “I will take what’s happened to Wrythe. The king will know what to do,” I said in a loud voice so all of them could hear. Then less loudly, I went on. “I’m so sorry this happened. We will find Seth, and we won’t rest until he is brought to justice. You can count on me.”

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER ANOTHER SHOWER and being peppered with Styx's questions, I made it to the cafeteria only five minutes late. Wrythe was seated and already had his food. He saw me and smiled. Then he must've seen something on my face because he stood and came over.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Seth is back," I said gravely, not feeling very hungry.

"Did you see him?" He took me by the elbow, and we went over to one side, next to a wall, so we were out of the way.

"No, but he tortured Soreth, one of the sloth demons." I ground my teeth together.

Luke walked into the cafeteria, saw us, and began to make his way over.

"I'll tell you more later tonight," I said just as Luke arrived.

"Wrythe, I need to speak with you about an issue I'm having with one of the trainees," he said.

"Of course, but not until after dinner." Turning to me, Wrythe said, "Get your food. I'll save you a place." He squeezed my elbow. "I'm sorry about Soreth. I know he was a friend."

"Thank you," I said somberly.

Once I had my food, I sat beside Wrythe, but I struggled to eat. When he finished, he had Cook bring out some special cider. As soon as all of the glasses were filled, Wrythe stood.

"Moths," he began, clanking his knife on the glass for silence.

Everyone quieted.

"Thank you. I have some great news," he began and looked at me.

I smiled, suddenly beyond nervous. What would everyone think?

"As you know, Alice and I have gotten to know each other very

well over the last year. It's been my pleasure to work side by side with her, and last night, I proposed." He paused for effect, but it wasn't necessary. You could've heard a pin drop. The cafeteria was so quiet. "So please raise your glasses, and let's drink to Alice, my fiancée, and the soon-to-be queen of Demonland." He sipped from his glass, but no one else moved.

Summer, the Sloth council member stood. Her face was an emotionless mask, but she raised her glass. "To Wrythe and Alice." She lifted her glass again, then took a drink.

One by one, the other council members did the same. By the time the last of the seven, Glenna was done, the rest of the Moths had stood.

As one, they chanted, "To Wrythe and Alice."

When Wrythe sat back down, the room erupted in anxious conversation. Wrythe wasn't bothered. He looked at me, and all I saw was his happiness. I was sure he saw mine reflected at him. At least I hoped so.

After out dessert of peach cobbler and vanilla mint ice cream, Wrythe took my hand and kissed my fingers. "I'll see you later tonight?"

It was then I remembered Wendy and our plans. "I'm going to go above ground with Wendy and some friends."

"Sounds fun. I'll be waiting when you get back."

The way he spoke sent a shiver of desire down to my toes. "Good," I whispered.

He headed to his office and was followed by several of the council.

After waving to Wendy, and promising her I'd see her at ten, I took the elevators over to my new rooms, hoping to get some rest before I went out. As I made my way down the walk, I glanced at my beautiful rose garden and the little cottage and realized how right Styx had been when she said this would be a place I would come to more and

more. I hadn't slept in the actual compound in months.

Once I was in my garden, I walked over to the bench, thinking to sit a moment and remember my friend Soreth, but my father had other plans.

He appeared out of thin air, as was his way.

"You will not marry Wrythe," the Devil seethed, dark light sparking all around him.

I gasped in shock. I hadn't seen my father since the end of my second Trial when Kade had died. I'd nearly forgotten about the final Trial. What had my father said? "For the third trial, you will be required to give up the most precious part of yourself to save someone you love."

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Go away," I said, knowing I sounded childish.

"I will not," he said and crossed his arms. "You are too good to marry the king of the Dark Moths," he said through clenched teeth.

I found it slightly amusing that my mom and dad agreed on something.

"It's none of your business," I retaliated, clenching my fists.

"I didn't want to do this, but it seems I don't have a choice." He raised his hands like he would clap.

"You're going to kill me now?" That was how he'd killed the council members. Dread and fear raced along my veins. A year ago, dying might have been a nice reprieve, but now I wanted to live, marry Wrythe, and have a family.

"No, dear girl." He glared. "But I'm tired of waiting. The sooner you figure out every part of yourself, the sooner you'll be able to complete the third Trial."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my stomach turning into knots. Nothing good ever came of fulfilling his wishes. My father refused to let me be happy.

“What I mean is that I’m sending you to the angel realm.” He dropped his hands, tucking them into the front pockets of his suit pants.

“Why would you do that? I don’t care about that half of myself anymore,” I said and meant it. Leaving Wrythe was out of the question. I would be lost without him.

Sure, Kade’s superiors had demanded I go there. They’d said they believed in a prophecy that had something to do with me. But after Kade died, I hadn’t heard anything more from the angels and figured they wanted nothing to do with me.

The Devil rolled his eyes. “You have no idea whether you care about it or not because you haven’t given that part of you a chance.”

“But I thought you wanted me to embrace my demon half.” I was too surprised and confused to think about what I was saying.

“Oh, I do, and I have every confidence you will choose to come to me, but you will never fully commit until you know what the angelic part of you has to offer.” He took a step toward me, and I flinched.

I couldn’t reason with him, so I decided to beg. “Please,” I said. “I love Wrythe and want to marry him. Don’t take me from him.”

“You aren’t going anywhere.”

Wrythe was suddenly there, broad as a bull and just as angry. “Get away from her,” he seethed, his power rippling off him.

My father glanced back and forth between us. Then he clapped his hands.

I screamed, thinking he had killed Wrythe, but instead, Wrythe was tied up in black chords, and his mouth gagged.

“Do not hurt him,” I said, running past the Devil until I reached Wrythe.

“It’s okay,” Wrythe said around the rope in his mouth.

“You will go to the angel realm, and you will learn all there is to learn about the angelic half of yourself. If you don’t, I will kill

Wrythe." He was suddenly directly in front of me. "But more than that, I will end your mother once and for all." His eyes glistened with fury.

Cold flooded me. I knew he was telling the truth. "How long?" I asked.

"How long what?" he spat, sending spittle onto my cheek.

"How long do I have to remain in the angel realm?" I asked as wrath rolled along my skin.

"As long as it takes, daughter." The Devil wrapped one of his hands around my throat and lifted me off the ground.

Wrythe shouted for him to stop, but I didn't struggle.

I held Wrythe's gaze. "Free Wrythe, and promise you won't return to Demonland while I'm gone." The words came out in gasps since it was hard to breathe.

The Devil put me down. "You're in no position to bargain, but fine. I give you my word Wrythe will be safe and sound, as will this compound, while you're in the angel realm."

I sucked in a deep breath. "Will they even let me in?"

"They are anxiously awaiting your arrival." He turned and walked over to Wrythe. "Do we have a deal?"

I was taught never to make a deal with the Devil, but I didn't have a choice. "Yes," I said and rushed over to Wrythe. He was still tied up, and I wrapped my arms around him as best I could. "I love you, Wrythe."

Before Wrythe could respond, the Devil clapped his hands, and I was no longer in Demonland.

OceanofPDF.com

"YOU MUST BE ALICE."

Her voice was warm, and as I turned, I saw a lovely angel with a smile that filled the room. "I am," I said softly, forcing myself not to cry. But Wrythe? I already missed him. My heart ached, and all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry. My ring still rested on the counter in my bathroom. I hoped Wrythe found it and would keep it safe. Fury burned deep in my center, and I wanted nothing more than to slay some rachet demons.

But I was in the angel realm. Here, I wouldn't find any evil.

"You're safe," the woman said.

"Thank you." I would tough this out since it was part of the Trials. Even the angels were willing to work with the Devil if it was to their benefit. Kade said his superiors believed I had something to do with a prophecy, and they wanted me to come to the angel realm.

Well, here I am, I thought darkly.

The angel came forward. Her skin was dark, and her hair was black and curled tightly around her head. Eyes the color of the setting sun, a combination of orange or yellow or both and deep red lips stood out on her heart-shaped face. She was probably half a foot shorter than me, and her wings were black except the ends, which were the same color as her eyes. Similarly, she wore a black uniform like mine. "I am Tillie." She held out her hand.

I gripped her forearm the way Dark Moth's greeted each other. Confusion formed on her brow, but only for a moment before she smiled and returned my greeting. "It's good to meet you," I said, hoping that sounded true.

Tillie gave me a radiant smile. "Your effort is appreciated, but I know you are engaged to be married to the king of the Moths and

would rather be with your betrothed." She released my arm and went over to a stark white table where two glasses and a pitcher were filled with a clear liquid. I guessed it was water.

I gave the room a quick perusal. Everything was white, including the walls, the ceiling, the floor, even the furniture. Thankfully there were accents of oranges and yellows to break up the monotony.

After she'd poured us each a glass, she handed one to me. "Drink," she said.

"Thank you." I smelled it. There was a hint of something sweet, and I sipped. It was water, but the most delicious water I'd ever tasted. And I realized I was parched. Before I could stop myself, I drank the whole glass. "That is delicious water," I said, wishing I had more.

"It comes from Rymi Cascades on the other side of the realm." She sipped hers before placing it back on the table. "Would you like to see some of our realm before I take you to meet Raphael?"

I forced myself not to shrug. "That would be great." My father demanded I be here. I might as well make the most of it. Because the sooner I figured out what it meant to be an angel, the sooner I could return to Wrythe.

And then you must complete the third trial, I thought, trying to figure out what it could possibly mean that I would have to give up the most precious part of myself to save someone I love. No answers came, and I pushed those contemplations away.

Tillie took my glass and set it on the table next to hers before walking to a door. Once it was open, she held it for me. I peeked out and into a glorious green meadow filled with white flowers. In the distance and beyond the field was a tall golden gate with two enormous doors. On either side of the gate stood angels with all-white wings dressed in a white uniform.

I stepped out and noticed under my feet was a shimmering golden path that led to the gate. The air was the same as inside the room.

Neither cold nor hot, but just right. As quietly as possible, I breathed in through my nose curious what the angel realm smelled like. Demonland always held a hint of sulfur. Here all I could smell was the flowers on either side of the path. They were light and sweet like honey.

"Right this way," Tillie said, coming to stand beside me.

I kept time with her while we walked as I studied my surroundings.

"You're nineteen, right?" she asked.

I didn't understand why my age mattered when it occurred to me, she was just trying to make conversation.

Calming myself, I bit the inside of my cheek. "Yes," I finally said. "I had my birthday a couple of weeks ago." I turned back to see how far we'd come and saw the building we'd come from was just the size of the room I met her in. "What do you call that place?" I asked, pointing back at the building.

"That is a Welcome Station. In the angel realm, there are four," she said pleasantly. "When do you intend to marry the Moth king?" She was back to asking casual questions.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "We didn't really have the chance to talk about anything beyond the proposal." Talking about Wrythe was like a knife stabbing me through the heart as I bled out anguish.

"Well, after you spend some time here, you might change your mind anyway."

My hands became fists at my side. "Highly unlikely, given how much I love him," I said through clenched teeth.

She didn't respond because we arrived at the tall, double gates. The angels standing on either side of the door held a spear in one hand. On their breast pocket was an insignia of a pair of angel wings with SA overlapping them.

"SA?" I asked, curious. Several words, including a few curses with

the letter S came to mind but I kept them to myself.

“Seraph Academy,” she said, flicking her hand.

Immediately the angels opened the gates.

Beyond the gate was what looked like an enormous building, like the skyscrapers in big cities like New York, except these were all white. “Why is the academy protected?” I asked, thinking guards and protection were wasted here.

“It’s important to give extra protection to those angels still learning. The fence keeps the students safe from everything else,” she said as she walked through into the courtyard.

I followed as the quiet of the land beyond the gates gave way to the shouts and laughter of dozens of angels. Some were chasing each other through the air in a flying game of tag. Others sat together on the grass, their wings tucked away.

They all stopped what they were doing and stared like I was the new animal at the zoo.

I didn’t like the feeling. Not one bit. “Why am I here? I have no intention of attending school,” I hissed and debated whether I could be outside the gates before anyone got a good look at me. The thought of going to more classes and all that went with schooling made me sick inside. I was a teacher, not a freaking student. Those days were over.

“But you must,” Tillie said. “Otherwise, how will you learn what you need to about your angelic half.”

I didn’t want to make a scene, but it wasn’t happening. If the angels wanted me to learn about that part of myself, they would have to find another way. “No,” I said, crossing my arms, defensive.

We nearly reached the closest building. The bottom floor was almost entirely made of glass, and I could see angels inside, though their wings weren’t visible. All around me, angels stopped what they were doing. Some whispered and pointed. My eyes flicked back and forth, studying them, desperate to disappear.

“Let’s go talk to Raphael,” she said and began walking faster. She didn’t like to be the center of attention any more than I did.

“Fine.” I kept my teeth clenched together, wishing I was anywhere but here.

Inside the building, angels were hurrying to get to wherever they had to be. Some looked at me, but most were too intent on where they were going. A few had their wings out, the feathered edges fluttering as they went.

Tillie walked up to the long, white desk and stopped in front of a man with stark white hair and silver wings. “We’re here to see Raphael,” she said.

The man flicked his gaze to me before making a sour face. “What is this about? Archangel Raphael is very busy today.”

“This is Alice Blackburn. He will want to speak with her,” Tillie insisted, leaning on the counter.

At my name, the angel’s eyes got wide. “Absolutely.” He stood and disappeared through a door directly behind him.

Tillie turned. “I need to get back to my Station. You shouldn’t have to wait too long.” She started for the door and turned. “It was nice to meet you, Alice. Good luck.” Then she went through the doors and lifted into the air.

I watched as she dodged through the group of kids playing tag before landing in front of the gate. I wondered at that. Why didn’t she just fly over? The answer came when someone knocked a ball in the direction. It appeared it would go over the fence, but instead, it hit an invisible force that incinerated the ball.

“Super,” I whispered, turning back to the desk to wait for the white-haired man to return.

Tillie was right. I didn’t have to wait long. He returned with another angel with pasty skin, broad shoulders, and a uniform the same color as mine and Tillie’s.

“Welcome, Alice,” he said, though he didn’t sound very welcoming. On his back, he carried a great sword. “If you will come with me.” He eyed me like I was a menial rat and didn’t wait as he started passed the common area and toward what looked like elevators.

I mean, I shouldn’t have been surprised. In Demonland, we had elevators, why not in the angel realm? Angelland? I wanted to laugh at my joke, but the warrior angel gave me a look that said one false move, and there’d be a fight. So I kept it to myself.

On the ride up, we didn’t speak, and I took the opportunity to check out the walls. They looked like they were padded, and I touched one to verity. Yep, padded.

The elevator was faster than the one in Demonland, and before I had much of a change, the doors opened on the top floor.

“Right this way,” the warrior said.

I decided to make conversation the way Tillie had. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” he grumbled.

Fine, I thought.

We arrived at another door, which I guessed must be the entrance to Raphael’s office. The warrior knocked once and then turned, so he stood to the right of the door, looking straight ahead, as though I wasn’t even there.

“Come in, Alice,” the voice on the other side of the door said.

For some reason, his words gave me the chills.

The warrior opened the door and pushed it aside. “Go on then,” he snapped.

I swallowed, keeping my hands loose, determined not to let this Raphael see that I was nervous.

The plan was going great. There was a large white desk with an equally sizable white chair. The back of it was to me, so I couldn’t see

the archangel. Twin chairs were on my side of the desk, but I had no reason to sit.

“Thank you for having me,” I said, raising an eyebrow curious about why the angel wasn’t facing me.

Slowly he spun around.

And a scream caught in my throat.

OceanofPDF.com

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" I asked, thinking perhaps I wasn't really in the angel realm but in a nightmare. Before me was a man who looked exactly like my father. The only difference was his hair color. My dad's hair was black. This man had white hair.

He wore a white suit and clasped his hands together in the same way my dad did, and though he wasn't seated on a throne, he might as well have been.

The man gave me an oily smile, and I thought I might be sick.

"You can see the similarities between your father and myself, I take it," he said and sounded familiar.

Um, yeah, that was an understatement. "Definitely," I said, trying to keep it together. "Are you my father?" The question sounded preposterous, but I had to ask.

"No, but I am the Devil's brother." He pushed back his chair and went to stand at the floor to ceiling windows behind it.

I touched my cheeks, thinking it felt like he'd slapped me. "How is that possible?" My hands became fists, and I felt my demon power ignite within. If the Devil were playing, he would quickly find out I wasn't in the mood.

"Come, Alice," he said, waving me over to stand beside him.

Carefully, I moved, feeling the knife in my boot as well as the demon orb. When I was close, he held out his hand and took hold of my arm. "You must have heard of some of the stories," he said.

I couldn't look at the man but stared out the window. The grounds beyond were breathtaking. In the far distance, the sun was setting, the sky painted in lavenders and blues with hues of oranges and yellows near the water. Closer to us were a dozen white buildings, but they were interspersed with lots of greenery, including trees and flowers

and grass. What made the scene most beautiful though, were the angels. They flew everywhere. Some soared while others dipped and weaved. Each angel's wings were slightly different, unique to them, and they filled the sky and the area below with beautiful colors. I tried to recall ever learning about the Devil having a twin brother. “I don’t think so,” I finally said.

“Well, then your education is highly lacking. Wrythe should be ashamed of himself.” He glanced over at me, putting his hands behind his back.

I didn’t appreciate him speaking about Wrythe so disrespectfully. In the last year, Wrythe and I had several discussions about changing the new trainees' curriculum. Adjustments were happening, but it was a slow process. “I learned what was necessary.”

“I disagree,” he snapped. “You don’t even know the story of how the Devil came to be.” He went around his desk to a sideboard and poured himself a drink. Then offered me one.

If it were more of that water, I was interested but shook my head anyway out of spite. “Then tell me,” I returned. “Tell me all of it. That’s why I’m here to learn what it means to be an angel. If that includes the story of how the Devil became the Devil, then I’m ready to listen.” Everything about this angel irked me, which wasn’t all that different than how I felt about my father.

Raphael let out a heavy sigh. “How many years were you in Demonland before becoming a Dark Moth?”

I had a feeling he already knew the answer. “A lot,” I replied through gritted teeth.

“And yet you think I can just sit you down and show you everything about the angel half of yourself in one night?” He went back over to his desk but didn’t sit. Instead, he placed his hands on the slick surface but kept his eyes on me, waiting.

The truth is, that was what I hoped. I already wanted to be done here. “I guess not,” I said. “But I refuse to attend classes. I’m not a

child," I said.

"You are still a child. Nineteen is nothing compared to eternity. And you have a lot to learn." He adjusted some papers before dropping them into a white tray. "Classes have ended for the next two months for our *regular* students. But there is a teacher…" he paused, tilting his head to one side, his eyes roaming over me like he worried about how I would react. "He will be teaching a few students during the break. They come with interesting pasts like you." He sat down and took out a piece of white paper.

Delinquents, I thought. We occasionally had those in Demonland as well. Those few who couldn't get along with others or were continually starting fights and various other reasons. Wrythe would have them be taught separately, always willing to give them a second chance. Usually, they made it too.

Raphael wrote something down. "I think that is exactly where you should be." He smiled for the first time, then tore off the paper and held it out.

"Maybe you aren't hearing me," I said, trying to keep calm, but my demon power was there, ready to strike if necessary. "I will not take any classes."

Raphael kept the smile on his face, but it was easy to see it didn't reach his eyes as he came around to stand directly in front of me. A silver-white power began to ripple around him. He was taller than I was, and he looked down on me like he intended to kill me right then and there. The power oozed from him, and at once, his pearl-white wings appeared. They hovered above and to the sides of him, placing me in the shadow of them.

My demon power wanted to come forth, but it was as though Raphael had somehow dampened it. The other part of me—the angel part of myself roared to life—and I felt it push out of my center. If it was a fight he was after, then so be it. But I didn't know how to use my angelic power, and before it could fully manifest, it fizzled.

“I don’t think you’re hearing me, Alice. You will do as I say. You will attend the classes with the other students until I say otherwise. Do I make myself clear?” He enunciated each word with malice.

I thought he could kill me in a blink at the self-righteous haughtiness rolling off him. Though I didn’t want to cow to this man, I didn’t have a choice. “Yes, I believe you do.” I crossed my arms. Raphael may be an archangel, but it seemed to me that he was exactly like his brother. An evil demon.

“Good.” His wings vanished with a snap, and my insides jumped at the sound. “You’ll go with Deacon down to the front desk,” he went on. “There, you will give this note to Gneth, and he’ll get you set up.” We went back around to the other side of his desk. “That’ll be all.” He waved me away with the flick of a hand. Then sat in his chair and spun around, so he once again looked out the window.

Slowly, I went to the door, thinking that the angels were supposed to possess the opposite of the demons. Where we had wrath, there would be forgiveness. Humility instead of pride. Charity over greed. Kindness in place of envy. Diligence above sloth. Chastity, instead of lust and temperance, took the place of gluttony. In the small amount of time I’d been here, the only kindness I’d seen was from Tillie. Everyone else acted just like the Moths.

“And Alice,” Raphael said as soon as I touched the door handle.

“What?” I glanced back, but he was still facing away from me.

“Live up to your heritage, or you will find yourself stripped of all of your powers and living with the other angel rats before you have the chance to finish the final Trial.” He did turn around then. “I can’t imagine Wrythe would want you then.” His oily smile returned.

Inside I was reeling, primarily since he’d used my word for menial demons against me. Calling the angels without powers rats felt too coincidental. For a quick moment, I wondered if this were real. It made more sense that I was in some sort of elaborate fantasy or dream that the Devil concocted. At the thought, I pinched myself in hopes of

waking, but it was no use.

Grinding my teeth, I held my tongue against all of the foul words I wanted to shout at the archangel. Brusquely, I opened the door and closed it softly behind me once I was out in the hall. Relieved, I glanced at the warrior. “You’re Deacon?”

“That’s right,” he said, working not to smirk. Obviously, he’d heard what Raphael said.

“Great, well, I guess I’m supposed to go back down to speak with Gneth.” I kept my voice even though I was nearly boiling with rage.

“Right this way.”

I followed him to the elevator. We rode down in silence. At the desk, I gave Gneth the note. He studied it a moment before disappearing behind the door once again. This time when he returned, it was with a female angel. Her wings were brown, and the tips were red like they’d been dipped in blood. It was a bit off-putting but no more so than the red tinge to her eyes. Her skin was light and covered in freckles, and she had the pinkest lips. Surprisingly, the look wasn’t bad on her. It worked.

“This is Catherine. She will show you where to meet in the morning for your first class and then take you to your room and get you set up with all the necessities.”

“Great. Thank you,” I said, no longer feeling in control of my life.

Gneth didn’t bother with a response and returned to his chair, busying himself with whatever had to be done.

Deacon didn’t bother to say another word before disappearing behind the door.

Catherine came around and gave me a wisp of a smile. “Follow me,” she said.

Rolling my shoulders back, I let her lead me across the main entry area to the back of the building. From there, we went outside. Once again, I found it strange there wasn’t a change in temperature. This

was the direction Raphael had been watching, and I wondered if he saw me now. If so, I refused to let him know how he'd gotten to me and how alone I felt and kept my back straight and my head high.

"You'll have your own room since most of the angels are gone for the break," Catherine said. She didn't seem to feel any of the tension I did. "You're so lucky," she added. "I share a room with three other angels, and we're constantly bumping wings or getting on each other's nerves."

I figured she was trying to make me feel better but didn't say anything since luck was not a word I'd use to describe my situation. "I guess so."

Directly in front of us loomed another skyscraper. Catherine veered to the left, heading to a building half the size of the one in the center. "These are the female dormitories, and you'll be on the main floor."

"Do you know anything about my instructor?" I asked, hoping to get prepared for what lay ahead tomorrow.

She shook her head. "Only gossip, which isn't even that much. Until recently, he spent most of his time down in the human realm." Catherine stopped, glancing around to verify we were alone. "How does it feel to be part of the biggest prophecy ever written?"

Not again. "I'm pretty sure it isn't about me," I said, wary. A prophecy conversation didn't thrill me in the slightest. But then again, she might be able to tell me more. "With those things, it could literally be about anyone."

That seemed to please her, and she clasped her hands together. "That was my thought too," she said, a strange smile contorting her sweet face. "Who knows. Maybe it could even be about me." A shadow fell across her face. "Are you hungry?" She shook her head and appeared to be debating something internally.

"Not really," I admitted, and changed the subject. "So, my teacher is chayot, then?" I didn't know much except what I'd learned in the journal Heathcliff gave me.

She shrugged. “Beats me.” She stopped in front of a door and unlocked it by pressing some buttons above the handle. When the lock clicked, she turned. “I will say that while most chayot spend their time in the human realm, from what I’ve heard, that isn’t this guy.” She paused and pushed open the door.

I went inside. The room had four white walls as well as a ceiling and floor. A bed, dresser, closet, and a small bathroom off the entry. Basic. The room reminded me of the one I had in Demonland. The coloring was different, but that was it.

“There are towels and toiletries in the bathroom,” she indicated with one hand. “Your uniforms are hanging in the closet, and underthings are in the drawers.” She looked around the room. “I’ll have some dinner brought to you after I show you where you’ll be meeting tomorrow if that’s alright.”

“Sounds great.” I crossed my arms and waited for her to exit so I could follow.

Her shoulders dropped with relief. “The food here is excellent. Our cook is amazing.”

That was debatable. No one could be better than the cook in Demonland, but I kept that to myself.

Catherine told me the code to get into my dorm room before we left and headed over to the large building in the middle of the dorms. On the way, she explained the structure to the right was the men’s dorms and that all of my classes would be held in the large building we were heading to.

Inside this building was set up the same as the first one with a desk upon entering and an angel behind it doing busy work. This one acknowledged Catherine before we rode the elevator up to the top floor and walked the length of the all-white hall until we reached the door on the other side. She opened it to reveal a set of stairs going up.

“These will take you to the roof, but most angels fly.” Then she

glanced at my back and took in my absence of wings.

I forced myself not to get embarrassed. Kade had said there might be hope for me to have a pair of my own, but none had appeared yet. And probably never would.

We took the stairs up to the roof. Catherine was breathing heavily when we exited. She bent over to catch her breath. “I’m not used to all the walking,” she admitted.

Did she want me to apologize? It wasn’t happening. I walked over to the closest edge and was about to glance over when two angels shot up, barely missing me. They were two females, and they were fighting, their power rolling off them as they punched and kicked, slashed and dove. One held a blade in her hand while the other had a whip. Both weapons glowed with their angel power as though they were extensions of the angels themselves.

I watched in awe, thinking it was like a dance until one of them noticed me. “Stop,” she commanded.

Surprisingly, the other obeyed and followed her gaze, so they were both staring me down. The first, an angel with silver hair and wings and eyes to match, flew down until she landed a few feet away.

Catherine flew to my side. “Let’s get out of here,” she said, taking my elbow.

I allowed her to steer me, but the silver-haired angel was suddenly in front of us, a sneer of her face. The other angel with black hair and lavender wings with lime green ends landed beside her. She leaned back, her wings folding. “Look at her, Leia, she has no wings.”

“Another rat for us to play with, Veronica.” She kept her wings spread as though she were trying to scare me.

I crossed my arms. “Sure, I’ll play,” I said, rolling my eyes. If they thought I was nothing more than a lowly rat, they were wrong.

“Oooh, she’s feisty.” Veronica turned her blade as though she intended to cut me.

It was a bit overwhelming. I expected since this was the angel realm for more light, acceptance, well basically goodness. So far, I was feeling none of that. “What’s with all of the hostility?” I asked, unable to help myself. But I was preparing too, my power growing within.

“I’m sorry, Alice,” Catherine whispered. “We’ve had a lot of changes in the realm lately, and most of them haven’t been for the better.” She raised her chin defiantly at Leia and Veronica. “We don’t want any trouble,” she said.

“Shut up, kitty cat. No one cares what you think,” Leia said, shoving Catherine. Then she focused her hostility in my direction. “Alice, huh?” Leia asked like my name meant something to her. “I’ve heard about you. You’re the daughter of the Devil and a Fallen archangel.” She flicked her whip, and there was a crack right beside my head.

In a flash, I grabbed the tip of the whip and wrapped it around my fist. “Don’t do that again,” I hissed, keeping my voice low. I was madder than hell after speaking with Raphael. Not to mention, I didn’t want to be here. So for this jerk to try and start something with me? Well, I wasn’t going to have it.

Veronica lunged for me, but I flung some of my demon power at her, sending her back until she hit the door and fell to the ground. There was a dent, and I felt smug about it. Veronica screamed out in pain and rolled to her knees. One of her wings was at an odd angle. “Make her pay,” she said, still clinging to her little knife.

Leia worked to yank the whip away, but I held on, pressing my demon power down through her whip and into her hand. She yelped, letting go, and I took the opportunity to make the weapon my own.

Before that moment, I hadn’t thought about sending my demon power into my weapon, but since I’d seen them doing it with their angel powers, I decided to give it a try. Deep red power rolled off me and into the whip. I’d tried the weapon once or twice and was adept. It just had never been my weapon of choice. Now though… I cracked

it.

Leia stepped back, fear in her eyes.

Catherine stood off to my left, unsure of what to do.

And Veronica moaned, obviously still in pain. “When I heal,” she began.

I snapped the whip again, cutting her off.

“Alice, that is enough!”

OceanofPDF.com

HIS VOICE CAME FROM BEHIND, and I froze as familiarity rolled through my veins. But that was impossible. He was dead.

Slowly, I turned, unsure what I would see. But it was as I suspected. Kade was there, flying toward me. “Are you real?” I asked, dropping the whip. My demon power was forgotten and dissolved, replaced by disbelief. How was it possible? For the second trial, I chose for Kade to die. Yet, there he was.

It felt like I was turned inside out. My breathing became rapid, and I fought to catch my breath. Everything I believed over the last year, all the pain I suffered, and the guilt I harbored… it’d been for nothing.

Because Kade was alive!

He landed without a sound looking as gloriously handsome as ever. Longish blond hair whipped around his head. Eyes green as emeralds were surrounded by long dark lashes. His white wings were still tinged with green, the same color as his eyes. They beat lightly behind him. “As real as you are,” he said, his head tilted to one side like he questioned my sanity.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, I forgot about everything else and ran to him, flinging my arms around his neck. “I can’t believe it.” Tears filled my eyes and fell onto his white shirt. “You’re here. You’re really here.” I held him tight, enjoying the cinnamon scent of him as all of my tamped down love and need broke through the barrier and rushed out.

Instead of returning my embrace, Kade stood there stiffly, without moving.

I missed you so much, I said into his mind.

There was no response.

“Kade?” I pushed back so I could see his face. “What’s the matter? Are you mad I chose you instead of Wrythe?” But that’s what he wanted me to do. He had specifically said I must choose him.

Extricating himself from my grasp, he adjusted his shirt, wiping at it like I dirtied him. “You would do well to keep your distance, Alice,” he said quietly. “Physical contact of that nature between student and teacher is not permitted.” His eyes bore into mine like I already failed my first test somehow. Or worse, he’d put me on his crap list.

One of the girls laughed, but I ignored her as pain radiated through my veins like electricity. *Kade,* I tried again.

Stay out of my mind, demon girl, he returned. His jaw clenched like he could physically stop my efforts.

All of the fire, the anger, and the arrogance went out. My shoulders rolled in, and my soul curled up on itself. Because either Kade was too angry with my choice or he honestly didn’t remember who I was. Both possibilities hurt beyond what I thought I could handle.

“And just because you have demon power doesn’t mean you should use it,” he said, his features changing momentarily to disgust. Then he walked over to Veronica and began speaking with her.

I was in shock. “Are you really Kade?” Raphael looked like my father. Was it possible Kade had a twin as well? The words came out sounding as hurt as I felt. Sure, I was with Wrythe now, but Kade and I shared a bond. At least we used to.

He glanced back. “That’s Professor or Professor Everett to you,” he said. “And of course I am. Who else would I be?” He went back to speak with Veronica.

My emotions were a swirling vortex of confusion. On the one hand, I was happy to see that he was actually alive and well. On the other, he didn’t remember me. How was that possible? “You don’t remember we met outside an Arizona club while fighting demons?” As I spoke, a white light emitted from Kade’s hands and into Veronica’s wounded

wings. There were crystal tears in the girl's eyes, but she was still shooting daggers in my direction.

Catherine kept looking from me to Kade and back again, unsure what she should be doing.

And Leia? She'd collected her whip and had it wrapped around her waist like a belt. Smug. That was the only word to describe her. She watched our interchange with glee and intended to use it against me whenever she had the chance.

"And what about at the Mexican restaurant? When I killed the second royal demon after the Trials? You remember that?" My heart raced in my chest, desperate for some indication he knew what I was talking about. But I knew the answer. Somehow when I chose Kade to die in the second trial, he hadn't died, but his memories of me had been erased. And he was different.

"Alice," he said, standing and helping Veronica to her feet as well. "I don't know what you're talking about." Kade shook his head. "Raphael said you would be a difficult student." He raised an eyebrow. "And that you were a little bit mad, but I thought he was overexaggerating." His eyes rested on me, and for the briefest moment, I thought there was a flash of recognition. "Normally, I don't make judgments until I've spent some time with the student, but it turns out, he might be right."

"No," I said, my hands out, pleading. I didn't care that I was making a spectacle of myself. My pride be damned. I needed him to remember me. "I loved you, and you loved me."

At that, Kade's looks of pity changed to anger. "I don't know what you're playing at, but either you stop this nonsense, or I will have to tell Raphael I cannot teach you." He led Veronica over to the edge of the building. Leia went with them, but her eyes never left mine.

I swallowed, wishing I was back in Demonland with Wrythe and Styx and Daya and Wendy. "Sorry," I said, forcing myself to sound contrite. "I must have you mixed up with someone else." I shoved

down my feelings and stomped on them. No more showing weakness in front of these angels. “You’re going to be my teacher, then?”

“If you’re done with this nonsense and willing to make an effort,” he said, and his face softened. “Then yes, I’ll be your teacher along with Veronica’s and Leia’s as well as two more.” He put his hands on his hips.

Leia and Veronica shared a look.

Double crap! “I look forward to being taught by you,” I said.

He didn’t seem convinced but didn’t voice that feeling. “Return to your rooms. All of you. We will meet up here at eight in the morning.” He took to the air. “Don’t be late.” The last part, he said, looking only at me.

“Can’t wait,” I said, cringing internally.

Whatever Kade did to Veronica’s hurt wing, it was better, and she took to the sky, same as Leia. When they were gone, Catherine came over. “Come on, I’ll show you where the cafeteria is on the way to your room.” I was about to tell her I didn’t want to eat there, but she went on. “I’ll have some food sent over,” she added.

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Thank you, Catherine.” As I went down the stairs to the elevator and rode down to the main floor, I couldn’t help thinking about my interaction with Kade. At the thought of him being alive, I would get a thrill of excitement. The next moment my heart would break because he didn’t remember me.

The cafeteria was on the main floor on the opposite side of the main entrance, in the direction of the male dorms. It was an enormous room with an enormously high ceiling made wholly of glass. After Catherine told me the times for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, she walked me back to my room.

“Sorry,” I said, feeling like I should apologize. “I thought I knew him.” I gritted my teeth together. “Obviously I made a mistake.”

“That happens to all of us sometimes,” she said and patted me on the arm. “I’m sorry too. Those girls… I’m older than they are, but

they're just so mean." She shook her head. "I don't like them, nor do I know how to handle them."

I appreciated her honesty. "Thank you for being kind and for all of your help." Recalling the code, I pressed it into the pad, and the lock clicked open.

"Of course." She smiled. "I'll see you around, I'm sure." She started back down the hall.

"We will?" I asked, hopeful before going in.

"Sure. I'm working here for the summer."

Inside, I pushed until the lock clicked, but didn't move. It felt like I hadn't made any progress at all. Like the last year and a half had been for nothing. Sure, I was in a new place—the angel realm. And I had the opportunity to learn how to use that part of myself, which should've been great, but all I felt was sad.

Homesick.

"Wrythe," I whispered.

OceanofPDF.com

AFTER CLOSING the curtains on the window that overlooked the common area outside, I showered and changed into white shorts and a tank top. On the bedside table sat a book titled: ***Angels 101***. I flipped through the pages sending the scent of daisies wafting through the air. I decided I might as well start reading.

In the beginning, the book began, and I sighed. I so wasn't in the mood, but according to my father, it had to be done. So I read and read and read until someone knocked on my door.

Thrilled at the possibility of a distraction, I ran over and peeked out. A silver cart with a tray of food and a glass of clear liquid sat on top. Glancing both ways to thank whoever brought it, I saw the blip of a white angel wing with green edges before it disappeared around the corner. My pulse quickened. "Kade," I called out softly.

He didn't appear.

Schooling my desires, I lifted the tray off the cart and took it inside my room. The plate was filled with bright fruits and vegetables, though I couldn't place any of them. Each bite I put in my mouth was like what I thought joy might taste like. I didn't stop until my plate was clean. The liquid was more of the water Tillie had given me to drink when I first arrived. Once again, when I finished, I longed for more.

With my belly full, I returned the tray to the cart and debated whether I should leave it or return it to the cafeteria. I wasn't necessarily dressed for being out in public but shrugged it off. Mostly everyone was gone anyway.

Barefoot, I wheeled the tray down the hall and out of the girl's dormitory.

Though the sun had set and it was obviously nighttime, there was an abundance of light in the sky thanks to a full moon and billions

upon billions of stars. I had always believed the night sky in Arizona was a sight to behold, but this. This was indescribable in all of its glory. I found myself mesmerized and couldn't look away until my neck started to hurt.

Effortlessly following the path, I made my way to the front door. It was easy to see through the glass doors that no one was at the front desk, and all of the lights were out. It occurred to me the building might be locked, but when I got close enough, the doors slid open, and I walked in. The cafeteria was to the right, and I went that way until I saw the swinging double doors. Pushing the cart through them, I stopped just inside and was surprised to note that it was beyond dark. Regardless of the time of day, there was always a light on in the cafeteria in Demonland. Without light, I stopped, giving my eyes time to adjust since I wasn't familiar enough with the layout to know where I was headed.

Several long moments later, I could make out the tables and chairs' shapes and walked toward the door I believed would lead me to the kitchen. As I wound my way through the sitting area, I debated what Kade would teach us tomorrow and how long I would have to remain in the realm. During my shower and while I got ready, I decided it was better Kade didn't remember me. That meant I was able to entirely give my heart to Wrythe without feeling guilty. And once I returned to Demonland, my king would reap the benefit of my newfound relief.

Before I reached the kitchen door, I heard voices coming from that direction and froze. Two males spoke, and I strained to hear, knowing full well if they turned on the lights they would see me. Part of me wanted to leave the cart and make a run for it, but something told me not to go, but to listen. So, I did leave the tray and carefully snuck closer to the voices so I could understand what they were saying.

"…make sure she dies. I don't believe what the others are saying about the prophecy. It could be any one of us as well as her. She is a disgrace to the angelic race, and the sooner she is no longer taking up

space in the universe, the better," one voice said.

Instantly, I knew it was Raphael and that he was talking about me. The archangel wanted me dead. How very un-angel like, not that this place was anything like what I imagined it would be.

"But what if she is the one the prophecy is speaking of? If she dies, that will be to our detriment."

Kade's voice! At least he didn't want to kill me.

"It's all lies meant to keep us down and at war with one another. The prophecy hasn't come to pass in a thousand years. And this girl?" Raphael scoffed. "Even if the prophecy is real, she isn't the one."

"I'm sure you're right, and if that's the case, then she'll fail on her own merits without the need for such drastic measures," Kade said.

"She doesn't deserve to live, but don't underestimate her. Your memories of her were wiped, but hear me when I tell you she won your heart once already. Given time, I have a feeling she might do it again." Raphael sounded so condescending, I wanted to punch him in the face.

"So you say, but I have a hard time believing it. She's so…" Kade paused, and I found myself gripping my hands into tight fists. "Demonic," he finally finished. "Not my type at all. Besides, I'm taken, and we are to unite on the eve of the next full moon."

Raphael chuckled. "That's right. I meant to congratulate you and Mari. That said, watch out. While we may be angels, we all still possess weaknesses. Alice was yours, and she nearly cost you your wings."

Green light suddenly caught my attention, and I realized my demon powers were skittering along my skin. Weakness! The archangel called me a weakness. I'd show him weakness. Even as I flung the thoughts through my head, I knew that wasn't why my powers had erupted. It was envy. Kade was engaged to be married.

So are you, I thought, but that didn't help.

“I guess,” Kade said. “What would you have me do?”

“Well, I certainly don’t want to tell you how to do your job, but if it were me, I would take her and the others out on a teaching mission to Lava Falls.”

“That’s a dangerous place for angels, and Alice doesn’t even have wings. How would we get there?” Kade sounded irritated.

“Oh, she has wings. I sensed them. First thing in the morning—”

At Raphael’s words, I jerked and banged into the tray, knocking the fork to the ground. “Crap.” Without a backward glance, I sped back the way I came and hurried out of the main building and into the girl’s dorm. Once I was in my room, I leaned against the door, breathing heavily. My mind whirred at all I’d heard.

Raphael wanted me dead. Well, he could join the crowd.

And, he said I had wings.

After turning the lock, I climbed into bed and lay there for hours deliberating over my options. At one point, I hadn’t believed I could be killed except by my father. He could snuff me out of existence with the clap of his hands. It stood to reason an archangel had at least the same amount of power. That reasoning led to questions. If Raphael wanted me dead, why make Kade do it or go through the trouble of having me participate in a teaching mission? Why not just get it over with?

The longer I debated the archangel’s reasons, the clearer my thoughts became. Angels. Demons. They were a lot alike. Sure, demons had their games, but so did the angels. Since I was half demon and half angel, I was lucky enough to be caught up in both worlds.

That knowledge burned through my soul. I was tired of being a pawn in other creatures' games. By the time I fell into a fitful sleep, my destiny had become apparent. No one was going to kill me. Not Kade. Definitely not Raphael. And certainly not my father. I would figure out what it meant to be an angel, and then I would return to Wrythe and the love we had and never give the angelic part of myself

another thought.

In a small recess of my mind came the thought that was exactly what the Devil wanted. I shoved it aside, knowing that I could be the Queen of the Dark Moths without giving in completely to the demon half of myself.

OceanofPDF.com

THE NEXT MORNING, I quickly dressed in my white uniform, thankful my favorite blade, and the demon orb traveled with me into the angel realm. Tucking those in my right boot, I jogged over to the main building and made it up to the roof before the others. Even Kade hadn't arrived yet. While I waited, I casually peered over the edge of the all-white and glass building. I was so high above the ground, it made me dizzy.

"Ready to fly?"

The words startled me, but that wasn't the half of it. With the question came his hands shoving me over the edge. Before I could wrap my brain around it, I was falling, the ground coming at me fast.

My arms and legs flailed as I fought uselessly to stop myself.

"Let go of your fears and allow yourself to fly."

I decided if I lived, I would kill Kade. But as the ground got closer, I wondered if it were possible to survive such a fall.

Ten feet.

Five feet.

I closed my eyes and braced myself, but my body never struck.

Carefully, I peeled my eyes open and was surprised to note I was hovering a foot off the ground. So close, I could see a white spider making its way through the lush green grass. A light wind brushed against my hair, and I glanced back and let out a squeal.

Wings beat at my back. They were golden near my body and lightened to white at the tips, except the very edges which were blue like my eyes. As though I accidentally dipped them in sky blue ink.

"I do have wings." A gurgle of excitement out of my throat. Even though I couldn't stand Raphael, he told the truth. I tried to touch them while still in the air and immediately regretted my decision as I

spun a moment before floundering forward, landing face-first on the cobblestone path. That was going to leave a mark. Good thing, I healed quickly.

Behind me came a deep rumble of laughter. “Very graceful,” he said.

My face got hot as I jumped to my feet and whirled around. “You pushed me,” I spat, charging Kade. It still surprised me how easily my body reacted to him. All I wanted to do was hold him, but I fought against that. The Kade I knew was no more. This guy dared to shove me off a freaking building. The Kade I knew would never have done that. I got in his face determined to push him, but he sidestepped me easily, using his wings to sail out of my reach.

“It was necessary.” He landed a few feet away. “And look at your wings. They’re amazing.”

At the look on his face, I settled. Because at that moment, he looked like the Kade I knew and loved. But as soon as it was there, it vanished. “You could’ve warned me first,” I said flatly. “That would’ve been the polite thing to do.”

“Think you can fly up to the top of the building?” he asked, ignoring my comment.

“I can try,” I replied, unsure how to make them go. But I looked up and thought about reaching the top of the building. And before I knew it, my feet were off the ground. “I’m flying.” For some reason, a vision of Abernathy came to mind. Flying with him had been exciting. He’d told me everything wasn’t as it seemed, and he’d been right.

Part of me wanted to look back and witness my wings beating at my back, but I worried that I would send myself spiraling again and didn’t want that to happen. Instead, I caught my reflection in the shiny white walls interspersed with the windows and saw a glimpse of what I looked like. My wings stood out against my back in the reflection of the glass. They were amazing.

Once I reached the top, I had another issue. How to land. Veronica,

Leia, and two guys were there, watching me like a was a bizarre attraction at the circus.

Kade landed in front of them but turned to face me. “You’re doing great,” he said. “Think about your landing.”

Did I detect a hint of worry in his expression? Probably not. I tried to slow, but kept going, and knew before it happened that I would run right into Kade. My feet kicked into his chest, and he let out a groan but held on, and I dropped, sending him and me to the ground, so I was on top of him. Working to untangle myself and my wings, I pushed off his chest but caught hold of his gaze.

His green eyes were so intense. I glanced at his lips, licking mine as they twitched with need. His cinnamon scent filled the air around us. I was dazzled by him. And then I remembered Wrythe and quickly stood, before falling back, sitting on my wings. I winced and wanted to cry out in pain. Instead, I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from doing so in front of strangers and Kade.

Veronica, Leia, and the guys were laughing, and I couldn’t blame them. I probably looked like an idiot. More than that, they were in shock. Was it because my wings appeared? I figured that was it.

“Quiet,” Kade barked and stood before coming over and putting out his hand. “That was a good first try,” he said when I took hold of his grasp. At our touch, there was a physical and emotional spark. I flinched again, yanking my hand from his and getting myself to my feet on my own.

He glanced at his hand before turning away, focusing on the other students. “Today, you’ll be teamed in groups of two. Veronica and Thomas. Leia and Jax.”

That left me a loner, but that was fine. Whatever. School sucked! It was another reminder that I didn’t want to be in this place.

“Alice and I will be paired together,” Kade said, interrupting my thoughts.

My heart hammered inside my chest. *Great,* I shouted internally,

trying to be sarcastic, but my body hummed with enthusiasm.

It will be, he responded.

I glanced over, but he wasn't looking my way. He was focused on the other four students. "I'm going to present you with a challenge. You will be given a slip of paper. On it will be your first clue. The team to get back here with the item you are hunting wins a prize."

"If you and Alice are a team, that isn't fair," Leia snapped, her eyes wary as she studied my wings.

"Yeah," Veronica added.

The guys nodded their agreement but didn't speak. I had yet to hear two words from them, which I found strange. I studied the two of them. Thomas was tall and rail-thin with hair the same fawn brown as his wings. Except at the ends, which were freckled brown and white. His eyes thankfully were brown, though they were the palest shade I'd ever seen, almost taupe.

Jax's skin was dark and he had cream wings with orange tips. His hair was cut close to his head, and he had one orange eye color, and the other was blue. I found that very interesting and wanted to know his story.

When he noticed me staring, he smiled, showing off very straight and very white teeth.

I smiled back. Maybe I had a friend in the group, after all.

Then I remembered Kade and Raphael's conversation, and my smile vanished. The archangel wanted Kade to take us to Lava Falls, but Kade said it was too dangerous. Perhaps he intended only to take me there.

"Alice just got her wings. She and I will not be participating in the challenge." He smiled, giving each of them an inspiring look. "You'll be going against each other."

At those words, the attitude of the girls changed, and excitement buzzed between them.

“What’s the prize?” Veronica asked.

I watched Kade’s jaw clench and unclench. “It’s a surprise.” He took two slips of paper from one pocket and hand one to Veronica and the other to Jax before lifting his arms high above his head.

They quickly unfolded the paper and read it, whispering to their team member. It was nice that they weren’t focused on me.

“On your mark. Get set. Go.” Kade dropped his arms.

The four of them ran to the edge of the building and jumped into the air.

I watched them fly briefly, thinking how cool it was. I might be half-demon at heart, but my wings… well, that was a bonus and certainly a part of myself I wouldn’t give up. I thought about what Wrythe would say when he saw them. He would like them, wouldn’t he?

“What are you thinking about?” Kade asked, suddenly beside me.

We were so close, his arm brushed against mine.

I forced myself not to react. “Nothing,” I said. Then added, “I’m not opposed to my wings if I can figure out how to use them without making a fool of myself.”

He bumped into me a soft smile on his lips. “I swear your first time flying was better than mine.”

I looked over, trying to figure him out. At that moment, he almost reminded me of the Kade I fell in love with. “Maybe, but you were probably five when you learned. I’m nineteen.”

“Three, but yeah, I guess that’s true.” He chuckled, and the smile he gave me pierced deep into my heart.

What was happening? Raphael told him he wanted me dead. Kade’s sudden kindness was throwing me off. Sort of like how the guards are super nice and accommodating to death row inmates on the day of their scheduled expiration date. Is that what he was doing? I gritted my teeth. I wouldn’t make it easy on him.

Refusing to give him the satisfaction of killing me on his terms, I took off running until I reached the edge of the building and jumped, hoping my wings would know what to do. Rather quickly, I knew what I'd done was a bad idea. I was falling, and my wings were of no help. They hung above me like a broken parachute.

I glanced up as Kade jumped from the roof, his wings out at his sides briefly before folding them against his back and angled toward me like a bullet in a gun. His face was a mask of intensity until he caught me in his arms just as his wings popped out behind him, and we were no longer falling but floating.

Don't you ever do that again, he said into my mind. His angry eyes held mine captive. I couldn't even breathe.

"You're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?" I asked softly, and I looked away, staring at my hands.

Where did you get that idea? Again he spoke into my mind.

I heard you and Raphael talking in the cafeteria last night. He doesn't believe I'm the one from the prophecy, not that I blame him. But I do take offense that he wants me killed. I figured Kade would take us to the roof again to give me instructions about flying without falling. Instead, he lifted us higher into the air, and we flew languidly over the school grounds toward the fence.

Raphael is arrogant and has systematically turned the Seraph Academy against those angels who are different. More than once, since I became a teacher, I've complained about how he encourages mistreatment. After last night, I couldn't take his insolence another moment and reported him. A smile spread over his face. *When they learned he wanted you killed, they immediately had Raphael removed from his position at the school and made me the new headmaster. Only his secretary knows of the changes. But the higher-ups intend to announce it to the whole realm sometime today.*

I appreciated his willingness to stand up for the underdogs, but we were getting closer to the fence, and I started to worry. "Won't we be

incinerated?" I asked, pointing at the sky in front of us. We were only ten feet away from what I guessed was an invisible forcefield of some kind.

"Now that the Seraph Academy is on break, the protective powers have been dropped." He tore his gaze from mine and focused ahead.

"Thank you," I whispered, gazing up at his face.

"For what?" he asked, confused.

"Saving me from myself," I admitted, thinking how stupid it was that I just jumped off the building like that. I mean, I probably wouldn't have died, but the repairs to my body would've taken time.

"You're welcome." He didn't elaborate, nor did he speak, just continued in a straight line, heading where I had no idea.

More than once, I wanted to ask our destination, but each time I went to open my mouth, I changed my mind. From the air, I could see a thick overgrowth of trees. The tops ranged in shades and colors from ruby red to midnight blue and sunflower yellow to sherbet orange. But that wasn't what was so unusual. It was that the trees grew in a tight, straight line. Kade flew along the tops of them as though they were the shaft of an arrow, directing us where to go.

"How come the trees grow in such a straight line?" I added, thinking maybe it was because we were in the angelic realm, and everything was perfect. Though as soon as I thought it, I knew that wasn't true.

"They are a hologram, surrounding an electrical barrier used to keep the different classes of angels from crossing into the other's lands," he admitted.

"Oh," was all I said. I'd read about the different classes. There were four. The Fallen were angels who, for whatever reason, had their powers stripped from them. Their job in the realm was to serve the other angels in any capacity. Many had jobs just like humans did and worked for wages. This would've been where my mom dwelled if she lived in the angel realm. I doubted they would let her, though, since

she was still a vampire, not that she would want to. Professor Pops wasn't here. Next was the Chayot. They were angels given the task of guarding the human race and protecting them from supernaturals. Many lived here during their training, and once they were retired. Then there was the Protestas. These were the most interesting. They held similar positions to the Tracker demons. Considered mid-level angels, they were the realm's warriors and called upon to protect, teach, and fight for light and good. At least that was what the book said. Finally, there were archangels. All it had said about them was that they were royalty in the angel realm. I took that to mean they did whatever they wanted, the same as the royal demons did.

"There are four holographic forests just as there are four entries into the realm, four entries into the academy and four Welcome Stations for when an angel crosses over," Kade went on, shaking me from my thoughts.

I couldn't help but snort. Since arriving in this realm, most I met were anything but welcoming.

He glanced at me, but I didn't meet his eyes, choosing to focus on what lay ahead and enjoy the wind in my hair and the warmth from the sun on my face. "I know you're not one of the Fallen since you have your angelic power. And I know you aren't a Chayot either. That leaves either a Protestas or Archangel, but which one?" I asked. I was guessing Protestas but wasn't sure.

He didn't respond right away, and that was okay. I waited patiently, checking out the landscape below. On either side of the hologram were more buildings. All of them were similar to those in the academy—exponentially tall and white with glass. However, I noted that the ones on the left of us were more dreary and dilapidated, much of the glass missing from the buildings.

"You did some reading," he said and winked.

"Protestas are considered mid-level angels, right?"

He smiled. "That's right, and that's what I am…" He let his voice

trail off. “Or it was until last night. Now, I guess I’m considered an archangel, same as you.”

I didn’t have a good response. He was saying I was an archangel because that’s what my mom was when she was the angel of death. “Congrats, I guess,” I finally said.

He didn’t respond but continued flying. More than once, I thought about telling him to put me down but decided against it since I didn’t know where we were going, and my flying still left a lot to be desired. Falling into an electric barrier didn’t sound pleasant but would undoubtedly be my fate if left on my own. I needed instruction first.

In the distance were several waterfalls. Some were large and roared over the edge of the jagged cliff while the smaller ones trickled down more lazily.

This wasn’t Lava Falls, and I was grateful. My guess was this was where the angels retrieved their water. This was the Rymi Cascades.

He flew us up above the most significant fall and then landed on a grassy area. “Ready to learn how to fly?”

OceanofPDF.com

"DEPENDS," I said, taking a moment to get my equilibrium back and literally ruffling my feathers. I didn't even know how I was doing it. Like my body just somehow naturally knew they needed to be fluffed.

Kade chuckled. "On what?" He tucked his wings onto his back.

I crossed my arms. "Whether you intend to push me off the edge or show me how these blasted things work," I said, touching one of my wings. They were so soft, the feathers like that of a blanket.

"I'm not going to push you off," he said, stepping into my space and uncrossing my arms.

At his touch, I felt another punch of energy and hitched my breath.

He must've felt it too because he pulled back. I relaxed, looking past him to our surroundings where flowed a river probably twenty feet across in width. Trees grew along the edges, some large and others looking new. As I followed the water with my gaze, I saw it disappeared into the fog. Squinting, I worked to see what lay beyond, but it was too thick.

"Is this the Rymi Cascades?" I asked, turning my focus back to him.

"It is, but where did you hear the name?"

I couldn't tell whether he was surprised or upset, and I blinked several times to get a handle on myself. "Tillie told me that's where the water for this realm comes from." I shrugged, hoping I wasn't getting her into trouble.

My answer seemed to satisfy him. "You're correct. This is the Falls. And it's true, our water comes from here but more than that, this is the spot where we teach our fledglings to fly. It's considered a sacred place. You should be honored to be here."

Okay? I hadn't asked him to bring me here. There was no sense mentioning that, though. Kade was the new headmaster, after all. "I absolutely do," I said, re-crossing my arms.

"Good. Let's get to your first lesson." He spread out his arms as well as his wings. The tips went beyond the length of his arms and kept going until each wing more than doubled the expanse of his arms. They were massive. Before that moment, I hadn't realized just how big they were. "Now, I want you to do the same. Stretch out your wings as far as they can go. It helps for some fledglings to stretch out their arms first like this. Usually, their wings will naturally follow."

"Got it." I extended my arms as Kade watched.

"Keep going and reach your fingers like you're trying to grab something beyond your grasp." He walked around to my back so I could no longer see him, but I did as he said.

"Like this?" I pretended to be reaching for Wrythe, and a blast of sorrow filled my breast.

"That's right," he said.

But nothing was happening. My blasted wings remained flat against my back. I tried again, gritting my teeth with my will. One of my wings twitched and then the other, but didn't move beyond that. "What am I doing wrong?" I asked, feeling frustrated, dropping my hands to my sides.

"Nothing. Your wings have been dormant for your whole life. They just need a little encouragement. Do you mind if I touch them?"

I glanced over my shoulder and licked my lips, remembering when he touched my back at the spots where my wings should be. The feeling had been sensual.

But now things were different.

Kade didn't even know who I was or that I loved him, and he loved me.

"Go ahead," I said and swallowed, preparing for what his touch

would do to my body.

He ran his fingers along the top of one, stretching it as he went.

There was no desire. No hot need. And I was surprised. It did feel good, but not like before. I didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. Truthfully, I felt a bit of both. And as I accepted the knowledge and sank into my feelings, something happened. My wings began to open.

Slowly at first.

Kade continued to trail his fingers along the one wing, but he was no longer pulling. I was doing it all by myself. When they were fully stretched, I felt different. A shiver of change rushed from the top of my head down to my toes. For the first time wholly myself. As much as I hated to admit it, my dad was right. There was a part of me I wasn't entirely aware of. But being an angel was a part of me, and it was important I nurtured it regardless.

As I focused on the feelings within, they intensified.

"Very good," Kade said, but he sounded far away.

My emotions grew more potent, like spreading my wings fully had allowed the angel power to spread through me as well. It'd been closed off all this time, but like a broken dam, it rushed through me, golden liquid filling my veins. I shivered again and felt the marks on my hands burn white-hot.

A quick glance at them showed me they had changed from black to gold. How odd, I thought.

"Relax, Alice." Kade was in front of me once again, lifting my chin so he could meet my eyes. "Deep breaths."

I wanted to relax and breathe. I really did, but now that the angelic part of myself had been freed, I didn't know how to control it, and the golden-white in my veins suddenly burst from my body, like I was a flashlight that had just been turned on. It pulsed out of me and into Kade.

He was sent flying backward as though a wrecking ball swung into him. Into the mist, he went. I wanted to be scared and feel worried about Kade, but all I felt was joy, strength, and peace. I glanced at myself, feeling like I could do anything and would be unstoppable.

After a few moments, I relaxed slightly, and the light dimmed.

My feet lifted off the ground, and I circled several times before feeling confident enough to fly off the cliff's edge. I went over and peeked at the raging waterfall. It roared like it was angry at something, and I couldn't for the life of me decide what it had to be upset about.

"Alice," Kade shouted.

I spun around just as he dove into me.

Surprised, I grabbed hold of him.

His eyes grew, and for a moment, he looked like he was in pain or scared. "I've got you," he said.

The dimming light flared to life, more reliable than before, and I thought that perhaps the sun was an angel unable to control her power. I didn't believe the energy within would ever subside, but then he leaned in and kissed me.

And everything went quiet.

The light faded back into my soul, and it was just Kade and me.

I kissed him back with all of the hurt and sadness and fear and guilt and… the love I had for him. There was gratitude too. That he was alive and that I was in his arms. Now everything would be okay.

Too soon, he released me. Though I was sad that his lips were no longer on mine, I was also beyond happy. "Kade," I said his name softly, studying his emerald green eyes.

Instead of seeing love or even recognition, there was only relief. "I'm sorry," he said. "But it was the only thing I could think to do." He flew me over to the grassy cliff where we'd started from and let me go.

“You still don’t remember me, do you?” The pain cut through my heart like a knife, and I looked away, desperate to leave this place and return to Wrythe and Demonland. At least there, I knew who my friends were, and I felt loved.

“I do,” he said as he walked over to the edge and peered over.

Had I heard him correctly? “You remember me and our time in Demonland?” I couldn’t believe it. Because if he remembered, then why wasn’t he treating me so indifferently?

“I shouldn’t, but yes, I remember everything.” Kade shoved his hands into the front pockets of his white pants. “The first time we met. The way your lips touched mine when we kissed. The way you felt in my arms…” His voice trailed off. “Last night,” he went on. “It all came back to me.” He turned so he could see my eyes. “The first and second Trials. That you chose for me to be the one to die.” He squeezed his eyes shut.

My heart was going to beat out of my chest. “I… didn’t know what else to do,” I finally said.

“You were in a horrible predicament.” He glanced down at his hands. “And you can see, I didn’t die, though apparently my memory of our time together was wiped until recently.” He shook his head, letting out a bitter laugh. “In some ways, I was better off not knowing how much I loved you.”

“I loved you too,” I admitted, dropping to the ground in front of him.

He landed as well, and we were so close I could smell his cinnamon scent. “Loved?” he asked his hands on my arms.

“Love,” I corrected. I couldn’t deny it. My love for him had been pushed aside because I believed him dead. Now that he remembered me? My love for him rushed through my heart.

He kissed me again, this time with such hunger, it was like our bodies became one. As before, there was no deciphering where I ended, and he began. I wrapped my arms around his hips and pulled

him against me. He groaned, his fingers tangling in my hair and down my back to the place where my wings protruded. And I shuddered, biting his bottom lip eagerly.

“My sweet Alice,” he whispered against my mouth. “But…” His voice trailed off.

I knew why. My freaking brain went rational too. Kade was engaged. More than that so was I. And I loved Wrythe too. Desperately.

Kade noticed the way my body stiffened, and his hands went lax. “I’m engaged,” he said and stepped back off the cliff, his wings holding him steady.

This time I felt relief in his absence. Now I could think straight. “Me too,” I said, clasping my fingers together into one fist so I wouldn’t run over and kiss him again.

“Wrythe,” he said, his teeth clenched.

“Mari,” I returned, trying to keep my knees from shaking.

Kade exhaled sharply, crossing his arms, so his muscles flexed. “Not to mention, you’re a student at the Seraph Academy, and I am the new headmaster. Our being together would not be accepted in any way.”

“And I can’t hurt Wrythe. I love him too much.” I lifted into the air and turned, desperate for more distance between Kade and me. I flew quickly along the bank of the river until I reached the mist.

Kade had followed me. “You loved him even when we were together, didn’t you?”

I dropped my head to my chest. “Yes,” I admitted. “Though it was different, more like the way I loved a friend.” I didn’t tell him about seeing my future with Wrythe. It had been that continual vision that allowed my feelings to shift into the kind of love I felt for him now. I turned and studied Kade.

“Was?” he asked, and I saw the hurt there.

I wanted to say something that would make us both feel better, but I couldn't think of anything, so I just nodded. "I'm in love with Wrythe."

He licked his lips and reached out to take my hands. "And I love Mari." He looked over my shoulder a moment. "Let's have this one day together. You and me, and no one else. We'll be the couple we were meant to be before everything happened." His eyes found mine. "When the sun goes down tonight, that will be it. We're over. And we will go back to teacher and student. Two people engaged and in love with other people."

The sane part of my brain said it was a bad idea, but the rest of me was entirely on board, and I flew into his arms, kissing him like he was the very air I breathed.

OceanofPDF.com

OUR NEED for each other accelerated quickly until Kade began to unzip my uniform. A pink hue glittered along my skin as my lust for the angel in front of me intensified.

He studied me, anticipation in his features. “I want you, Alice,” he said, his voice deep and throaty.

At that moment, an image of Wrythe on one knee, proposing filled my mind. His eyes shining with love and hope. I couldn’t do anything that would jeopardize what Wrythe and I had together. One day be damned. I would always know what I did. “I can’t,” I said, placing my hands over Kade’s to halt his progress of removing my clothes.

His other hand caressed my cheek. “Okay,” he said, his eyes on my swollen lips. Without another word, he turned and sprinted until he reached the edge and dove.

“Kade.” I chased after him before using my wings to lift into the air. He was there, near the roaring waterfall, a wicked smile on his face. “Let’s get back. You have the basics of flying down. Not that I had to really teach you anything. You’re a natural.” His smile grew. “Truly remarkable,” he added.

“Thanks,” I said, grateful he wasn’t mad that I'd changed my mind. It wouldn’t have mattered whether he was upset or not. Wrythe was mine now, and I was his. Was I growing as a person? I wanted to think so, but the ache low in my belly begged to differ.

Kade headed toward the straight holographic trees and the electric barrier they housed. I fell in beside him. *Why do you think there’s a spark between us?* In the air, I felt safe enough to ask the question.

You and I, he began and then stopped.

We are soul mates, I said, understanding flowing over my skin like the air around us.

Yes, that's true in the sense that our souls together create their own kind of magic. But that doesn't mean soul mates are always meant to be together. That's a human fallacy. You love Wrythe?

Yes, I answered without hesitation.

And I love Mari. They complete us in a way that makes us better. They are more than our soul mates; they are our true loves. Because we chose them and they picked us instead of letting a physical attraction or our bodies make the decision. He shook his head. "But the two of us together?" He glanced at me, his eyes filled with fiery desire.

I knew what he meant, and my body responded with a lick of lust as my demon power pushed to be released. Grinding my teeth, I forced it away. "Agreed," I said, glad we didn't take our temptation to the next level. No good would've come of it. "How did you and Mari meet?" I asked, desperate to change the subject.

He blew out his breath, recognizing what I was trying to do. "Funny enough, it was also during a battle."

"Really?" That surprised me for two reasons. The first was the similarities between our meeting and his and Mari's. The second? "There is war in the angel realm?" Angels were supposed to have been created from the seven virtues. War was a demonic issue.

"You might as well find out now since, at some point, you'll be asked to contribute to future missions." Kade peeled to the right.

Though I was confused, I followed. "Find out what?"

"In the last year, a war has raged between the Fallen and the protestas."

I considered his words, understanding better why the Fallen section looked rundown. How could they—without their powers—have a chance against mid-level angels. That would be like the menial demons going against the trackers. "Won't the Fallen be wiped out?" I asked, my eyes taking in the plumes of smoke and broken glass below us.

"You're worried about them?" Kade shook his head. "Your ability

to call forth any of the seven virtues is still so remarkable."

If he said so. It was just part of me. I didn't find it remarkable or noteworthy. In Demonland, I was always the weird one.

"Though they don't have powers the way you and I do, they still possess their angel essence. I'm sure you detected something similar in your mother." He tilted his wings down and to the right.

I did the same with my wings. "But what use is the essence?" I thought it was just the residue of having been an angel at one point.

"Nothing, if each Fallen is fighting alone, but if they put their collective essence together, all sorts of consequences can occur."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What could they possibly have to fight about?" Surely having been born of forgiveness, humility, charity, kindness, diligence, chastity, or temperance would predetermine them for peace. Didn't war go against their very natures? "I don't understand," I added.

He gave me a wry smile. "You have all of these fixed beliefs about the angel realm. You probably thought it was all harps playing, choirs singing, and joyous speaking as we sat around eating grapes and talking philosophically?"

"Well, I mean, yeah. Angels are made up of the seven virtues like demons have the seven deadly sins." I thought my hypothesis was logical.

"True, but you've seen for yourself that even demons can choose more than what they were born to be." He raised one eyebrow. "It's the same with angels. More so with the Fallen, but all of us fall prey to the seven deadly sins."

I instinctively knew he was talking about what we'd almost done. Given into our lust and the desires of our flesh. I nodded. "I guess," I said, thinking nothing was ever easy.

"And to your question about why they're fighting. It's simple. Pride. Greed. Sloth. Envy. Wrath. Gluttony. Lust. Those attributes are in the Fallen to a much greater degree than the rest of us, but as you

know, even archangels can have those weaknesses." He pursed his lips. "As for this latest fight. It's because the leader of the Fallen, a man named Scott, believes he was robbed when he was stripped of his powers and thinks that if he slaughters enough angels, the higher-ups will take notice and reconsider." He laughed bitterly. "Scott couldn't be more wrong, but he won't listen to reason."

"What happens when an angel dies? I mean, can we die?"

"In a manner of speaking. Angels who suffer the Final Death either in the human realm or in the angel realm become spirits and must dwell Elsewhere and are no longer allowed near Earth."

For some reason, that knowledge caused me to shudder. "But when the Devil killed you, obviously it wasn't the Final Death."

"No, he didn't kill me at all. Just sent me back to the angel realm and had all of my memories of you removed." His jaw flexed like he had more to say on the subject, but didn't have it in him. "I'm sorry," he said.

I let out a quivering breath. "You did the best you could." I swallowed. "So did I. There's nothing to be sorry for." But I couldn't help thinking about what might've happened if he came back for me. Or if I knew he was still alive. Without a doubt, I wouldn't have given my heart to Wrythe. I may have been broken, but the hope would've kept me patient for when Kade and I found each other again.

"Still," he said, and I saw in his eyes he was thinking about the same scenarios running through my head.

But that wasn't how things played out. We both found and fell in love with other people. And I couldn't lessen the adoration I felt for Wrythe. That wasn't fair to him or to me.

A fire just to the right of the electric barrier separating the Fallen from the Protestas caught my attention. Before I could comment on it, there was an explosion.

Kade flew back to make sure I was okay, but I darted around him and headed down toward the danger, hoping no one was hurt, but

guessing some were.

“Stop,” Kade shouted, grabbing hold of my arm.

I slowed and turned, using my wings to keep in place. “Someone might be wounded or worse,” I said, as urgency begged me to hurry.

“You’re probably right, but there’s nothing to be done. If you go down there, the Fallen will attack you.” He held out his hands, pleading.

“I don’t care,” I said, and took off, landing near a blackened building with an enormous chunk of the bottom floor missing. Smoke and fire rose up all around me, and for the briefest moment, I thought this felt more like the Devil’s territory than the angel realm.

Painted in bright silver on the side of the building was a set of broken angel wings with the tag: *No pity here*. Distracted, I tried to imagine what it meant until Kade landed beside me.

He was angry. I saw it on his face. The new headmaster and my one time boyfriend wanted to drag me out of there by my wings.

I ignored him, turning away and began searching the rubble for possible survivors. “Hello?” I called, hoping someone would answer.

To the right, I saw an arm poking out from under a piece of a building. I ran over and felt for a pulse. Heathcliff would've been so proud, and then he’d probably chew me out. I was making bad choices by coming here. I felt it then.

Death and misery everywhere, but it was more than that. A furious animosity hung in the air. I was about to tell Kade he was right and that we should go when a group of four women and three men climbed out of the mangled building. Their faces were masks wrath. There was no kindness or forgiveness anywhere in or on them.

In their hands, they carried various deadly weapons. One held a fist-sized rock in each hand, and another held a long sword. Still, another had a bow and arrow. All of them were aimed at Kade.

He saw them the same time I did and shewed me away with one

hand telling me to go, but I'd be damned if I left him. I was constantly getting him into messes. This time, I would make sure he escaped unscathed. No Final Death for him. Not even a scratch.

"What do we have here?" the man asked. He looked like a Dark Moth standing at seven feet tall with dark hair and gray eyes. He had his shoulder-length hair tucked behind his ears and held a longsword in one hand like it weighed nothing. He was also familiar, and I racked my brain, trying to figure out how I recognized him.

Now that I was there, I felt out of place, but I flew over to Kade.

"You are infuriating. I forgot that until this moment," Kade hissed, but didn't look my direction.

"Who's this?" the woman standing beside the man asked, her eyes raking over my wings like she could rip them from my back and claim them for herself.

"My name is Alice," I said, hoping to sound calm. "I saw the explosion and wanted to see if I could help."

The woman whose hair was the color of dried hay laughed. "She wants to help. Isn't that cute, Scott?"

The others joined in her laughter.

"I'll let her help," one of the men said, his eyes raking down my body.

For some reason, comfortable confidence settled into my bones. This, I understood. They were intent on taking my life. I could feel it. Let them try. "I guess we'll be going then," I said, moving to stand in front of Kade.

"Look at her trying to protect him," a woman spat.

Their laughter increased, and Kade rested a hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged him off. It was like I was in the training room once again about to battle the menial demons for a chance to go above ground. As I usually did, I would win this time as well.

A whisper of kindness brushed against the wrath burning just

below the surface of my skin. Perhaps I could talk them out of what they intended. “If you don’t require assistance, we will be on our way,” I said, repeating myself.

As soon as I finished speaking, the one holding the bow shot an arrow. As though it happened in slow motion, my demon power shook to life, but with it came the angelic equivalent, which gave me the clarity to see the arrow, if left unchecked, would strike me in between the eyes. She was a good shot. I leaned to one side and grabbed the shaft out of the air.

Shocked, I glanced at it, surprised by my speed. I’d always been faster than regular humans, but these were angels, even if they were Fallen. Before I could really consider what I’d done, another woman plucked a knife from her boot and threw it. As before, time slowed, and I caught it in my other hand. Dropping the arrow, I flipped the blade and aimed it at her. “Stop this instant,” I said. “Or our encounter will end badly for you.” Then I caught the gaze of each of the others. “I don’t want to hurt you. I came down here to be of assistance, but I’ll leave.”

Kade shifted behind me, and I flinched. He’d told me not to come down here. He’d been right.

“We’ll leave,” I amended.

The man who looked like a Dark Moth pulled something that reminded me of an old cell phone from his front pocket and pressed a red button.

Immediately, there was a crackle from above.

The sound of thunder filled the air as several jolts of electricity lit up across the sky.

“You won’t be going anywhere,” he said, studying me intently.

“Damn,” I heard Kade whisper.

I had to agree.

“I feel like I know you,” the man said, coming closer. “You said

your name is Alice." His eyes roamed my body, landing on my hands and the now golden marks that told what I was. With a snap, they returned to my eyes. "You're a Dark Moth," he said. Then he glanced at my wings. "How is this possible?" His sword dipped momentarily.

That was my chance. I needed to get the button from him and release the forcefield. He noticed what I looked at and smiled.

"I never would've believed it, but my brother was right. You are half demon and half angel, a true abomination." His features were alight with wonder. "Not to mention those wings," he added.

What about my wings? I spoke into my mind thinking of Kade, but he didn't respond.

"Isn't that what the prophecy—" the woman began, but Scott backhanded her, sending her to the ground.

"She's meant to help us," another of the men said.

"Shut up," Scott said and glared the man into silence. "Now," he said and turned over his hand, so I could see he had the mark of the Dark Moth. "You see? I was like you with angelic blood as well as demon. Perhaps you met my brother, Seth?"

And that's when I knew how I knew him. "I did meet him," I said, swallowing. Was that why he was able to get in and out of Demonland? The angelic part of him. I knew it was like that for Kade.

"And you didn't die?" Scott smiled. "Not sure whether I should be impressed with you or disappointed with my twin."

I had at least a dozen questions but now wasn't the time. "Obviously," I said, feeling even more relaxed than I had a moment before. The angel and demon powers within swirled, so I felt perfectly balanced.

"If we give you the Final Death, the higher-ups will have to listen to us." Scott glanced back at his group. A few looked like they wanted to argue, but finally, they all agreed. "I am sorry, Alice, but the seven virtues are of no use today. Not in Demonland, not in the human realm, and certainly not here in the angel realm. I'm afraid your

kindness will be your demise."

Was the man, right? The answer was a blatant no. My blade was still in my boot, but I didn't need it. In fact, I would take the longsword from Scott and use it against him.

The eight of them surrounded Kade and me.

"Lose the wings," Kade whispered. "They'll try to hurt you by hurting them." His vanished from his back.

I sent mine away with a thought. Somehow that made my angelic power seem more vivid. Scott came at me, his sword swinging like he intended to chop my head clean off in one motion. Quicker than I believed I could move, I lay back like I was going to do a backbend, but kept my body parallel to the ground. The sword sailed by. When Scott's hand was at eye level, I lifted one hand and struck his wrist, knocking the sword free as my power flung from my other hand and into Scott, sending him hurling back, taking two others with him.

While the sword was in the middle of falling, I grabbed the hilt out of the air and righted myself, swinging the blade around and lunging as a woman came at me.

I had the upper hand, and I could've killed her, but something held me back. Literally.

It felt like the sword. Then I heard it whisper into my mind. *Killing them is not the answer.*

I tried to drop the blade like it burned me, but the blasted thing wouldn't let go, clinging to me like it possessed its own set of hands.

No, Alice, I am meant to be your weapon.

What the hell? I responded.

And I heard giggling that sort of sounded like a bell tinkling. Kind of similar to the way Daya sounded when she laughed. *No need to curse, Alice. I am part of the prophecy the same as you. Now that we are together, it will come to pass.* She exhaled as though she were finally happy after thousands of years of waiting.

While I was still trying to figure out what was happening between me and the sword, an arrow sank into my shoulder, and I cried out.

One of the women knocked me to the ground.

Another kicked me in the side while a man yanked the arrow from my shoulder so he could stab me again. I glanced over and saw Kade was on the ground a little ways off. There was a jagged cut on one cheek, and blood oozed from the wound. His eyes were closed.

Please don't be dead, I pled as all seven of the deadly sins, and the virtues came together inside me. I felt like I was going to explode and closed my eyes. There was a snap, followed by a pop and then silence. I opened my eyes and watched as the eight of them were struck by my power and knocked out, possibly mortally wounded, but I wasn't sure.

Sounds returned, and I was breathing heavily. The smell of dust and blood and fire stung my nose.

Ripping the sword from my hand, I ran over to Kade, flinging myself to the ground beside him. "Hey," I said, slapping his cheek lightly, my face directly above his. "You're not allowed to be dead. Don't make me kiss *you* this time," I said, trying to make light of the situation, but inside I was frightened. If Kade were dead, I would never forgive myself.

His eyes blinked open. Glorious emerald green. "I'm alive," he whispered, then turned his head to the side and coughed. Blood tinged his bottom lip.

A sob escaped my throat. "Thank goodness." I kissed him on the forehead. "Can you stand?"

"Probably," he said, sitting up, but clutching at his ribs.

"Hang on. I'll get us out of here." I ran over to Scott and stuck my hand into his pocket, searching for the thing that would turn off the forcefield. My fingers clamped hold of it, and I pulled it out, ripping his pocket in the process.

Scott moaned, and his eyes flickered open. He grabbed hold of my arm. "It was the Dark Moths who murdered me while in the human

realm. They thought me too powerful to live. After that first death, I was allowed to come here, but this place isn't the same." He rubbed his lips together. "I think Farrah is right. You are who the prophecy spoke about, and you are meant to unite all of the angels. No more division, but all of us equal." His gray eyes found mine. "Don't let them use you…" he began, and then he was gone.

Was that his Final Death? I had no idea and didn't have the time to find out. Kade was wounded, and I needed to help him. I pressed the button, and the electric currents zipped across the sky once before they vanished. Shoving the thing in my pocket, I made my way over to Kade.

"Can you fly?"

"I think so," he said, trying again to sit.

It was then I noticed the sword was next to me on the ground. Like it had crawled over. Freaking thing. I helped Kade stand. His wings popped out, and he took to the air.

I released mine as well and was about to fly when I heard crying.

Please don't leave me, Alice. I was made for you. Please.

Fine. I plucked the strange sword off the ground and then jumped into the air, using my wings to fly faster so I could catch up with Kade.

When he noticed what I was carrying, he lifted his brows. "A souvenir?"

I debated whether to tell him the truth but just shrugged. "I like it is all."

I like you too, Alice.

OceanofPDF.com

I WENT with Kade to the Healing Center, but he suggested I didn't go inside. After saying goodbye, I went back to the Seraph Academy, landing just outside the doors to the girls' dormitory.

"I saw you with him."

I flinched that she snuck up on me so easily. The sword still hanging at my side as I turned. It was Catherine, the angel who'd helped me find my way around yesterday. Now, though, her face was twisted with rage. "Saw me with who?" I asked calmly.

"Kade. When they find out what the two of you were doing, they will strip Kade of his powers and make him live in the Fallen sector." She gave me a slippery smile. "That'll serve him right after what he did to my dad." She narrowed her eyes. "Just thought you should know."

I'll take care of her, the sword said, her little voice vicious.

No.

"Catherine, whatever you think you saw, it wasn't…" I didn't know how to lie. Kade and I had been making out. There was no misreading that. "Please don't say anything," I tried, hoping I sounded contrite enough.

She crossed her arms, and some of the anger left her eyes. "I'll keep it to myself for now, but you owe me." She glanced down at the sword. "And you already have a weapon. You are definitely the Devil's daughter."

I didn't like that everyone knew more about me than I knew about them. "Who's your father?" I asked.

Instead of answering, she opened her brown wings with the blood-red ends and took to the sky.

"Well, crap!" I hurried to my room to hide the sword under my

bed. Carrying it to the cafeteria seemed like a bad idea. When the sword realized I was about to leave her, she began to cry. “I can’t take you with me. People will think I’m looking for a fight,” I said, feeling weird talking to the sword out loud. *What do you want me to do?*

She began to shimmer and lifted into the air. Before my eyes, she transformed from a giant longsword into twin golden bracelets before wrapping herself around my wrists in the shape of my Dark Moth marks. *There,* she said. *Now everyone will think you’re wearing bracelets and nothing more.*

Alright. I started for the door, but before I opened it, I stopped. *Do you have a name?*

No angel has ever asked me such a question. She began to cry.

I forced myself not to grumble. She was a very emotional weapon. *Well, do you?* I asked, trying to keep the irritation from showing in my voice.

I am called Faithkeeper, she said, sniffling.

Nice. I’ll call you Faith.

A nickname already. Thank you, Alice. Her voice had a dreamy quality to it, and I smiled.

You’re welcome. I made my way down the hall and to over to the main building. The cafeteria was mostly empty, and I was grateful. After collecting my food, in the same way, I got it in Demonland, I tried to decide where to sit. Leia, Veronica, Thomas, and Jax were seated together at a table nearby.

Should I sit with them?

Ugh, I hated school!

Jax turned and looked at me. “Did you learn how to fly?” he asked, sounding conversational.

I waved my wings slightly and leaped into the air, hovering for a moment in answer.

Their eyes grew wide.

“Impressive,” Veronica said. Then waved me over.

“Since the five of us are going to be a team for the next several weeks, we’d better learn to work together,” Leia said.

“I’d like that,” I admitted, setting my tray on the table in the space between Leia and Jax.

The male angel winked before taking a bite of his green beans. “Your bracelets are cool. Are those the demon marks?” He pointed at the back of my hand.

I was about to correct him. They weren’t my demon marks but the mark of the Dark Moth.

“They are wicked,” Thomas added.

I decided not to lose my cool. I’d already done that once today. “Yes,” I said, and picked up my sandwich, biting into it. “Thanks,” I added after I swallowed a bite and took a drink. The water was so refreshing.

For the next twenty minutes, I listened to them talk about the assignment Kade gave them and who won. I wanted to ask what the winners received, but a message sounded over the loudspeaker.

“To all angels throughout the realm,” a female voice intoned. “I am pleased to announce that our beloved teacher, Kade Everett, will be the next headmaster of the Seraph Academy. When you see him, please offer your congratulations on receiving this great honor.”

Relief washed through me. Catherine hadn’t told anyone about Kade and me. At least not yet.

There was a crackling noise, and then the room went silent.

“Wow, that was fast,” Thomas said, picking at his fries.

“But Kade is a good teacher?” I asked and picked up my glass, pausing before I took another long drink.

“He’s the best.” Veronica cracked a smile. “And completely hot too. If only he wasn’t engaged.” She batted her lashes. “Don’t you think?” she asked.

My pulse started to race. Did Catherine tell them about Kade and me? I decided to play it smart. “He is very handsome, yes,” I admitted.

“So true. If I didn’t have a serious boyfriend, I might try and make the moves on him,” Leia said, pushing away her tray.

“But he’s off-limits even more so now. Before, it was fun to flirt even though he was engaged. Now though?” Veronica rolled her eyes. “There’s no hope for any of us.”

Thomas and Jax studied their food like it held the secrets to the universe. The discussion was awkward for them.

“But those lips?” Leia went on. “Can you imagine how they would feel—”

Thomas cleared his throat, and the conversation shifted away from Kade and on to other things.

I ate my sandwich as I debated why they were suddenly so friendly. Whether it was because I now had wings or something else, but couldn’t decide how to bring it up. Every once in a while, I would catch them studying my wings and realized they had theirs put away. I thought about putting mine away too because maybe it was a faux pas, kind of like not wearing a hat inside or something. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. “Is there something wrong with my wings?” The words came out more annoyed than I meant.

Thomas physically jumped.

“Should I put them away? It’s because we’re inside, right?” I hated that I sounded so overeager to please these angels I didn’t even know.

“It isn’t that…” Veronica started, giving Leia a sideways glance.

“It is considered polite to put away our wings inside,” she said and glanced down at her napkin. She was folding and unfolding the corner with one hand.

“Sorry about that.” I sent them away.

Leia shook her head. “That isn’t why we’re staring,” she went on

and looked a little self-conscious. “It’s their color.” One side of her mouth lifted and twitched.

“They’re gold,” Veronica said, surprised.

“Is that bad?” It would be just my luck if they were.

“Not at all. It’s only that no other angels in this realm, or that I’ve ever met have gold in their wings. Yellow? Sure. Bronze? Definitely. But gold in unheard of these days.” Veronica forked a piece of fruit and put it in her mouth.

A quick perusal of the table verified what she was saying as fact.

Finally, Tomas spoke up. “Only angels above archangels have gold in their wings.”

“He’s right,” Leia added.

I turned to Jax. He winked, which settled my nerves a little. Maybe it wasn’t so bad?

“They’re awesome is what they are.” Jax reached out like he wanted to pat my arm, but hesitated.

“Really?” My heart fluttered nervously. Again, I was different than the other angels. Kade should’ve told me, so I was prepared. We had been slightly distracted by the making out and then the fight, but still. “Who are these higher-ups?” Kade had mentioned them before too. Or, I guess he’d said his bosses. Had he meant Raphael?

The group glanced at each other, but no one spoke.

Finally, Jax answered. “They don’t dwell in the angel realm, per se, but still know all that is happening here.” He leaned in close. “They are higher than the archangels,” he said in a whisper.

“They live in another realm?” I was confused because weren’t archangels as high as angels could go?

“Basically,” he said.

I wanted to know more but didn’t know which questions to ask to get the answers I was seeking.

Veronica and Leia got up. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Alice.” They

waved goodbye and left the table.

Thomas left soon after.

When it was just Jax and me, he rotated in his seat and faced me.

I searched his eyes, admiring that they were different colors as I waited for him to say what was on his mind.

“What’s it like in Demonland?” he asked, a wispy smile on his lips.

That was the last question I expected him to ask. “Pretty similar to here,” I admitted, still surprised by the similarities of the realms.

“Really?” He was disappointed.

“It’s underground and isn’t nearly as beautiful as this realm, but… the politics are very similar.” I shrugged. “At least there I understood things.” I picked at the bread on my sandwich and waited. There was something more substantial he wanted to talk about. I could feel it.

“That makes sense.” He clasped his hands together and rested them in his lap.

“Were you born here?” I asked, hoping to put him at ease.

“Yes,” he admitted and turned back to his plate. “My father is the archangel Gabriel, and my mother was the angel of death,” he said, sneaking a peek at me.

Surely he wasn’t suggesting that my mom was his mom. I mean, there had to be a new angel of death since my mom no longer had wings. “What’s her name?” I asked, working to keep calm.

“Joanna d’Arc. The human who led the French army against the English in the human realm. The same woman who because a revenant and was tricked into becoming a vampire.” His eyes held mine as he spoke. “Then she became the angel of death—”

“You’re telling me your mother is my mother.” I eked out, the words getting caught in my throat.

That’s amazing, Faith said into my mind.

I’d forgotten she was there. *Is it?*

“We’re half-siblings.” He bit into what appeared to be asparagus

and chewed.

“How? Wha—” Where did I begin? I had a brother. His name was Jax. “Do you hate me?” I don’t know why I asked the question. It was dumb.

“No way. Why would I?” Jax asked, laughing.

“I don’t know. Maybe because your mom is in the human realm, and she’s a vampire again, and that might be my fault?” I didn’t think it was, but what did I know. I picked up my fork tapped it nervously on the table.

Jax rested a hand over mine, stopping the noise. “I don’t blame you for her choices. From what I’ve read, you didn’t even know your mom was alive until a year ago.” He leaned back, a soft smile on his face. “She told me about you, and I hoped someday to meet you.” He ate another asparagus spear. “I think it’s cool.”

I couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled out of me. “I have a brother. That is cool.”

“Right? And I have a sister.”

“Do the others know we’re related?” I was no longer hungry.

“If they do, no one has said anything. I casually asked Leia what she knew about you. She knows what we all do. That you’re the Devil’s daughter as well as the daughter of an archangel. As for me…” He smiled. “She knows even less, which is exactly how I like it.” He wiped his hands on his napkin before tossing it on the tray with his unfinished food.

“Is that good?” I stabbed one of the vegetables in my salad but didn’t eat it.

“I’ve found the less the angels know about me, the better.” He licked his lips. “That thinking comes from the way I was raised. But honestly, if anyone tries hard enough, they can find what they’re looking for.”

“Reveal as necessary,” I said, understanding as I set down my fork.

“That’s my motto.” He stood, picking up his tray. “I’m meeting Thomas for a game of hockey tomorrow after dinner, want to come?”

“Hockey? As in ice hockey?” One of my favorite books had a main character who played the sport, but I’d never seen it in real life. Hell, I’d never even seen ice before.

“Yep, the Academy has a frozen pond behind this building so we can ice skate or play hockey whenever we want.” He smiled. “It’s a lot more fun with wings and no padding added into the mix.”

I laughed. “Thanks,” I said and scooted out my chair. I was done too.

“Sure.” He glanced at my uniform. “It can get a little chilly, so make sure you wear a coat.” He started to walk away. “Hey, Alice?” He glanced back.

I tucked in my chair and lifted my tray. “Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re here and that we get to spend time together.” He flashed his gorgeous smile.

“So am I,” I said, following him over to where we put the trays.

Finished, we walked together out of the building. He went left, with a promise that he would see me tomorrow, and I went right, following the golden path. Inside the dorms, I walked the halls until I reached my room. Then entered the code and went in.

Catherine was sitting on my bed, reading my **Angels 101** book.

When the door closed, she shut the book and threw it on my bed.

I should’ve known she would get in here. She knew the code. That meant I needed to figure out how to change it. Pronto! “What are you doing in my room?” My newly combined powers churned to life.

Let me at her, Faith hissed, slithering along my hand like liquid gold.

“I haven’t told anyone what I saw, and now you need to do something for me,” she said, standing.

That was fast. “What?” I leaned against the wall just past the

bathroom, trying to act calm, but that wasn't how I was feeling.

"There's a weapon I want you to retrieve for me," she began, walking around my room, touching everything.

"Okay," I prodded.

"It's known by many names, but it looks a lot like the sword you held earlier. Last I heard it was in the hands of the leader of the Fallen. But it seems he suffered his Final Death. Any idea of how that happened?"

If she'd seen Kade and I kissing, it stood to reason she'd seen us fight those in the Fallen sector, including Scott. But I decided to play coy.

Faith writhed against my skin, and I tucked my hands behind my back.

"What do you want with the sword?" I asked, instead of answering her question.

"That's none of your business. But tell me, where is the sword you carried earlier today?"

I tried to act nonchalant. "Need to know." I ground my teeth together.

"I think that sword is the one I'm looking for. Give it to me now, and I won't tell anyone about you and the headmaster." She came forward, trying to look intimidating, but it wasn't working.

You can't give her to me. You can't, Faith moaned.

Hush. I had no intention of cowing to Catherine. "I'm sure it wasn't the sword you were looking for," I said. "But tell me about the one you want, and perhaps I can locate it for you." I held my breath, pretending I wasn't bothered by her request.

She crossed her arms, glancing at me from under her long black lashes.

My pulse quickened. Did she already know I had the sword? "What do you want with this sword?" I asked, pushing off the wall and

coming toward her.

You cannot give me to her, Alice. Please. She will use me for evil. Of that, I am certain.

"That is none of your business, but let's just say I will use it as intended."

Talk about vague. "Okay, then what's so special about it? Why can't you just use any sword?"

You must know that a talking sword is special, Faith harrumphed.

"So many questions." She picked up the **Angels 101** book and flipped through the pages until she found the one she was looking for. Then she handed it to me. "Here is the description of the sword, what it does, and why it is special. There is also a picture." She eyed me.

When I took the book from her, Catherine pointed to the sword. It didn't look anything like the one Scott tried to kill me with, but since Faith could shift into bracelets, I was pretty sure she could shift into a lot of different things, which was probably why Catherine wanted it. "I'll see what I can do."

She tilted her head to one side. "Fine." She snapped the book shut and handed it to me. "You have one week to give me what I want." She pushed passed me and went to the door. "And Alice, if you tell anyone or try in any way to get out of this, your secret will be revealed."

It was just her word against mine. Plus, I seriously doubted Kade would back her story up. "Catherine," I began, but she held up a hand.

"Also, I know how you demons work, and you probably think that you'll screw me over since it's my word against yours and Kade's, but I have the pictures to prove it." From her pocket, she removed a device that looked sort of like a watch. She pressed a button and a holographic image of Kade, and I kissing appeared in the space between Catherine and me.

Heat rushed to my face as I watched myself in Kade's arms. If

Wrythe ever saw that? I clenched my hands into fists.

"The two of you?" She peeled her gaze from the image. "Damn hot." She clicked the button, and blessedly, the vision vanished. Then she opened the door. "One week."

Once she was gone, I studied the lock and found a way to change the code. I did that immediately and then took a shower. As the water ran, I leaned against the wall and cried. I missed Daya and Styx, and most of all, I missed Wrythe. Would he understand about Kade and me? The two of us were over, but that hologram? It was horrible. Still, without kissing Kade, there wouldn't be closure. He chose someone else, and so did I. Wrythe. And I loved him.

After the shower, I climbed into bed, exhausted. It'd been a long day.

What are you going to do about Catherine? Faith asked. She sounded tired too. Could swords get tired? She no longer looked like a sword or bracelets but sat on my dresser in the shape of an ordinary, smooth rock.

I don't know. What I want to know is why she wants you? I put my hands behind my head and closed my eyes.

As you've already guessed, I am not your average sword.

"Is that so?" I whispered, trying not to smile.

She hissed. *Yes. I was created when the first angel stepped through into Earth from the eighth world. He was named War. His mate was Peace. Then came the female Pestilence and the male, Health. Followed by Famine and Plenty. Lastly came Death and Life. The first eight. Balance. The Heavenly Harbingers. And I was the original sword.* Faith paused, and I guessed she did it for effect. It worked.

You really are unique, I said.

That I am, she responded before continuing. *In the millennia since the Harbingers arrived, their stories have changed from truth to fiction. That's probably for the best because they are terrifying, though not as much as their creators.*

You've seen their creators? That surprised me.

Oh yes. They created me and gifted me to War. They are like nothing and everything, the beginning, and the end. They can be mist and corporeal. They can be whatever they want. And… She paused.

I waited, but she didn't continue. *What is it, Faith?*

A portion of the creators dwells within me, she finally admitted.

Alright, so you're beyond exceptional, I said, unable to hold in my smile this time.

You know it, she snapped. *For a good millennia, War kept me with him. I was there when he and the others created this realm. After another millennium, he and the others saw what was happening—that though their offspring came from the seven virtues, they also possessed many of the deadly sins. The angels fought among themselves, and war became almost second nature among them. The Seraph Academy was built to cultivate and teach the new angels, making them nearly as human as those in the human realm. The only difference was their angelic powers.*

Are the demons connected to the angels? If the Heavenly Harbingers were opposites, I wondered how they fit in with the demons and the Devil.

The original archangel was the Devil, though he was known as Deckland. War, thinking to give his first creation a symbol of unity, presented Deckland with me.

She sounded sad.

Deckland didn't use me as a symbol of unity but as a harbinger of death, and all he wanted was to escape from this realm. Your father created the first Welcome Station though that wasn't what it was called at the time. When he stepped through the portal, he Fell. Even though he hoped to take me with him, I refused to leave the angel realm, and he had no choice but to leave me.

Holy hell, I said as things suddenly slid into place. My father hadn't sent me here so I could learn about my angel half. Without question, my father sent me here for Faith. He wanted her. Did Faith know

that? *Faith,* I began, but paused, unsure of how to frame my question.

I sense you know the truth. Deckland wants me back, she said, her voice trembling. *Since our connection, I've been pondering the coincidence of it all. Why would the Devil's daughter be half-angel and be the one to find and wield me hours after she arrives? Not only that, but you are the one the prophecy speaks of—*

You believe in the prophecy too? I was so over it. Surely nothing and no one could predict or forecast the future.

Of course, Alice.

What does the prophecy say?

She will rise as with the Harbingers. Child of light and dark. With her, she will bring unity. But fair warning. Unlike the Heavenly Harbingers, she possesses virtues and vice within her soul. If she chooses vice, all will be lost.

Apprehension coursed along my skin like lightning. Hearing Faith say the words was a reminder to my heart. I already knew them but had forgotten.

Alice? Are you okay?

I'm fine, I lied.

Good. Because what I was going to say is this. I don't think your father wants me back so much as he wants you to give me to him. Doing so would pass on the mantle of power, and he would once again rule the angel realm and the realm of demons. Can you imagine? I don't know that anyone could stand against him… except possibly the Creators, and from all I've seen, they don't interfere too often.

I would never give Faith to my father. *I will protect you at all costs.*

Thank you, Alice.

I needed to talk about something else to get my mind off what she'd said. *Did you speak to any of the other angels?*

No! Nor have I shown anyone just how versatile I can be. You are the first since War that I've spoken to.

I wasn't sure whether to feel gratitude or worry that she waited for so long. *Not even Scott?*

Definitely not that awful Fallen leader.

How did you change hands after my father?

The archangel Uriel found me and proceeded to reign. At first benignly, but over time… I'll tell you the most significant thing I've learned.

What's that?

If you allow the need for power to fester, one thing is certain. There will always be blood. She sniffled. *The things I have been made to do. I just can't even tell you.*

I'm sorry, Faith.

Uriel received his Final Death and is no more. Since then, I was passed around and used until I could no longer take it and shut myself off. It wasn't until your hand landed on my hilt that I awakened back to myself.

What a horrible existence. I would take good care of her and treat her well. *I'll do my best to honor you.*

And that is why we are speaking, and I can show you all that I am and can do. She shivered. *You are different even than War. Not even he knew all I am capable of.* She hiccupped and sniffled.

How was that possible? She didn't have a nose? I shook my head. *As though you and I are one,* I said.

I have a secret, she went on.

What is it? I asked, thinking I might already know. There was a similarity between her and me, and Kade and I. Earlier Kade and I talked about soulmates. Before this moment, I believed the word coincided with romance, but now I knew that wasn't true.

You and I are—

"Soulmates," I said, finishing her sentence and rolling onto my side, allowing her sudden joy at my use of the word to run through me. I had a brother and a friend, even if she was just a weapon. And that led me back to Catherine. *If you won't do your thing for just*

anyone, why does Catherine want you so badly?

For the same reason, your father does. Whoever possesses me is given greater authority over others. Without sharing any of my more significant gifts and talents, I naturally enhance the angelic power of the one who wields me. Over the years, I've been called by many names, including Sword of War, Sword of Uriel, Flaming Sword, Burning Stick—not my favorite—Finger of God and more. Only you know my real name.

I'm honored, Faith. Thank you. I yawned, tugging the covers up over my shoulder.

It's as it should be. I'm not sure whether War knows this truth or not, but I was created for you. Goodnight, Alice.

Goodnight.

I thought about all Faith said, until I fell asleep. During the night, I dreamed that angels were operating on my brain. My scalp was peeled back, revealing the blood and sinew under my hair and skin. As I watched them work, I tried to understand what they were saying, but their words didn't compute except one. *Baby*. When I woke in the morning, the dream and that word sat heavy in my heart and made my stomach sick. What did it mean? It had to be my subconscious' way of getting rid of all I'd been through recently. That was it, right?

Shaking the dream away, I dressed, adding the demon orb and my knife to my right white boot. Faith changed into my bracelets while I got dressed. I slipped them on before going to the mirror, where I brushed my hair. At seeing my reflection, I thought of Wrythe.

"I love you, my king. We'll be together again soon," I whispered, wiping at a wayward tear as I went to the door.

I'm sure he loves you too, Faith said.

If I could've hugged her, I would have. She said exactly what I needed to hear. After locking up, I headed to the cafeteria. It was crowded, but I scooted past the other angels like a phantom. No one spoke to me though several glanced over. Trying not to focus on them and what they might be thinking, I grabbed a breakfast sandwich and

left the cafeteria, heading out of the cafeteria. From there, I walked through the grand entryway and went to the back of the building. Outside, I searched for the frozen pond. To my right and behind the cafeteria was a strange structure, but I didn't give it my attention. Instead, I found the frozen pond straight again. Angels would fly and skate, using their wings in such a lovely way, it was like watching a dream. On girl tucked in her pale blue wings as she leaped into the air. Then extended her wings and twirled before landing.

I clapped, and she glanced over, smiling before returning her focus to what she was doing. I went to a bench to sit and eat. Jax was right, though. It was chilly over here, but I liked it.

OceanofPDF.com

INSTEAD OF TAKING the elevator or the stairs to my class on the roof, I flew. I wasn't the first one there. In fact, everyone else was already there and talking to a new angel. She had bubblegum pink hair with matching wings, except the edges which were black.

Jax saw me and waved.

I returned it, glad he really wanted us to get to know one another.

The woman noticed and straightened, coming toward me. "You must be Alice," she said. "I'm Aaryn Grinson, your new teacher."

"It's nice to meet you," I said, trying to ignore how she gawked at my wings.

"I heard about them but had to see for myself," she said, her voice wispy. "They are lovely," she added, licking her pink lips.

"Thank you." I tucked my hands into my pockets, feeling self-conscious. In one swift motion, I noticed the rest of the class was staring at me too.

Take a picture, it lasts longer, I thought.

Faith snickered.

"This morning, I will be testing you for speed and agility," Aaryn began, speaking to the group as she walked over to a silver line pulsing near the opposite edge of the building. "You will start here and fly, following the holographic barrier between the Protestas land and the archangel land until you reach Grace Mountain. There, you will pick up a flag and then return to this point. The first one back will be the team leader for the mission will be going on this afternoon." Her light pink eyes met each of ours. "Are there any questions?"

No one said anything.

"Great. Everyone line up."

Veronica, Leia, Thomas, and Jax went over and took their places

behind the line. I followed but wondered if we were ever going to do any book work. I really wanted to know why I had golden wings and what precisely that meant.

"Get set," Aaryn barked.

I glanced back at my new teacher. She gave me a quick wink. "Go!"

Jax and Veronica were the first in the air, followed by Leia and Thomas.

Flap those golden wings, Faith hollered into my mind. *Hurry! Losing sucks.*

I'm going. I stepped forward, stumbling slightly. For some reason, I was nervous. Thankfully, after yesterday's practice, my wings knew what to do and lifted me into the air.

The direction Kade flew me yesterday was opposite to the way we were going today. For that reason, I was hesitant though the holographic trees were like the other barrier. The land around us was different. The archangel building on the left had a bright silver hue to them while the buildings on the protestas side were strictly white. I'd seen some of that region yesterday as well. The archangel district was so different. Opulent was the word that came to mind, and lush was another. Exquisite flowing gardens surrounded each building with angelic water features. Each building had its own park. There was a central location with silver streets and shining dining establishments without a roof so that a customer could fly in or out. Beyond the center street were more buildings followed by forest, and then what I guessed were the Lava Falls. The molten magma rolled slowly down the side of an enormous volcano. Every once in a while, the interior would sputter and send sprays of boiling hot liquid into the air. At first, I was shocked that the archangels chose such a location. If they were the upper class of the angels, one would think such a danger would've been delegated to the Fallen.

But as I watched another spray of the liquid shoot into the air, one

large cluster sailed higher than the others. When it arced its way down, I thought it might hit a building, but it struck an invisible barrier. From there, it fizzled and changed to gold. That was when I noticed a group of angels surrounding the volcano. When the gold reached the group, the angels picked them up and put them in a basket.

Alice, stop sightseeing. You have a race to win. Don't embarrass me. Faith's voice startled me, and I glanced down and saw I'd veered away from the barrier and into the archangel district. Quickly righting myself, I kicked it into high gear. Jax was the furthest away followed closely by Veronica, Thomas, and then Leia. It almost looked like she wasn't trying.

I zipped past her, causing her silver hair to blow everywhere.

"Hey," she said.

I wanted to keep going but had a thought and looked back. "Leia, are you okay?"

She let out a sob. "Not really, but it's fine. Don't worry about me."

You heard her, Faith said. *Faster!*

Releasing a deep breath, I turned around. "Are you hurt?" I asked when I fell in beside Leia.

"Physically, no, but…" Her bottom lip trembled. "I broke up with my boyfriend last night." Tears filled her eyes.

Relief washed over my soul. That was bad, but at least it wasn't life or death. Or I hoped not. "I'm so sorry, Leia. Is there anything I can do?"

She glanced over and gave me a watery smile. "No, I'm fine. Really. Hurry up. Don't let the rest of them beat you." She flicked her chin, indicating I should keep going.

"Alright." I returned her smile and took off.

Maybe things were going to be different here between me and the others. I hoped so.

Go! Go! Go! Faith chanted.

I banked right and beat my wings hard, raising myself high into the air, going on a gut feeling. I had no idea whether it would work or not, but I decided it wouldn't hurt to try. When I was well above the others, I relaxed a moment, squinting in search of the flags we were supposed to retrieve. They were there, each a different color. Silver for Leia. Lavender for Veronica. Cream for Jax. Brown for Thomas. And gold for me. Against the stark white snow, they stood out. I continued to fly in that direction until I was ready, then angled my body down and closed my wings.

What are you doing? Faith asked, fear in her voice.

I have no idea, I admitted. With my hands at my sides, I felt like a bullet shooting my way toward the flags. The wind rushed against my cheeks, making it hard to see I was going so fast. I pursed my lips together and hoped I wasn't going to regret this.

And I was gaining on the others. In no time, I passed Thomas. In another few seconds, I sailed by Veronica. Jax was nearly at the flags, and I angled my body slightly to pass him. When I went by, I shouted. "Hey, bro," and smiled.

Jax glanced up, surprised, and then a look of horror filled his face.

I didn't understand at first. And when I finally did, it was too late.

This isn't going to end well, Faith said mournfully.

She was right. I opened my wings, jerking myself back, but it still didn't slow me enough, and I sailed past the flags and kept going until I went into the mist and crashed into a snowdrift. It hurt, but not as bad as I expected. What was worse? I was face first in the stuff, my arms and legs buried in snow. Foulest of all? I couldn't move my body. Thankfully my wings were free enough, and I beat them back, trying to pull myself out. The snow was too heavy, and I was getting colder by the second. *This was a bad idea,* I said into my mind.

You think? Faith was upset and pouting.

I thought I would like snow, but my first experience has changed my

mind.

Faith didn't respond.

In the distance, I heard Jax and Veronica calling for me.

I wanted to shout that I was here. Or help me. Or anything.

Fear crept along my spine. What if no one found me?

I was cold. So cold. And I couldn't think straight.

Have you so quickly forgotten who you are? Faith asked in a huff. When I didn't respond, she continued, *You're the freaking Devil's daughter, not to mention the daughter of the Angel of Death. You are a bad a. Now use some of your power and get us out of here!*

Okay. At her words, my power—that was no longer demonic or angelic but a combination of both—erupted inside me. It was liquid gold and sunshine. It grew in my chest and raced along my spine. There was an unfamiliar sound around me until I realized it was the snow melting.

Once again, I beat my wings, using all of my might to pull me from the snow. It worked better than I expected, and I was flung backward and landed on something.

"Oof. Alice," Jax said.

"Sorry." I worked to stand, flapping my wings to get myself off him. When I was on my feet, I turned. Jax was still on his back, his wings out behind him. Veronica was beside him, rubbing her head. Apparently, I knocked them both over.

There was another moan. Thomas was on the other side of Jax.

Had I knocked him over too.

Leia arrived then, a look of confusion on her face. "What happened here?" She put her hands on her hips.

"I— it was an accident," I said, holding one hand out for Jax and the other for Veronica. They took them and stood. Then I went over and helped Thomas up.

"Alice thought she would win by flying like a missile," Jax said,

chuckling, a look of admiration on his face.

“I’m so sorry,” I said again, hoping he and the others could forgive me.

“It was pretty awesome,” Thomas said, running a hand through his whacked-out hair.

“Yeah, up until you crashed, it was pretty great,” Veronica added. Her hair was in a tangle, and I helped her fix it.

“Thanks,” I said, grateful they weren’t yelling or hating on me. Maybe their virtuous traits were more robust than I first believed. That was good.

“What happened in the mist?” Jax asked, glancing over my shoulder warily. “Did you see anything? None of us has ever been inside. It isn’t permitted.”

I shrugged, unsure what to say. I didn’t see anything. “I landed in the snow and couldn’t move for a while. I heard you and Veronica calling me, but I couldn’t get out.” I paused, wondering if I should tell them about my angel power. Surely they had some just as the demons did even though I hadn’t seen them use it yet. “I kept flapping my wings like an angry chicken until I finally broke free.”

“An angry chicken?” Thomas tilted his head to one side as if he were trying to see my words in his mind. Then he stuck his hands under his armpits and began flapping his arms and his wings at the same time while squawking like a chicken.

At first, I was shocked. Goofing off wasn’t something that was done in Demonland.

Leia started laughing, followed by Jax and Veronica.

I guess here it was fine. A gurgle of happiness erupted from my throat, and I covered my mouth. Was this okay? As far as I could tell.

Jax joined in, flapping his wings and crowing like a rooster.

I couldn’t help myself and double over in laughter. It was a rarity, especially since I was laughing so hard I was crying. It felt good. Being

with these four, I felt comfortable and let myself go.

The guys kept at it and started scratching at the snow with their feet. Even Faith was laughing like she swallowed a helium tank.

Veronica was on the ground, sitting with her wings extended and her legs flat out in front of her. She wiped her eyes.

Leia had collapsed to her knees but was now hovering a few feet of the ground, and her cheeks were rosy red. “You guys are nuts.” She touched her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

Thomas and Jax stopped at the same time.

I straightened.

“How about we fly back at normal fast speeds and not rocket speeds?” Jax patted me on the shoulder, light, and mirth still evident on his face.

“Deal,” I said, and feeling a jolt of exhilaration, reached out and hugged him.

He hugged me back. “Let’s try this again,” he said, going over to the edge of the cliff.

We lined up in the snow, each of us probably fifteen feet apart and holding our flags.

“Go.” Jax leaped into the air, and the rest of us followed him.

I didn’t push this time, and when we reached the Seraph Academy roof, I came in third after Jax and Veronica. Not bad, I supposed, but Faith didn’t agree.

OceanofPDF.com

JAX WAS PRONOUNCED THE WINNER, and we broke for lunch. After getting our food, Veronica led us to an atrium built of white steel that came to a point in the center of the room and high above. Clinging to the brackets was green ivy with white flowers blooming sporadically. We found a round table with enough chairs for all of us. I sat between Jax and Leia. It felt good to be outside in the sunshine. I ate and listened to the others talk and secretly wondered how I ever survived deep below the ground for so long.

Veronica shared that she was full-on Protestas while Leia and Thomas were half chayot and half protestas. I already knew about Jax, which was good because he chose not to talk about it. And they all knew my heritage. From there, they went on to discuss the reasons why they weren't taking classes with the rest of the school. Apparently, Veronica liked to fight. Thomas had a difficult time in large social situations and would refuse to talk, which irritated his teachers and other students. Leia had tried to skip school altogether and sneak into one of the Welcome Stations to go to the human realm and serve alongside her three older brothers. And Jax? He and several other angels pulled a prank on one of the teachers. Only he got caught, and he refused to rat out the others. Totally unfair, but he shrugged it off.

When we returned to the roof, Aaryn was already there and speaking with Kade. At the sight of him, my pulse skipped a few beats. Then I thought of Wrythe, and my heart raced for him.

Kade didn't stay long. When he left, he didn't even look my way. I was glad because I didn't want things to be weird between us. But I debated whether to tell Kade about Catherine and her blackmailing me. She told me not to say anything, but if Kade and I could somehow get it in front of what she intended to do, maybe it wouldn't be so

bad. Not to mention, I couldn't give up Faith.

Aaryn clapped her hands as she walked over to our group. "It's good to see the five of you getting along. Life is better when you can trust those around you." She met my eyes.

I swallowed and nodded and hoped that was enough of a response.

"Now, for this afternoon's lesson, I will be evaluating each of you on how well you work together as a team and how quickly you're able to accomplish the given task." She removed a remote that looked a lot like what Catherine had used to show me she really had dirt on Kade and I and pushed a button.

A holographic image appeared. Jagged and sparkling crystals twinkled in the mild afternoon light casting prisms of rainbows into the air.

It was beautiful.

"This is Crystal Peak," Aaryn began. "Your task is to collect as many crystals as possible within three minutes. But," she said and paused.

"This place is deceiving," Jax said, nodding.

I glanced at him, thinking he would make a great leader.

Aaryn agreed. "That's right. Crystal Peak is beautiful, but it can be dangerous." Aaryn pressed the button again, and the hologram vanished. "Rule number one. You must remain flying at all times. Touching down could create dire consequences for you or the chayot land and the angels living there."

That didn't sound good, and my stomach quivered with worry.

"Second, you must return to the roof with your crystals by dark. A second later and the mission will be considered a failure." She locked eyes with me.

I swallowed but didn't say anything.

"We won't fail," Veronica said, her voice filled with determination.

I found myself agreeing as did Thomas and Jax, but Leia had her eyes on the ground. She was obviously still upset about her boyfriend dumping her. I hoped she was up for the challenge.

"May I speak with you privately?" Leia asked Aaryn.

The teacher's gaze cut into Leia. "No excuses," she snapped.

Leia looked like she wanted to cry.

Aaryn handed the remote to Jax. "You are welcome to use this, but I want it back unbroken."

"I'll keep it safe." Jax clamped it in one hand.

"We've got this," Veronica said, giving Leia a sideways glance.

Jax agreed with her as did the rest of us.

"Good. After today's assessment, classes will be different," Aaryn said, checking her watch. "We won't meet on the roof tomorrow morning, but will be meeting on Sub Floor One for weapons training." She held up her first finger to emphasize. "You'll have to take the elevators down."

Back underground, I thought, darkly.

Once I was buried for ten long years. It was horrible contending with the writhing creatures living down there.

Sorry, Faith, I said, shoving my hands into my back pockets.

Aaryn was still talking. "You have thirty minutes to come up with a plan. By minute thirty-one, you must be in the air." She shot us a smile. Extended her wings, flapping them lightly. "Time starts now," she said and lifted into the air. In the sky next to Jax appeared a holographic timer that was counting down.

"What's the plan, Jax?" I asked, feeling inadequate to help since I knew very little about the place.

IT TURNED out none of us had been to Crystal Peak. Clumped in a sporadic circle, the five of us concocted a plan. It was easy enough. The hardest part was getting there. First, because it was so far away in

chayot territory at the most northeastern point of the realm and secondly because the chayot kept sentinels in the sky to guard their air space from possible attack. So, we would have to get into the chayot territory, but once there, we would have to convince the chayot we weren't there to do anything nefarious. Then we would have to get to Crystal Peak, collect as many crystals as possible, and return to the roof.

Not impossible.

We agreed to retrieve our pillowcases from our beds and meet back on the roof in fifteen minutes. Veronica, Leia, and I flew down to the girls' dorm while Jax and Thomas flew down the other side. They were in a different wing of the dormitory than me, so we parted at the entrance.

Catherine was waiting for me at my door. "You changed the lock. You're smarter than you look."

I didn't respond, but pushed past her, and went to my door. Catherine was hovering, and I refused to let her see my passcode. "What do you want?" I asked.

"Just to know if you've done anything to find what I asked you to." Her eyes scrutinized my face for a clue.

"Not yet," I admitted. "But I will."

She rolled her eyes and turned away. "Better hurry, Alice. Time's ticking." She pushed open the door and was gone.

I sighed in relief and opened my door.

That angel needs an attitude adjustment, Faith said. *I can do it if you want. Just let me at her.*

You're too kind, but no. Not yet. I might change my mind another day. But at the moment, I still hoped we could work things out without violence.

Faith sulked as I ripped my pillowcase off my pillow and tucked it into my back pocket before heading back over to the main building

and flying up to the roof. I was the first student there. Kade was there too.

He saw me and sighed with relief. “You’re going to Crystal Peak?”

“Yes,” I said, curious about what he was doing here.

“Be careful. The crystals are benign for most angels, but for some, they can be more than just beautiful prisms. They are humanity collectors. Within each crystal are many memories or emotions or both from any being with a soul. I fear for you they might be… distracting.” He blew out a breath. “I told Aaryn my concerns, but she isn’t worried.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I hope she’s right. Still, I wanted you to be prepared.” His features softened as his eyes roamed down to my hands. “What’s this?” He lifted one hand to study my gold tattoos and the bracelets, touching it softly.

Faith vibrated. *He has a nice touch.*

Shush! I pulled my hand away. “Nothing,” I said aloud.

Kade’s eyes widened. “Is this?”

Veronica appeared, followed by Leia.

“Hey headmaster Everett,” Veronica said.

I knew I should step away from Kade. We were too close. But I needed to speak with him. “It’s urgent I speak with you about something,” I hissed.

I’ll meet you in your room tonight. Keep the door unlocked. He turned and said hello to the girls before lifting into the air and leaving.

You indeed are the one the prophecy spoke about, Faith said, her voice awed.

I was starting to get sick of the whole prophecy business but didn’t voice my concerns.

“What did he want?” Leia asked, eyeing me shrewdly. The girl was very intuitive.

Kade hadn’t said I wasn’t allowed to share what he told me, so I decided they should know.

“Weird,” Veronica said. When Thomas and Jax arrived, she told them what we’d learned.

“I’m so glad he shared,” Jax said. “I heard rumors like that but didn’t believe them. Until now.”

“We’ll be on our guard,” Thomas said.

“Agreed.” Jax nodded. “Everyone ready?” He lifted into the sky, his cream wings with orange ends were beautiful against the afternoon sun.

I fluttered mine and beat them against the air, lifting off the ground and followed the others.

Jax led the way briefly until Veronica came up beside him.

We’d decided not to follow the holographic barrier line since there was no point, but decided on the most direct path. Once we were outside the Seraph Academy fence, we were immediately in chayot territory where we were accosted by two sentinels.

“What is your business?” the one with gray wings asked.

Jax told them what we were doing.

After only a slight delay, they let us pass. Aaryn had told the chayot we were coming, and they agreed to let us into their space. As we went through, other chayot sentinels flew with us or stopped us to ask questions.

It was surprising to see the chayot with wings. I had believed the angels couldn’t fly or that they didn’t have wings. Apparently, that wasn’t true for all of them.

Each time we were stopped, the chayot made a point of checking out my wings. One even went so far as to touch some of my feathers. I flinched and temporarily spun out of control, causing our group a delay. Thankfully, the others were supportive and didn’t hold my lack of experience against me.

The peak stood so grandly in the distance; I could see it when we got about halfway through the territory. The crystals would catch on

the sunlight and twinkle or create rainbows. It was stunning, and I could tell the chayot were proud it was in their area.

By the time we reached the peak itself, some of the excitement had worn off. I didn't know about the others, but my wings were tired, and I needed to rest. But we weren't allowed to stop flying. That was one of the rules. Another problem we saw immediately? There weren't any crystals we could carry in our pillowcases. The smallest was about my size in thickness and height.

"I'm going to fly around the peak and see if there are smaller ones on the other side. Anyone want to come?" Jax eyed me. I was about to say yes but saw that Leia was waning. "I'll stay and help Leia."

"I don't need your help," she snapped.

"You sure?" I ignored her glare because I understood why she was behaving like that. She was tired.

"I'll stay with her," Veronica said.

"I'll come too," Thomas added.

Jax was hesitant. "I don't like that we're splitting up, but we need to see if there are smaller crystals. I'm guessing there must be." He eyed Veronica and Leia. "Do not touch down. We'll hurry."

Leia gritted her teeth but gave a quick nod.

"We won't touch down," Veronica said.

I got the feeling she wasn't being honest, but what could I do?

"We'll hurry," Jax said, and took off.

Thomas followed behind him, and I trailed them both.

"Thomas, can you fly higher and see if there is something at the top?"

"On it," Thomas said and batted his wings, lifting himself higher.

"Alice, take the middle ground."

I rose so that the three of us were covering all aspects of the enormous peak. My wings were tired. I was tired, but stopping wasn't an option. So I kept going. Flying closer and closer to the crystals until

I was soaring around and between and over and under them. As I went, I would occasionally hear a voice or see a flash of something. Thanks to Kade, I wasn't frightened or surprised by the snippets, and I continued on. As I went deeper between the crystals, I found some smaller ones—almost like new leaves on a plant.

A wave of happiness rolled through me. We could do this. Plucking a small crystal out of its nook, I hurried out to tell the others. Jax was below, and Thomas was above, but they were a little further away. "Hey," I shouted to get their attention.

They both looked at me, and I held up the crystal. "Fly into the crystals," I continued. "The further in you go, the smaller the crystals."

"What?" Thomas responded and flew down to me.

Jax came over as well.

"See?" I said, holding the crystal in my palm. "There are dozens of smaller crystals like this, but you have to go deep in between the bigger ones." My eyes flashed back and forth between them.

Thomas took the crystal and studied it. "Cool." He handed it back, and I put it in my pocket. I'd use the pillowcase after I told Veronica and Leia.

Jax gave me a super watt smile. "You figured it out." He squeezed my shoulder before heading in. "We need to hurry. We're running out of time."

"I'm going to tell the others," I said and took off without waiting for a response. More hands made light work. That was a phrase Peter would quote from time to time. At the thought of him, my heart flashed with pain. But instead of sinking into the hurt, I pushed faster.

OceanofPDF.com

AS SOON AS I reached the other side, I knew there was a problem. Veronica and Leia weren't visible, and I called them.

No one answered.

I searched the sky in the direction of the Academy, thinking they might have headed back, but they were too far away if they had. Then I glanced down, wondering if they'd landed after all. They weren't there either.

I called them again. That's when I heard what sounded like singing or crying. I wasn't sure which. But it was coming from within the crystals.

Hesitant, I followed the sound. "Leia, is that you?" I asked, flying up and over several giant crystals and maneuvering through them until there was a place big enough for me to enter. She wasn't there. Neither of them was. As I finessed my way deeper, a random voice or vision would display itself. As instructed, I ignored them. They didn't concern me. Until I heard a familiar voice.

"She will be back," he growled.

Instantly, I knew it was Wrythe.

The sane part of my mind told me to disregard the voice and keep looking for my friends. But my heart ached at the sound of my fiancé, and I unconsciously flew in for a closer look.

Sure enough, it was him. "Wrythe," I whispered, touching the place on the crystal where he stood.

Faith, who'd been mostly quiet, spoke up. *Ignore the visions and find Veronica and Leia. I fear they are in danger.*

Of course, she was right, but I couldn't pull away. "Wrythe," I called again.

He turned as though he heard me and walked forward as though

he saw me as well. My heart pounded in my chest. “Can you hear me?” I asked.

When I spoke, the crystals around me began to vibrate.

“Alice?” he asked, moving forward. I recognized Wrythe was in his office and knew he must be able to see me from inside the mirror hanging across from his desk.

Tears filled my eyes, and I sniffled. “It’s me,” I said.

The crystals vibrated harder and shook like a chandelier in an earthquake.

“How is this possible?” he asked, and pressed his palm against the glass.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, ignoring the catastrophe happening around me. All that mattered was Wrythe. My palm pressed against what I thought would be the crystal, but our hands touched. I let out a sob as the warmth from his hand sent shivers along my arm.

“You’re okay.” His fingers twined with mine, and his face twisted in agony. “And more beautiful than ever.” A tendril of a smile lit up his serious face.

I leaned forward, desperate for him in any way I could get him. He did the same, and our lips touched for the briefest moment. Then he reached through, and his hands cupped my face as his eyes roamed over me before flaring. “Are those wings?” he asked, surprised.

Alice! Alice, stop this. You’re going to send every last crystal down onto the chayot sector.

What? I glanced around, and sure enough, crystals were falling all around me like teeth coming loose from their gums.

“You aren’t safe.” Wrythe tried to pull me to him, but I resisted.

“I’ll be okay, and I’ll see you soon,” I said, breaking free. In doing so, I knocked back into a crystal, and it started to fall. “I love you,” I said and then reached out and grabbed the crystal desperate to hold it in place. But it was too heavy, and I was too small compared to its

size, and it slipped from my grasp.

I darted in and out of the crystals like a mosquito flying along a pond at dusk. When I was a safe distance away, I peered back and saw dozens of crystals falling and rolling down the mountain. As they went, they knocked into each other while others picked up speed. The edge of the chayot town wasn't far. Everything in their path would be crushed and destroyed. Many lives would end if I didn't do anything. But what?

Jax appeared, his face contorted with worry and his pillowcase hanging from one hand. "What happened?" Fear stretched across his eyes at the inevitable outcome.

I shook my head. "They just began to shake loose. I don't know."

Thomas appeared, but before speaking, he aimed his body at the furthest crystal and closed his wings. He shot down, going rapidly. He was going to try and stop them, but how could he? I went after him.

Jax dropped his pillowcase and followed.

But we were too late. Thomas reached the largest one and sent a light green light from his hands and into the rock. Subconsciously I knew it was his angel power. At the same moment, I also knew he wasn't strong enough. The crystal rolled over Thomas like he wasn't even there.

"Thomas," I shouted and pushed faster.

On her own, Faith transformed from my bracelets and into a sword. *Use me to control your power, Alice,* she shouted into my head.

At seeing Wrythe, I'd forgotten about her and my powers. But as soon as Faith said the words, my abilities roared to life. The demon and the angelic combined to form a golden-white light. It shoved through me and out of my hands into the sword—Faith—, and she flamed to life. Without thinking, I flung the blade into the crystal. It sunk deep into the glass as veins of golden light cracked through, and it shattered into thousands of pieces.

Faith returned to my hand like a boomerang, and I flung her at the

next one. She shattered it, and we continued the work until all the crystals were nothing more than rubble.

The rumbling stopped, and my shoulders sagged.

Faith returned to my hands and became my bracelets once again as I dove down to search for Thomas.

“Thomas.” I called his name over and over until I heard moaning. Heading in that direction, I saw part of one of his fawn brown wings poking through some of the debris. “I’m coming.” I landed and used my hands to dig at the clear rocks.

Faith once again transformed into small twin swords. *There isn’t time to dig. Use your power.*

I called it forth, and it radiated out of me, through the blades and into the ground.

Like a giant puff of wind, the rocks dissipated, revealing the wounded angel. His eyes were closed, and blood trickled from his head, arms, and torso. He looked like a broken doll.

“What have I done?” Faith was back around my wrists in a flash as I touched Thomas’s shoulder. Immediately, some of my power flowed into him. But this time, it was to heal instead of destroying. In moments, the golden light that was my power filtered through Thomas until he shone briefly and then went back to himself, completely whole.

Thomas opened his eyes.

“Hi,” I said and smiled, sticking out my free hand.

He took it and used his wings as well as my help to get off the ground. “What happened?” he asked.

I wanted to explain, but his eyes went wide, and he focused on a point beyond me.

“Alice,” he whispered.

Nervous, I turned around. There were at least a dozen sentinel chayot standing there, swords were drawn, and their angelic power

radiating. There were seven colors, but they were softer than those of the demon counterpart. Each chayot also wore an expression of anger stood, ready to fight.

“I’m sorry,” I said just as Jax flew down and landed. He looked at me with kindness, and a balm of humility washed through me at the way Jax cared. I appreciated his support even though I didn’t deserve it. I’d nearly destroyed part of the chayot sector. A quick glance up at the peak revealed I had damaged something the chayot were proud of.

Thomas flanked my other side.

“All you were to do was collect the crystals,” the leader said, sarcasm heavy in his words. “I knew it was a mistake to let you into our sector.” He eyed me like I was a squished worm on the bottom on his boot.

Faith was itching to fight, but I kept her calm. “Where’s Veronica and Leia?” I asked, not wanting to push the angel, but worried too.

“They are being escorted back to the Academy, which is what we intend to do with you.” He lifted into the air. “You will stay with us and not veer even the slightest. Do you understand?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

I let Jax and Thomas go in front of me, and I took off after them. The chayot surrounded us like we were hardened criminals. And I guess we kind of were. Or at least I was. There had to be something I could do to make up for the devastation I caused.

The power you used to obliterate those crystals can also be used to create new ones, Faith said. *You possess both the ability to annihilate and to restore. Balance, remember?*

Jax hovered a moment, letting Thomas fly past him, and then he was beside me. His features soft, but his eyes were apprehensive. “What you did…” He shook his head. “That kind of power…” He was struggling to find the words. “Where did you get that weapon?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I said softly.

“Where is it now?”

Faith kept warning me not to tell anyone the truth, and after all I’d learned about my father, I thought it best to keep Faith a secret. “It’s safe.”

“No talking,” one of the chayot barked.

We flew the rest of the way in silence, but I knew Jax, and I would have a serious conversation about what happened at some point.

As soon as we entered the Seraph Academy’s air space, I saw Aaryn and Kade waiting on the roof. Neither looked happy. Part of me wanted to fly away. Head to the Welcome Station and make Tillie send me home. But I had a feeling I wouldn’t be allowed to leave. There had to be consequences for my actions.

So I kept quiet and decided to accept whatever penalties the headmaster and my new teacher decided to dish out. No matter what, I wouldn’t let the others take the blame for what I’d done.

The lead chayot landed and spoke with Kade and Aaryn. Their voices were hushed, but I got the feeling they were arguing. Veronica and Leia weren’t around. Probably sent to their rooms already. I went to stand in front of Jax and Thomas, but they wouldn’t let me, and I was about to get frustrated with them, but the lead chayot took off, and the rest followed.

Kade’s eyes met mine. Surprisingly, they weren’t furious but interested.

Aaryn, on the other hand, looked ready to melt us with her gaze. “What happened?” she snapped. She wasn’t focused on me but Jax since he was the team leader.

He stepped forward. “I’m unsure. Alice figured out how to retrieve the smaller crystals and went to tell Veronica and Leia. Not too long after that, while Thomas and I were filling our bags, the crystals began to shake and started to fall. Thomas and I barely escaped, and we hurried to find the others.” He paused and glanced back at Thomas and I. “Are Veronica and Leia okay?”

“They’re fine. Shaken but unharmed,” Aaryn responded. “But the three of you? How could you? If the chayot didn’t have family attending the Academy, we would be in serious trouble. As it is, there will be a tribunal to discuss my teaching methods, not to mention headmaster Everett’s leadership skills.” The words left her mouth like she was spitting nails, and each one caused me to flinch. “There will be serious consequences for the three of you. We will discuss it and get back to you.” She crossed her arms. “Now, go to your rooms until you are called.” She was about to turn, but I stopped her.

“Ma’am,” I began, pushing in front of Jax. “It wasn’t Jax or Thomas’s fault. They were brave and courageous and are excellent friends.” I paused and closed my eyes a moment. “But they didn’t do anything wrong. It was all my fault.”

Jax tried to interrupt, but I cut in over him.

“Yes, Jax was the team leader, but I didn’t listen and… engaged with a voice in the crystals. That’s when they began to quake, and that’s why they fell. It’s totally on me.” I clasped my hands together, as though I was praying. “Please do not punish them. Please.” I pleaded with her, and when she didn’t respond, I glanced at Kade. “Ka-Headmaster Everett, I swear to you this is all on me.”

He ground his teeth together.

Aaryn glanced back at him, and he nodded. “We will take what you’ve said into consideration. You are excused.”

I nodded and hung my head as I turned to go.

“Alice, you will meet me in my office in ten minutes after I speak with Miss Aaryn.” Kade’s eyes drilled into mine, but I agreed.

Except I didn’t know the location. “Where’s—”

“It’s Raphael’s old office,” he quipped before I could finish. “Now go.”

I followed after Jax and Thomas, taking to the air and landing in the courtyard below. “I am really sorry, guys,” I said, but couldn’t meet their eyes.

“Hey,” Thomas patted me on the arm. “No big deal. Class isn’t real until someone almost dies. If it had to be anyone, I’m glad it was me.”

He was smiling, and I felt myself relax. “Thank you, Thomas. But whatever I can do to make it up to you—” I turned to Jax. “Both of you, just let me know.”

“It’s fine, Alice, really,” Jax added. “Thomas is right. No one got really hurt.”

You still have a crystal in your pocket, Faith said.

She’d been quiet, and I flinched when she spoke. *Oh yeah.* I reached into my pocket and pulled out the single crystal. “Here,” I said. “At least we got one.”

They both started laughing, and Jax took it.

“I’ll be sure to show this to Aaryn. Technically, I think we completed the mission. Even if it was messy.”

A shadow appeared above us, and we all looked up in time to see Kade soaring overhead.

“I guess I better go talk to the headmaster,” I whispered, tucking my hands in my pockets.

“You’ll be fine,” Jax said, giving me a reassuring smile.

“I mean, he might strip you of your powers, but that’s highly unlikely for your first offense,” Thomas added, winking to show me he was joking.

“Thanks.” I turned and headed in the same direction as Kade. Inside, I went over to the elevator. The same warrior guard who’d walked me up to Raphael’s office was there.

“Alice,” he said.

“Deacon,” I returned, which surprised him.

“You remembered,” he said, his voice flat.

We rode up in the elevator in silence. When the doors opened, I didn’t wait for Deacon to walk me to the door and knocked as soon as I got there.

“I see your anxious to be punished. Feisty, even.” His eyes roamed down my body and back up again. “I like that in my angels. Maybe you and I could hang out sometime?”

“I’m engaged,” I said and was about to knock again.

“Yeah, but he’s half-demon. They don’t count.”

Anger roared to life, along with my power.

Easy, Alice. He’s doing it on purpose, Faith said.

I guessed she was right, but I didn’t care. “Shut your filthy mouth,” I seethed, using my wings to be eye level with him. “The man I’m engaged to is a king, and you’d do well to show some respect.”

He returned my anger with his own, and he shoved me. “Don’t talk to me like that! I don’t care what some of them think you are of what you’re prophesied to do. I know the truth. That your nothing more than a stinking rat.” He went to spit, but before he could, Kade opened the door.

“That’ll be all, Deacon. You are excused.”

It looked like Deacon wanted to comment, but didn’t dare. “Fine.” He stalked away.

When he was gone, Kade’s features softened. “Come in. Let’s talk about the consequences.”

OceanofPDF.com

AS SOON AS I was inside his office and the door was closed, Kade went over to his desk but didn't sit. "Talk to me about what happened and don't leave out a single detail," he said, picking up a book, but not opening it.

Even though I knew this was the same office Raphael had been in, it looked completely different. Where Raphael kept everything white and very minimalistic, Kade's reminded me of Professor Pops'. The walls covered in deep brown bookshelves filled with old books. And there were strange statues as well as ancient weapons leaning against a stand to be displayed. He was a collector of artifacts as well as books. How interesting.

"Alice," he barked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Fine," I said and went over to one of the chairs. I was exhausted.

"Thank you." He smiled, but it wasn't sexy like it used to be. Instead, it looked very head master-ish.

I clasped my hands together and rested them in my lap. Then told him everything about Wrythe, our kiss, and Faith. He appeared to restrain himself from asking questions but succeeded in waiting until I was finished.

"You called the sword you used Faith?" He shook his head. "You named it?"

You can tell him, Faith said. *I sense he is one of the best.*

Thank you. "She is called by many names. You might have heard Sword of Uriel, Sword of War, Flaming Sword, or Burning Stick?"

Kade's eyes widened. "Are you telling me the sword you took from the Fallen leader yesterday is the original sword?" He had to sit then and fell into his seat.

"That's right," I admitted quietly.

“It figures.” He placed the book on his desk and rested his head in his hands. “Alice, do you know what this means?”

I thought I did. “Does it have something to do with my father and the prophecy?”

He looked at me then, and there was a pain in his eyes. “Where is the weapon now?”

I leaned forward and rested my hands on the edge of his desk. Faith wanted to show off. She writhed from my wrists and formed into a blade between Kade and me.

“Unbelievable,” he whispered and touched it.

“She talks to me too,” I admitted, wondering what he would think.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” he said, stroking the blade lightly.

Tell him I think he’s impressive, Faith said. She obviously had a crush on Kade. I knew what that felt like.

“She wants you to know she thinks you’re amazing,” I said, giving him a grim smile.

He returned it, though wearily. “You must never tell a soul you have this sword. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I said, and swallowed. Faith said the same thing. “I know what this sword represents.”

“Good.” He stood and picked up the book and went over to the bookshelf, where he slid it between to other old and dusty books. Then he faced me. “I have to punish you for what you did.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” I nodded as Faith returned to my wrists. “Whatever you need to do, I understand.”

“Good. Just know it isn’t going to be comfortable.” He returned to his seat. “In fact, you might think it too harsh a punishment, but the chayot leader will accept nothing less, and it must be done to appease him.” He eyed me warily.

“It’s okay, Kade. I nearly killed a bunch of angels. I get that the punishment needs to be severe. Do what you must.” I sat back, feeling

a flutter of nerves run through my veins.

Faith wasn't thrilled. *You saved them all,* she huffed.

Yes, but I almost killed them all first. We will be alright, Faith.

"She's speaking to you now, isn't she?" Kade asked.

"She thinks you should be lenient because I didn't let any of the chayot get hurt." I bit my bottom lip, refusing to say more, though Faith had a lot more to say. *Shush,* I ordered. She wasn't having it.

What if he strips you of your powers?

He won't.

"I am going to be as lenient as I can." He ran his hands through his hair. "Hyneth wanted me to strip you of your powers…" His voice trailed off. "As if I could," he added. "I told him that would not happen, but that I would imprison you for the next thirty days."

"Angel prison? What's that like?"

"It probably won't bother you at all. The cell looks a lot like your room in Demonland," he said with a chuckle. "I'll make sure to bring your books. You can do your bookwork down there and continue to learn what you are meant to learn."

"Fine," I said, "But there's one more thing you should know."

He shook his head and leaned back in his chair, slumping his shoulders. "What is it?"

"Catherine saw us kissing. She demanded I give her the original sword in exchange for her silence." My cheeks grew hot as I thought about the hologram. "She has holographic proof, too. I saw it."

Kade sat up, grinding his teeth together. "Nothing is ever easy—"

There was a knock at the door, and it opened.

A stunning and beautiful angel walked in. Her hair was the same color as mine, but it was much longer, hanging past her hips, and it was curled at the ends. Her wings weren't out, but if they matched her eye color like the other angels, they would be deep violet with flecks of sunflower yellow.

“Sorry to barge in,” she began, walking over to Kade like a ballerina. Her eyes were locked on him like he was the sun and the moon. It was sweet, actually.

“Mari.” Kade stood and met her, taking both her hands in his. “I said I would be there as soon as I could.”

Mari glanced over at me. “Yes, but when I heard you were meeting with Alice, I had to meet her.” She released Kade and came over to me, pulling me up and into a hug. “Hi,” she said. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

For some reason, I expected malice or even a bit of jealousy, but there was only kindness on her face. It was a bit irritating if I were honest. “Hello,” I responded, keeping my emotions in check.

Kade stood to the side of us, his eyes flicking back and forth. “Allow me to introduce my fiancé, Mari Mayholden.” He smiled, and it was genuine.

Mari hugged me again. “You are even more beautiful than Kade described,” she said and gave Kade an aggravated look. “We could almost be sisters.”

I wasn’t going to say that, but it was true. We did look a lot alike. “I don’t think so,” I said, trying to find some humility. “You are much more beautiful, but thank you.” My heart was racing. I was feeling uncomfortable.

“You must join us for dinner. My parents will be thrilled to have you.” She released my hands and rested them on Kade’s shoulder, leaning into him and resting her head.

“Thank you for the invitation, but…” I wasn’t sure what to say.

Kade filled her in.

“Oh, that’s terrible,” she said as Kade walked her to the door. “See you soon, Alice.” She went out of the door, and Kade closed it.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said.

“It’s okay. She really is beautiful and seems very nice. The two of

you make a perfect pair." I rummaged around in my feelings to see if I meant it, and I did.

"Thank you." Kade went back over to his desk, his face a mask of seriousness. "You're sentence begins now." He pressed a button on his desk, and the floor opened.

"What am I supposed to do?" I peered down into what looked like a tunnel.

"This channel is direct access to your prison cell."

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. "Will there be others in there with me?"

"No, you will be all alone, I'm afraid."

I'll be there with you, Alice. You always have me.

That means a lot, Faith.

"I should relieve you of your weapon, but I have a feeling she wouldn't allow that, so please do not try to escape. That will only make things worse." Kade came around his desk and stood beside the hole. "Let me help you," he said, holding out a hand.

"That isn't necessary." I kept my head held high and went over, sitting on the edge. From that angle, I could see that it curved down, but it was impossible to tell how far down it went. Surely not any farther down than I'd been in Demonland. It was going to be okay. "What about Catherine?"

"You needn't worry about her. If she doesn't see things my way, I'll strip her of her powers and send her to dwell with the Fallen like her father."

"Who's her father?" I asked, curious, and trying to procrastinate.

"Raphael," he said. "Now go on. The chayot leader is waiting for me to confirm you have been imprisoned."

"Fine." I pushed off.

It was like a slide. Thankfully, it didn't go too quickly, and I slid into the room on my butt without any pain. Then the slide tunnel

vanished. Kade was right. It did look almost exactly like my room in Demonland. Except for no spider, I thought, glancing up at the corner of the room. There were other differences, too, like that the walls weren't made of dirt and were painted white. There was a bed and a dresser as well as a little bedside table with a lamp.

What if he forgets about us? Faith asked, sounding worried.

It wasn't a bad question. *We'll be fine,* I said.

And we were, I guess. But after three weeks, I was starting to go a little crazy. Mainly because each night, I had the oddest dreams. At first, they were about angels operating on me or poking me, or dissecting me. Each morning I woke with an awful feeling. But after the first week, the dreams shifted to me running through a meadow with a little girl holding my hand. We were laughing and happy, and then Wrythe would swoop in and lift the little girl into the air.

Those were the worst because my heart ached for Wrythe and the possibilities.

It was the same on the first morning of my fourth week in incarceration. Tears leaked onto my pillow.

Another dream about Wrythe? Faith asked.

Yes, I admitted, because there wasn't a point lying about it. Rolling onto my side, my **Angels 101** book fell from my chest onto the floor. I'd gone to sleep while reading. That happened a lot.

In the weeks since I'd been left in here, Kade had visited and brought me things. He also said that Jax and the others wanted to visit, but they weren't allowed. That filled my heart with a semblance of peace. They really did care.

I climbed out of bed and went to drop so I could start my push-ups, but there was a fluttering in my belly, and I was suddenly lightheaded. The feeling was new and left me dizzy. I fell back onto the bed, touching my head with my hand.

What's wrong?

Nothing. I grabbed hold of my stomach, and the fluttering danced through my belly again. It literally felt like butterfly wings brushed inside of me. What the hell was happening? I forced myself upright, and the dizziness hit me full throttle along with an intense bout of queasiness. Though I hadn't eaten since the day before, I rushed to the bathroom to throw up.

Alice, Faith barked. *Tell me the truth.*

I don't know what's wrong, I said, lying on the floor. *I've never felt like this a day in my life. I'm half-demon and half-angel. I'm not supposed to get sick.* Once, one of the kids I was in foster care with had the flu and threw up all night. That was the only reason I knew I must be sick.

Questions whirled in my mind. Was I being poisoned somehow? Or breathing bad air? I really didn't know, but I needed to talk with Kade. The problem was a door only appeared once a day when my food was delivered or when Kade came to speak with me. Otherwise, there were only four walls. Literally no way out. I moaned.

There is a way out, silly girl. Use your power. Bust us out of here. You can do it.

I hadn't realized I said the last part to Faith. *But I promised,* I uttered, before another round of nausea hit.

Something is wrong. You need help. I have no doubt that if Kade knew you were sick, he would understand.

She wasn't wrong, but I couldn't do it. My oath meant something, and I refused to break it. Rinsing my mouth in the sink, I went back to bed. Faith kept at it until I lost my temper. *I'll say something when my food arrives if I'm not feeling better. Okay?*

Fine. She wasn't happy with me, but let me sleep until the scrape of my tray moving across the floor woke me. And I felt better—no more nausea. But I was thirsty.

"Food," the voice on the other end of the tray said.

"Can I have some more water?" I asked, my throat scratchy.

“What for?” He barked.

“I’ve been sick,” I said, then picked up the water glass, drank it all, and stuck it in the little slot.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

There were footsteps, and I heard him walk away. Then padding as he walked up what sounded like stairs. I went over and peered out the slot. Sure enough, there was a long hallway with a staircase at the end. For some reason, seeing that freedom was so close brought my powers to life.

That’s it, Alice. Come on. I want out of this hole.

I did too, but I made a promise and refused to break it. Taking a deep breath, I worked to stabilize my power. Over the last three weeks, I had plenty of time to practice control, and I used my time wisely.

You are disappointing, Faith grumbled.

Get over it, I said, and bit into an apple that sort of tasted like strawberries and bananas combined. As I chewed, I heard footfalls on the stairs. Whoever it was, they were coming quickly. A waist, shoulders, and head appeared. It was Deacon. He handed me a full glass of water. “Drink up,” he said after closing the slot.

The door disappeared, and I was alone once again.

It was like that for the next three days. In the morning, I felt the strange fluttering in my stomach, followed by nausea. Where I would spend hours in the bathroom sick. Then I would sleep it off and be fine by the time my food came.

Faith thought I might die, but I started to get a sneaking suspicion it was something else.

I was pregnant.

The possibility had my heart springing between terrifying fear and blissful excitement.

That I could be carrying Wrythe’s child.

On the morning of the fourth day, I was still in bed when Kade arrived without preamble or even a courtesy knock. “Deacon just told me you’ve been sick,” he said.

I opened my eyes, groggy, and immediately the world started to spin. “A little,” I admitted, trying not to move. That helped.

“You’re pale, and you look dehydrated. I’m taking you to the Healing Center.” Without waiting for me to reply, he lifted me into his arms and carried me down the hall and up the stairs.

I wasn’t dressed, and the demon orb and blade were still under my pillow. “Wait,” I hissed, trying not to move.

He stopped. “What is it?”

“My things,” I said.

“What things?”

I carefully opened my eyes. “The demon orb and my blade,” I said softly.

“It won’t do to leave those.” He rushed back into the room. I lifted the pillow and retrieved my stuff.

“How is it some of the most powerful artifacts in all the realms are in your possession?” There was surprise in his voice, but he didn’t appear to want an answer.

I had to do all I could not to puke on his uniform.

OceanofPDF.com

I WAS KEPT in the Healing Center under guard for the rest of my week. It seemed like overkill, but whatever. They could do what they wanted. The Healer caring for me was Celeste. She revealed what I already knew. I was pregnant. The news caused quite a ruckus.

Angels could procreate but only when given special approval from the higher-ups—the Heavenly Harbingers.

I'd broken another rule. Surprise. Surprise.

The hospital room I was sequestered in was a lot nicer than the prison. Best of all, my friends were allowed to visit. They all came together the day after I arrived.

Thankfully, Celeste gave me something to help with the nausea, so I was able to talk with them without feeling the need to puke. That was a relief.

"I can't believe you're pregnant," Leia said, sounding envious. Her eyes flashed to my belly.

"Me either," I admitted. "It wasn't planned."

Jax took my hand. "But you're okay?"

Warmth radiated through to my heart. I had a brother, and he actually liked me. "I'm good. Thanks, Jax."

He didn't look convinced.

"Really," I added.

"I still can't believe they sent you to angel jail for a month," Thomas said, his voice gentle.

"It wasn't bad," I admitted. "At least not until I got morning sickness."

"My mom said she had it with me and that it was the worst. She couldn't fly. She could barely move until she was on the medication Celeste prescribes." Veronica smiled sweetly.

“Yeah, I’m thankful for that medicine, too,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“You coming back to class on Monday?” Thomas asked.

Nerves skimmed along my veins. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean, I caused a bunch of trouble.”

“True,” Thomas said and laughed. “But it’s been a total snooze fest without you.” He reached around about patted my calf. “We need you.”

“Thomas is right,” Jax agreed, squeezing my hand.

Tears threatened, and I blinked, looking away until I had myself under control. “I guess it’s up to the headmaster,” I said, hoping he would let me return.

Deacon appeared in the doorway and told my friends to leave.

After they said goodbye, I closed my eyes.

There was a rustling outside the door, and then it opened. Catherine stood there, her brown hair wild and her eyes red like she’d been crying. Her angel power sizzled and sparked red along her fingers. “You,” she hissed. Her feet were spread apart, as were her wings. She looked cracked crazy, and I sat up.

“Catherine, what’s wrong?” I asked carefully.

“You told Kade,” she said, in between ragged breaths. “I told you not to do that.” The red of her angel power grew and hovered above her hands.

“I had to because I wasn’t going to meet your deadline since I was in jail,” I said, trying to keep her calm. But something protective and sinister rose up amid my power. It was gold but also laced with darkness. Without a doubt, I refused to let her hurt my child. Wrythe’s child. I would protect this baby with my life.

“Our beloved headmaster,” she began spitting out each word like they tasted bad. “He tried to reason with me. Said he was trying to help me. But all he wanted was to keep me silent.” She removed the

remote-looking thing that held the hologram with the incriminating evidence of Kade, and I kissing and went over to what looked like a laptop though I guessed it was beyond that. “I’m going to show the realm what kind of angel you are.” She paused and looked at my stomach. “Nothing but a rat carrying demon spawn.” Then she smiled. “The higher-ups will destroy you, and I’ll sit back and happily watch.”

My heart was pounding in my chest so hard it almost hurt. “Don’t do this, Catherine. Please.” I wasn’t worried about me so much as Kade. What she had on that hologram would ruin him.

“You are in no position to tell me what to do. Unless you have the sword—”

Dark smoke filled the room along with black lightning and crackling thunder. Catherine froze, as my father appeared at the end of my bed.

Catherine gasped and stumbled, trying to get to the door. “I know who you are,” she mumbled. “The Devil is in the angel realm. That isn’t right. You can’t be here. Get out. Get out!” Her words all ran together like she was talking to herself instead of me. She reached the handle and went to open it, but her hand froze midway there. “I can’t move,” she eked out.

I scooted up. “Let her go,” I shouted, my power flaring to life.

He looked at me, an evil smile on his face. “Relax, Alice. I sent you here to find out about the prophecy and become educated regarding the angels.”

Confusion beat inside my chest. “What am I supposed to learn?”

Faith kept whispering that I should use her to end him, but I continued to ignore her.

“Come now, Alice. Surely you must know.” His slimy smile grew. “Even the supposedly virtuous angels can be wicked.” When he finished speaking, he clapped his hands together once.

Immediately, Catherine turned to sparkling red dust. Her remains

rained down out of the air and onto the floor—except the remote. That dropped onto the stark white floor with a tiny thud.

A strangled sob wrenched from my throat and sorrow filled my heart. I jumped out of bed. “She didn’t need to die,” I choked, breathing heavily.

The Devil bent over and retrieved the remote, tucking it into the front pocket of his bright green pants. “Where’s my thank you? I just saved you and my dearest frenemy from an enormous about of embarrassment. Especially now that Kade is married.” He nodded, knowingly, and studied my features.

My whole body shook. The Devil was goading me. Torturing me. And enjoying every moment of it.

Let me end him now, Faith said, the marks on my hands shining brightly.

I tucked my hands behind my back. *If he dies, then I die too,* I said, repeating what Kade told me and wishing it weren’t true. Then to my father, I asked, “Why have you come? It can’t be time already.”

His smile deepened, sending small crinkles around his eyes. “Actually—”

Kade burst into the room, his eyes alight with righteous indignation. “Depart,” he shouted, his nose flaring, and his wings were extended as far as they could go inside the enclosed space.

The Devil rolled his eyes before settling his gaze on me. “Either you finish your third trial or every Dark Moth, including your dear fiancé, will die. I have that power, Alice. You know, I do.”

“I will,” I said, wishing my knees weren’t trembling so strongly. “But I need more time.” I didn’t want to beg, but I would. There were still things I had to finish. “Please.”

“I order you to leave, Deckland! You are not welcome here,” Kade roared, his voice sounding like thunder.

My father snapped his fingers and was gone. But I heard him

whisper one word. “Soon.”

When the Devil was gone, Kade ruffled his feathers before they settled on his back. “Are you okay?” He held out his hands like I was a broken bird and would attack if I felt threatened. He wasn’t totally wrong.

“I’m fine,” I said through clenched teeth. Because part of me was angry with Kade too. He got married, and I wasn’t able to be there. Though come to think of it, that was probably for the best.

“Why don’t you get some rest,” Kade said. “I’ll be back in a few moments.” He left the room, and I heard him barking orders to Deacon in a low voice. Minutes later, two male angels in gray uniforms came in and swept up Catherine’s remains, placing them in a ruby box before wrapping it inside what looked like satin material. They didn’t speak to me. Didn’t talk to each other. Just came in. Did their job. And left.

That gave me time to figure out what I needed to do. By the time Kade returned, I had decided to make sure I fulfilled the prophecy and fixed Crystal Peak before anything else. I couldn’t leave the angel realm until both jobs were done, whatever they entailed.

“How are you?” Kade asked once we were alone.

“Freaked out, if you want to know the truth.” I wasn’t sure whether it was because of my hormones or something else, but at seeing him, panic and anxiety built in my chest. As did my power, licking against my bones and sinews like it was waiting to rage out.

What’s wrong? Faith asked.

I don’t know. Baby hormones. Is that a thing?

Oh yeah. I’ve seen it, and from what I’ve heard, it’s worse in angels than it is in humans. Deep breaths. You don’t want to burn the Healing Center to the ground.

Right, I said and hoped I wasn’t making a face.

Kade tilted his head to one side and ran a hand through his hair. A

flash of metal on his ring finger caught my attention and sent my anxiety into overdrive, so I was glowing.

Kade considered me like I was a new creature. “Should I leave? Call Celeste to give you something? You seem…” He didn’t finish, and it was a good thing.

I took a deep breath. “No,” I said, blowing out. Then I breathed in through my nose. “So you’re married?” I indicated his ring with my chin.

He glanced at it. “Here we call it joined instead of married. Because Mari and I will be together eternally, not until death do us part.”

“Well, where is she then?” I snapped and then took another deep breath. Blew out. “Sorry.” A pang of humility brought me back into the almost calm range. “I’m very happy for you both.”

“Thank you, Alice,” he said. “I didn’t want to join with her until after you were released, but the plans were in place, and Mari didn’t want to change them.” He glanced down at his hands. “It was probably for the best anyway.”

“Yeah, probably,” I admitted. It was almost comical the way we were both avoiding speaking about what had happened to Catherine because of the damned Devil.

“You’ll be released as soon as you’re ready. It’s silly to keep you any longer.” He paused. “If that’s okay?”

“Yeah, I’m ready to be free again. Definitely.” I decided to take the leap and bring up my dad and what he did. “Did the… Deckland really kill Catherine?” I asked, my voice quiet.

He nodded, his eyes falling to his wedding ring, and he twisted the band. “Though it wasn’t her Final Death. If the higher-ups want her to return to the realm, they can and will. I hope they don’t.” He held up his hand. “If my Mari were to see us—the way we kissed when you first arrived—that would hurt her, and I don’t want that. I’m sure you feel the same way about Wrythe?” He dropped his hands.

I felt that if I explained why I kissed Kade and how it closed the door entirely on my old feelings for him, then Wrythe would understand. Because then he would know that I was truly his, but I didn't say that. When the time was right, I intended to tell Wrythe all of it. "Something like that," I admitted.

"And Catherine was crazy. Literally. It's better if she remains where she is and not here in the angel realm."

"As long as she is at peace and isn't suffering?"

Kade shook his head, and reached out, wrapping my hands in his. "You really are special, Alice. And that is why I know for certain you are the one the prophecy is talking about. You truly are the best of all of us."

I pulled my hands from his grasp. "What do I need to do to make the prophecy come to pass?"

Kade stepped back, a flash of frustration crossing his face. "I don't know," he admitted. "I'm still searching. While you were incarcerated, I did a lot of research. Not once does it say how the prophecy will happen. Only that it will." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm worried. Because you have the third trial to complete. What is it?" He already knew, but wanted me to say it. I could tell.

I thought about all he said and the third trial. "I have to give up the most precious part of myself to save someone I love," I repeated.

Kade's shoulders turned in. "Now that you're pregnant." He paused, and his eyes went to my belly. Of course, I wasn't showing you. "The implications…" He struggled to finish.

Freaking frack! Had my father known I would get pregnant? Did he expect me to give up my baby? At the thought, a jolt of power burst along my veins, and I gold radiated from my pores.

"I know," Kade said. "We need a plan." Then he stepped back. "I mean, you need a plan, and I'll do everything to help. Of course. As the headmaster of the Seraph Academy, that is my duty." He seemed to be convincing himself as well as me that it was okay for us to

continue to spend time together. I wouldn't turn him down. The angel realm was still new. I'd spent more time in jail than actually getting to know what was here. His help was more than needed, it was required.

Tears filled my eyes. So much had changed, but I could handle it. "Thanks, Kade. I'm so glad I met you." I blinked several times, knowing now wasn't the time to break down. Baby hormones would have to suck it. "If you can't find anything, it might be a good idea to talk to Professor Pops or even Abernathy. The dragon has been around a long time. Maybe he can help me discover what I need to do to fulfill the angel prophecy and make sure I don't lose my baby in the final trial." I jumped out of bed, desperate to do anything but lie around and wait. My father was gone. I had no idea when he would return, but I couldn't worry about that. I needed to talk to the dragon. "Can you make that happen?"

"You mean you leave the angel realm?" He appeared distracted.

"Yes, temporarily." Surely he could see the benefit and could sense my urgency.

Kade swallowed, lifting a brow. "I think we should try something else." He crossed his arms, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Anything."

"I think we should try having you speak with the higher-ups?" His eyes found mine, and he held them.

"The Heavenly Harbingers?" That was a good idea. The prophecy came from them, didn't it? It stood to reason they would provide answers.

"That's right. But…" He rubbed the back of his neck.

I didn't want to hear excuses or reasons why it wasn't a good idea. Peter used to say when training us that we should go with our gut and listen to our instincts. If the idea came to Kade, then I had to give it a shot. "Let's go right now."

He glanced out the window as though he were deliberating, then

seemed to make up his mind. “Get dressed.”

“Where are my clothes?” I searched the room without success.

“I’ll have Deacon bring you some.” He closed his eyes and took another deep breath. When he opened them, I saw the resolve there. “It’s dangerous.” He glanced at my stomach. “The higher-ups don’t like to be bothered. They can come to us, but more than one angel received Final Death because they believed their request important enough to disturb them.”

Don’t worry, Alice. I won’t let anything happen to you or the baby, Faith said. *Between us, there isn’t anything that can stand in our way. Not even the Heavenly Harbingers.*

I couldn’t help the smile that grew on my face. “I’ll be fine, Kade,” I replied.

He glanced at my hands and the golden bracelets and must’ve guessed Faith said something. “Good.”

OceanofPDF.com

CLOTHED with my white Seraph Academy uniform, Kade and I flew through the archangel sector. The buildings were pristine and shiny, as though they were somehow cleaned and polished each and every day. The grounds surrounding the structures were elegant with lush grass, beautiful trees with leaves as colorful as the flowers growing near them. Including poppies, roses, and peonies. Water fountains shaped liked angels and surrounded by pools shone brightly, their sound repetitive and calming. On their Main Street were shops, their holographic signs advertising wing jewelry, and delicious smelling food. There were clothing stores and bakeries and anything an angel could possibly want, including a unicorn and flying horses as pets.

What the freak? That brought me up short.

"Unicorns are real?" The ad showed an angel child with pale pink wings riding on the back of a white unicorn with a pink horn, mane, and tail. They looked adorable together, and I was curious whether the angel parents purchased the unicorn to match or if it was a mirage. I felt positive my baby would love a unicorn.

The lure of the ad had me turning and heading down so I could see the animals for myself.

"Alice now isn't a good time," Kade said, shaking his head once. He gave me a very passable headmaster stare.

I wanted to sulk but told myself the angel realm wasn't going anywhere. I could check out the unicorns and flying horses another day. "But they are real?" I verified as I came up alongside Kade.

"Absolutely. The unicorns and their flying counterparts originated in the human realm as one of the seven magics. After a time, they were bred with regular horses and about to be extinct, but it's said two of the higher-ups decided to protect them and brought several to live in the angel realm." He shook his head. "They are only allowed to

be bred and kept in the archangel sector, and the Pegasus isn't allowed to fly except at night."

That seemed odd. When would a child get a chance to ride one? Not only that, but the commercial showed the child riding her Pegasus during the day. I was going to bring that to Kade's attention, but he went on.

"There are exceptions, of course. Once a month, they are allowed to fly any time during the day. And then there's also Pegasus Day where the archangels hold a flying parade and celebrate their beautiful flying horses." Kade shook his head again.

"Why only once a month?" I felt terrible for those flying horses that weren't allowed to fly except once a week.

"Don't worry. Like in the old-timey human days, the archangels hire Fallen to care for the animals. They allow the horses to fly while tethered to extended leads each night to keep their muscles conditioned."

That still didn't sound very nice. How awful it would be, I thought.

"The reason they aren't allowed to fly whenever is because the archangels don't want to flaunt their animals to the other angels and because too many of the animals were being stolen or led away."

I didn't know what to say but strained to see a Pegasus or a unicorn somewhere along the way. None of them were out. But I did notice several white buildings that looked like barns and guessed they might be in those. Disappointment radiated through me. "I'm sure they're beautiful," I said wistfully.

"They are," Kade said with a smile. "Not only that, but the animals' horns possess healing power. Their magic is used quite often in the Healing Center."

"The animals aren't hurt?" I hoped not.

"Oh, no. The animals, especially the unicorns, are very intelligent. Not only that, but their magic allows us to communicate with them.

Some of the unicorns want to help and actually live in the Healing Center."

"You are destroying my resolve," I said.

Kade chuckled and touched my arm. "I'll introduce you to some of them myself after this is all over. Okay?"

I noted when he touched me, there wasn't a zing. He was genuinely committed to Mari. Whatever romantic feelings he had for me were gone. At least that was how I felt and hoped he did too. "Cool," I said and smiled.

In the distance and poking out above the thick gray mists was the top of a volcano. I guessed it had to be Lava Falls. Flecks of lava would shoot into the air. Some would turn to twinkling dust while others would shimmer into something bright gold and fall.

"Won't we choke on the ash?" I asked, suddenly nervous.

"This volcano is different than those in the human realm. The ash doesn't remain." He pointed out toward the sky above the volcano. I followed his finger just as several particles of ash twinkled and sparkled before vanishing. "See that?"

"What's happening to it?"

"The ash dissipates and actually cleans the air. So, in reality, the air near the volcano is actually cleaner than the air anywhere else in the realm."

I found that hard to believe but decided to trust Kade. We may not be a couple, but we were friends.

We continued on heading directly at the volcano, and it became clear that was where we were going. At the edge of the mist, I because nervous again. It was harder to see, and I didn't know where I was going. "How much further?" I asked, feeling my shoulders tense.

"We're nearly there, but we need to land." He sailed to the ground and tucked his feathers in at his back before vanishing deeper into the mist.

I followed, glancing around, unsure what I expected to see. “Kade.”

“I’m here.” He reappeared directly in front of me.

All around us were shadows. Some of them appeared to be walking around while others flew. Worse than the shadows was the whispering. Words I couldn’t understand. As though they were pretending to talk. I strained to understand them.

The souls of the dead, Faith hissed.

What are they saying? I clenched my hands into fists and settled my wings at my back.

Nothing good, Faith said flatly.

“Why is there mist around the angel realm?” I whispered, edging up to Kade, nervously.

He stopped walking and gave me a sideways glance. “There aren’t many who know the truth, but since you are who the prophecy was written about, it would be stupid not to tell you.” He cleared his throat. “It isn’t really mist, but the souls of the dead.”

The truth was worse than I expected, and I let that sink in. “Why are they whispering?” I didn’t like the idea of touching dead angels’ souls with every step. The deeper I went, the thicker the soul mist got until I felt like I was suffocating.

“You can hear them?” Kade tilted his head, listening for a moment. “I can’t hear anything.” He gave me a sorrowful smile.

“I can’t understand what they are saying.” My hands hurt from clenching them so tightly and I uncurled them.

“That’s probably for the best.” He continued forward. “Let’s hurry. The contact point is in here.”

I stayed close to his side, worried I might get lost. It wouldn’t be hard, especially since it felt like the souls worked to infiltrate my body. And suddenly, an arched entrance appeared in front of us.

Kade heaved a great sigh. “We’re here.” He stepped under the

archway and vanished.

“Wait,” I called and promptly followed.

Instantly, my surroundings changed. The harsh and incessant babbling of the souls was gone, and it was easy to see once again. We were in a room similar to the one at the Welcome Station. All white with minimal furniture. The only thing in the room was an oversized oval mirror, the edge covered in golden filigree.

Kade stood to the right of the mirror-like he was afraid to look. I didn’t share his worries and walked right up to it.

“Don’t,” Kade said, trying to grab my arm.

“It’s fine.” I gently shoved him but was distracted. My reflection didn’t reflect what I was wearing. Instead of a white uniform, I wore a sleek gold dress. It shimmered and hugged my body, though not tightly, like liquid gold. Spaghetti straps and a scooped neckline in the front revealed my creamy skin and slight cleavage. I turned and raised my wings and saw the back of the dress was low, with some material pooling just below my waist. The dress was the exact color of my wings at my back. Facing front, I admired my hair, which was in several braids starting at my hairline and going all the way down to the ends—the thickest braid directly on top of my head with several smaller braids along the sides. The style seemed severe for the dress, but I liked it anyway.

“What do you see?” Kade asked, his arms crossed.

I told him about my dress and my hair. As I spoke, Faith in the mirror slinked off my wrists and formed the sword, her blade afire with golden flames that reflected in my eyes. “Frankly, I look bad a.”

He snickered. “On this side of the mirror, your hair is a mess. When’s the last time you brushed it?”

I snorted, but me in the mirror didn’t go along. She just stood there, looking like a warrior. I wanted to be her.

You are her, Faith said. *The mirror shows you the purest form of yourself.*

Thanks for the vote of confidence. "Why aren't you looking in the mirror?" I asked Kade, giving my reflection a smile. This time she smiled back.

Kade took a step back. "In the past, I have." His words came out quiet.

Was he afraid? "What did you see?" I'd never seen Kade be anything but completely confident.

"What I am today," he said, a reverent wonder tightening his features.

"But that's a good thing." I studied him a moment, waiting for him to reveal more or encourage me or say something. He didn't elaborate. "Okay, so what do I do?"

Kade relaxed and ran a hand over the back of his neck. "The mirror is a portal to the higher-ups. You'll need to knock seven times and wait." He headed back to the far wall as a door appeared.

"Where are you going?" I asked, turning.

"Only those who wish to enter can be in the room." He touched the door. "I'll be waiting just outside the mist for you." Then he gave me a small smile. "I always knew you were meant for great things. Good luck, Alice." A whisper of sadness crossed his features before he went through the door.

Alone, I turned back to my reflection. She looked on, giving me courage. I rapped on the mirror as Kade said. The mirror's glass disappeared. Within was what looked like a hallway or more like a person-sized hole. It smelled like dirt and had roots dangling from the ceiling.

"Not again," I whispered, thinking of the times I followed the white rabbit.

"Enter," a distinctly female voice said.

I hesitated. Was I doing the right thing? If a white rabbit appeared, I would run. Also, I still struggled to do what I was told.

"We're waiting."

The voice sounded kind and not at all impatient.

I've got your back, Faith said.

"I'm going." Breathing in through my nose, I stepped through the mirror. As soon as both feet were on the soft dirt floor, the mirror vanished. In its place was complete darkness. I rolled my shoulders back as my power sparked to life.

Faith, sensing my needs, came together and created a small blade that doubled as a flashlight.

You really are the coolest, I said.

She giggled. *Thanks.*

With her lighting the way, I pushed through the roots and headed in the only direction I could go. As I went, the dirt-covered walls were suddenly filled with projected images of people—specifically of a little girl with blond hair. I stopped as something about the her felt familiar. A taller boy punched her in the face, causing her nose to bleed. Instead of backing down or crying, the girl punched back.

There was a flash on the other wall had images projected on it too. The same girl trying to make cupcakes for her first friend's birthday. She stood on a chair and turned on the beaters to mix the ingredients, but it got away from her, and the chocolate batter went everywhere, splattering her, her clothes, the cupboards, refrigerator, and counter. A woman came in and began shouting, grabbing her arm and squeezing so hard that her skin was bruised.

I knew this girl.

"This is me," I whispered.

Immediately, the movies changed to other memories. Like the time I aced a spelling test, and the teacher accused me of cheating. Or the time one of my foster brothers tried to force himself on me and I broke his nose.

I walked faster to escape, but the quicker I went, the faster the

memories flicked along the walls. Until the day I arrived in Demonland. Peter brought me, and I was there with others just like me. Wendy and Eric. Pam and Gilbert and Georgia. Steve and Leif. At the sight of them, I slowed.

Home, I thought. Even though they weren't kind to me. It had been mostly my fault. I had been too focused on the tasks. Especially when I found out who I was and what I was supposed to do. Then the hardness in my personality thickened, and my purpose grew.

The wall flashed the first time I met Wrythe. His smile was the first genuine one I received. At the sight of him, my heart softened. I missed him. I loved him—more than I ever thought possible.

Are you sure about him? You could have anyone, Faith whispered.

I don't want anyone but Wrythe. No matter what, when this was over, I would marry my Dark Moth king.

Up ahead was another arched opening. Beyond was brightness. It infiltrated the entrance, as though the light were trying to take over the cave's darkness. Before I reached it, someone slinked from the shadows and blocked my path. The light filtered around him so I could only see his outline.

"Hello," I said, lightly, thinking he was supposed to take me through to the other side.

He stepped forward and out of the light, and I was able to see it was Raphael. Catherine's father. The angel who wanted me dead. I stopped. "You will not pass," he seethed. Then his eyes fell to Faith. "That is mine. I will have it, Alice." He reached out to take Faith from my hand.

When his fingers touched mine, I flinched. They were so cold, they stung. His other hand came forward to pry Faith, but I held her fast.

"You cannot have her," I said softly.

Never, Faith said.

As my power grew, so did the light on the blade. His eyes flicked

to mine, and he wavered.

I pulled from his grasp and turned the tip of the blade on Raphael. “I’m sorry about what happened to Catherine. You have my sympathies, but this blade is not for you.”

His face twisted with menace. “You’re half-demon and beyond vile. Your words mean nothing,” he said, grasping for the blade.

I stepped out of his reach. “You’re right. I am half demon and totally kick ass. Now get out of my way, or I will end you where you stand.” I didn’t want to kill him, but I would if necessary.

Faith growled her approval and flashed brighter.

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could utter a syllable, he vanished as though he’d been blinked out of existence or had never been there in the first place.

I shifted my weight, standing taller. *Was that me?*

Not you, Alice. The Heavenly Harbingers. They are not to be messed with.

Confining my nervous thoughts, I continued forward until I reached the other side. By the time I arrived, I had to raise one hand to shield my eyes. Without overthinking what I was getting myself into, I stepped through.

“Alice Blackburn. We’ve been waiting for you.”

OceanofPDF.com

THE LIGHT DIMMED, revealing a cavernous room, similar in shape to a cave, but everything else was different. The walls were beyond white and almost seemed to glitter. Above was a white dome ceiling, and underfoot was a white floor.

At the far end of the room were two… individuals. The bodies flickered and shifted from corporeal to apparitions. At first, they were standing or floating. Then two thrones appeared—gold and white. Without looking back, they sat, and their bodies seemed to become fully three dimensional.

One was male and the other female. The man's hair was short and jet black. The female's hair was short and seafoam green. They had the same eye color—lavender. He had a scruff of facial hair while the woman had thick lashes. Their faces were angular, and they were slim and had on sleek black clothes.

"Are you—" It sounded like I hadn't spoken in years, and I cleared my throat. "Are you the Heavenly Harbingers?" I expected more after what Faith told me.

They aren't, Faith hissed. *But they feel familiar.*

That didn't fill me with confidence, and I adjusted my stance, preparing for a battle if necessary.

The male stood. "Put away Faith," he said, lifting one hand and waving it in a soothing motion.

I found my hand dropping to my side without meaning to.

They are the Creators, Faith said. At her words, the blade—she—began to pulse in my hand.

The female walked past the male and stopped directly in front of me. She had long fingers with long nails painted in a color close to her hair, and she reached out and touched the blade. A jolt of power ran

from her and into my hand. Up along my arm and down into my chest, piercing my heart.

In an instant, we were no longer in the cavern but literally among the stars.

Floating.

Or flying.

Wings black as the vast universe around us appeared on their backs. They beat slowly as though they weren't needed, but only decoration.

I glanced back and saw my wings were out as well.

Ferocious fear roared through my veins. I didn't need air like regular humans, but surely out here in space, I would die. At my terror, my powers raced along my skin, and I glowed bright golden.

"You're okay, Alice," the female said.

"Why have you brought me here?" I didn't like it, not one bit. I glanced down and saw the Earth, which gave me some semblance of peace, but not much. At least I knew where we were.

"You are the most like us, Alice, and we wanted you to see all your power can do."

"Except that dragon," the male added.

"Abernathy?" I asked, my bottom lip trembling.

Faith was silent as though she had lost her voice.

"That's right. But never mind him. You need to see just how powerful you are." She took the blade from my hand.

Was she saying I could create worlds and a universe? I shuddered at the thought.

The female held the blade sideways in both of her hands. "Faith, come forth," she whispered.

At once, the blade shimmered and transformed into a human girl. Her form radiated golden power a moment before settling. She had blond hair similar to mine. Basically, she looked like my younger

twin.

Faith's blue eyes were wide with surprise. "Is this real?" she asked, studying her hands.

"Of course, Faith," the male said and held out his arms. "Daughter."

Faith searched my face, afraid.

"It's okay," I said, trying to comfort her. But I was out of my element and just as thrown off as her.

The male hugged Faith.

She resisted a moment and then sank into him and started to cry. "Father?"

"That's right, child," he cooed, patting her back softly.

The female went over and wrapped her arms around them both. As I watched, the three of them shifted from solid to wispy things and back again.

I felt out of place and was about to turn away when Faith pushed through her parents and rushed me, tugging me into her arms. "Alice," she said.

There was an energy, strange but desirable brushing through her as I hugged her back. "Do you know what's going on?" I asked, momentarily forgetting we were all still in space and that this wasn't the freakiest experience ever.

A moment later, we were back in the white cavern.

I heaved a sigh of relief.

"We did that," Faith said, standing back, her eyes wide with excited understanding. "Our powers combined."

Confusion coursed through me, but before I could clarify, the female spoke.

"That's right," she said, resting a hand on Faith's shoulder. "Together, you are even more amazing than we imagined when we created the prophecy."

“Sometimes we astound ourselves,” the male said, looking at his daughter, and then looking at me. “Brilliant!”

Faith smiled, and I joined her as her parents’ wings disappeared. I sent mine away, as well.

“Thank you,” Faith said.

“But how?” I asked, wanting answers to all of my questions.

The two chairs were still there, but the next instant, there was also a table filled with delicate fruits and opulent vegetables along with steaming loaves of bread and goblets filled with something refreshing plus two more chairs.

“Have a seat, both of you,” the female said. “We have much to discuss.”

Faith went over and sat. I joined her, planting my hands in my lap as Faith popped a piece of fruit in her mouth before she began piling food on her plate.

When the Creators were also seated, I glanced over at them from under my eyelashes, curious about what they would say or do next.

The male leaned forward. “Introductions are in order, so you don’t have to continue calling us male and female in your head,” he said with a sharp smile before biting into a strawberry.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” the female said.

Faith nodded but didn’t speak, her mouth full of food.

I guessed it was her first time eating, and she was enjoying herself.

“You may call me Syne, and my beloved eternal partner is Gwenthe,” the male said.

“I like that,” Gwenthe said, picking up a roll, tearing off a piece and chewing it slowly.

As I watched, I got the feeling they changed their names as well as their appearance at least as often as night turned into day.

“The name is as lovely as you are, Beloved.” Syne kissed Gwenthe’s

hand, and she smiled.

Then Gwenthe faced me. “Now then, you had questions. You wanted to know how Faith became a person who looks like you.” She blinked, and I nodded.

“I am wondering that too,” Faith said in between bites.

“Before we get to that, let us ask you a question, Alice,” Syne said.

Nervous, I picked up something that looked like a carrot and took a bite. Chewed. It didn’t taste like a carrot, but it was still good. When I finished, I set the rest of the vegetable down on the plate in front of me. “What?”

“Your mother. Aren’t you curious about why she did what she did?” Gwenthe clasped her hands together and leaned a cheek against her fists.

I felt my mouth drop open. Because, of course, I wanted all the details behind why she made such a decision. Not that I wasn’t grateful. I was alive because of her. But after all, I knew of *the* Joan of Arc and the little I’d learned about my mom in the last year, my mom wasn’t one to make such a seemingly irrational choice, at least not without an excellent reason. “You know?”

“We do.” Gwenthe batted her thick lashes. “She allowed herself to be swayed by the Devil because we asked her to.”

It was like my brain froze, and my body shut down. I struggled to breathe and found myself kneading my dress into knots. “You… What?”

“In case you didn’t know, things in the realms have been crazy. We nearly had a reset of all magics, and you and the prophecy would’ve been moot, but since that didn’t happen, we needed your mother to give birth to a child. You,” Syne added.

“Yes. We always have multiple fuels in the hypothetical fire of life. It keeps things interesting, doesn’t it?” Gwenthe batted her eyelashes at Syne, who smiled lovingly at her.

My confusion gave way to irritation. “Why would you do such a thing?” How irresponsible.

“The answer is simple. You are a part of us. We are power and creation. Whatever we command is brought into existence. When we formed Faithkeeper for the angels, we had such high hopes for them. She was to be their symbol of unity.” She clucked her tongue. “Turns out, they are just as driven by the most basic of urges as the rest of our creations.” Gwenthe glanced at Syne.

“So true, Beloved, which brings us back to the reason you are here, doesn’t it?” Syne smiled. “You want to know how to bring the prophecy to pass?”

“That’s right,” I said, but I was distracted because there was a fluttering in my belly. My baby was moving. It took every effort not to glance down, but I did rest my hands against my stomach just in case the baby needed comforting.

“Well.” Gwenthe’s smiled knowingly. “Over the years, there have been many possibilities. They were called to bring the prophecy to pass, but you are the only one to meet all of the obligations, including being with child.”

My power flared to life. “My baby has nothing to do with this,” I said, my voice lethal.

“You are totally wrong, Alice. Your baby is the reason you *will* bring about the prophecy. Finally.” Syne sipped his drink. “You see, for the prophecy to work, three requirements had to be met. “The first was a child born of the Devil and an archangel.” He pointed and continued. “That is you.”

“The second was that child had to live to adulthood and be able to get pregnant. Also you,” Gwenthe said.

“Right,” Syne continued. “The final condition was Faith. She needed to hold the one who wielded her with such adoration that she would reveal all of her secrets.”

Gwenthe smiled. “And Faith was immediately enamored with you,

weren't you Faith?" She glanced at her daughter, adoringly.

"It's true," Faith admitted. "Alice is the best of any being I've ever been in contact with. I will serve no other." She glanced at me, and I saw the fire in her eyes.

It rocked me, the sincerity and strength of her words. "Thank you, Faith. I will do all I can to honor your conviction in me."

Syne and Gwenthe clapped their hands. "And that is why the prophecy is finally able to come forth. The three of you are the perfect trio."

I still didn't understand but decided to ask another question. "We are to bring unity to the angel realm?"

Gwenthe rolled her eyes. "Over the years, the prophecy has been whittled down to fit the angels' needs. The prophecy is for more than just the angels, and you three will bring unity to all realms."

That sounded unattainably impossible. Since it was so massive, I decided to ask them to get me out of the third trial. "What about my father? He still intends for me to complete my final trial." If I didn't have to give up the most precious part of myself to save someone I loved, that would be awesome.

"Oh, we know." Gwenthe and Syne gave each other a knowing smile, and my pulse quickened. "You see, Alice, the third trial is what starts the prophecy in motion." While she spoke, she corporeal form turned to mist, and she hovered a moment, waiting.

Syne transformed into mist as well. They swirled around each other, like a dance before moving over to Faith.

Her fork clanged on the table as she turned into my blade once again.

I wasn't finished, Faith said into my mind, disappointed.

Sorry, Faith. And I was sorry, but I was also consumed with dread. My hand went to my belly. I wouldn't give up my daughter. And no one, not the Creators or the Devil, could make me.

In an instant, I was back in the tunnel. Quickly, I went until I reached the mirror. Stepping through, I crossed the room without hesitation and didn't stop until I was back in the mists. After what I just experienced, the indistinguishable gibberish was a welcome relief.

Once again, I was in my uniform, the dress gone. Faith had returned to my wrists and was soundlessly pouting.

I was too.

When Kade found me, he sighed with relief. “I was beginning to worry.” He pulled me into a quick hug. “What did the higher-ups have to say?”

I didn’t respond right away, but walked beside him, pondering until we exited the mist.

“Alice?” he prodded gently.

“I didn’t speak with the Heavenly Harbingers,” I said, bringing out my wings and taking to the air.

“Where were you then?” he asked, once he was flying beside me.

“I spoke with the Creators.”

Kade was confused and beyond shocked, but didn’t voice what he was feeling.

“They told me how to bring about the prophecy,” I continued.

“That’s good, I guess.”

I didn’t know how to tell him about all I was feeling. About Faith, my baby, and me. And about how the prophecy was supposed to come to be. It felt like my heart was being squished and I felt out of control.

Kade let me stew in my thoughts until we reached the roof of the building where his office resided. “What can I do to help?” he finally asked.

“You need to let me return home,” I whispered, staring at my feet.

He stepped back and crossed his arms.

I met his eyes, and hoped he could read some of the conflict

residing in my mind. He was disappointed. I figured he must think I was giving up on him and on the angels. “The prophecy will start when I complete the third trial,” I uttered, unable to look at him another moment. He said he wanted to help, but he couldn’t. No one could, except maybe Wrythe. I needed to see him again.

“Very well. I will escort you to the Welcome Station. You can leave right away.”

“Thank you.” My emotions were in my throat but I didn’t try to clear them.

Without another word, Kade took to the air.

He’s sad to see you go, Faith said.

You think?

Oh, yes. I can feel it in the air.

I’ll talk to him.

I caught up with Kade and cleared my throat again. “Thank you for all of your help. I wish you and Mari all the joy you could ever hope for.”

He blinked several times. “Loving you was the best decision I ever made,” he responded.

Okay. Was he having second thoughts about his union? “But, you love Mari more?”

One side of his mouth turned up into a smile. “Yes, Alice.”

He didn’t sound completely sincere, but it wasn’t my place to decipher his strange moods anymore.

We reached the Welcome Station and landed. Tillie let us in before giving us some privacy.

I didn’t have anything more to say. His life was here. “Well, thanks again,” I said, and went toward a door.

He turned the handle. It shimmered a moment, and the door opened. “Goodbye, Alice.”

Faith sniffled.

It's for the best, I said to her.

It's still sad.

If you say so. I was the opposite of sad. With each step through the opening, I was closer to Wrythe. Not even the time in the mist could deter my joy. Any moment, I would get to jump into my fiancé's arms and have him hold me. Any moment—

"It's time, Alice."

OceanofPDF.com

HIS WAS the voice of my father.

I had to cover my mouth so I wouldn't let out an aggravated scream. "Not yet," I sobbed.

"Now," the Devil said. And I was back in his spacious hollow with thousands of menial demons gnashing their teeth and anxious to escape. As though the Devil had trapped them in the walls. The Devil sat on his throne; one leg crossed over the other. His elbows rested on the arms of the oversized and pretentious chair like he had all the time in the world.

The white rabbit was there too, peeking from behind the throne. His nose and whiskers moved rapidly in time with my beating heart. He glanced at his pocket watch. "We're late. We're late. We're going to miss the date."

"Not so, Rabbit," the Devil said. "We're right on time." He clapped his hands together, and my white uniform vanished and was replaced with an inky blue dress, the lace sleeves reaching past my wrists and the collar touching just below my neck. The skirt was long, so I could no longer see my shoes, and the bodice was tight.

My hair no longer rested along my shoulders, so I guessed it was pulled up and probably in a lovely style.

I didn't care. Moaning, I fell to my knees, causing the skirt to bell out around me like I was drowning in a pool of dark water. It felt like it.

I didn't want to do this.

You don't have to, Faith said.

Her words sparked something in me, and my distress turned to fury. Because since I found out I was pregnant, I knew what the Devil was really after. It wasn't me, but my daughter.

He wouldn't have her.

My power thundered to life.

Faith flickered and slithered along my wrists in anticipation.

"Now, then," the Devil said. "It is time to complete the third trial." He smiled, and I wanted to puke.

Instead, I stood, allowing my power to pulsate just under my skin.

"You are required to give up the most precious part of yourself to save someone you love." His smile grew, and he uncrossed his legs and stood. "I bet you've had all sorts of thoughts trickle through your head about what that might be." He took one step down, and that was too close.

I stepped back. I didn't want to play his games. "True," I said, hoping to get him talking so I could come up with some kind of a plan. *I need an idea,* I hissed to Faith.

I'm thinking, she responded.

He began to walk at a leisurely pace, not toward me, but along the outskirts of the room. "Things like your love for Kade. Your Dark Moth power. Then your angel power. Your wings." He paused. "Can I see them?"

I shook my head, but he clapped his hands, and they appeared.

Dammit!

They spread out to their full potential, and I was pleased to see his eyes get wide. "They are even lovelier than I imagined. Would you give them up?"

I didn't want to. I did like them a lot, but I would if that meant I didn't have to give up the child growing inside me. "Yes," I said.

"Hm-huh. And that's why it isn't the most precious part of yourself." He tucked his hands behind his back and started walking again.

I sent my wings away and turned so I could keep an eye on him.

"I bet you even thought it might be Faith."

It was my turn to be surprised. He knew her name. “I did.”

“And I do want her.” He rubbed his hands together. “I have a feeling if I asked, you would give her to me freely.”

My shoulders slumped, but I forced them back. *To save my child.*

I understand, Faith said. *It’s okay. Of course, you would give me up if it meant saving your baby.*

I touched my stomach. Gritted my teeth. *There has to be another way.*

Together, we’ll find it.

“Alice!” In the blink of an eye, the Devil was directly in front of me. So close, I could feel his breath on my face. “Wouldn’t you?” His voice boomed.

“Yes,” I admitted, but lifted my chin defiantly. I didn’t want to give up Faith or my daughter, and I wouldn’t. Somehow, I would defeat my father.

He nodded and began a trek around the room again. “You think you won’t do it? You think you have the power?”

I know I do, I thought. “Yes,” I said. Did he know that completing the trial would set the prophecy in motion? I doubted he even cared.

You do, Faith verified.

“So, you have options. Kill me and destroy yourself and your child. Or refuse and destroy all Moths.” He went up the steps and sat back down on his throne. He was proud of himself. Arrogant. “But if you agree to give me the child when it is born, then I will allow the Moths to live, and life can continue the way it has for thousands of years. It’s a win-win, really.”

He is the most awful creature, Faith said.

Agreed, I said and closed my eyes. Because there was another flutter in my belly. My baby. How am I supposed to give you up? I can’t. Tears pushed against my eyes.

“What’s it going to be, Alice? Your daughter's life for thousands of

Moths or the death of thousands so you can raise your child. Alone."

You wouldn't be alone, Faith chimed in.

I knew that, but Wrythe would be gone. My heart ached.

Help me! I cried in the deepest energy of my soul. It wasn't to Faith so much as just a shout to out the Universe. The Creators. The Heavenly Harbingers. Someone. Anyone.

Almost immediately, an answer came. It was as if the baby's mind as well as mine and Faith's all fused together. Flashes and images sailed across my mind like mini-movies. A dozen of them in a second. And then the same flashes happened again and again. Until I understood what needed to be done.

The plan would require trust, but if it worked?

Faith, did you see that?

Yes. She sounded nervous. I was too.

Are you okay with this plan?

It would be an honor, Alice.

Thank you, Faith. I opened my eyes.

The Devil raised an eyebrow, waiting.

I took a deep breath and a step toward my father. My power pulsed. Then another step and another pulse. Another step and another pulse. It continued like that, up each of the steps to the Devil's throne.

Instead of fear, there was happiness in his expression. Did he know what I intended to do? It was doubtful.

When I was so close, my dress touched his legs, he pushed himself into a standing position, so he had to look down on me. "You can't win, Alice." He flashed a quick smile, so I saw all of his white teeth. "You have power, but it isn't as much as mine. And if you try to kill me, you know you will die too." His hands cupped my face.

The feel of his touch repulsed me, but I stood firm. I needed to be close. I needed to throw him off guard.

“Father,” I whispered and wrapped my arms around him, pressing my face against his chest.

He didn’t immediately respond like he was debating my sincerity, and I thought he might push me away.

There wasn’t much time. *Now, Faith.*

She changed into a blade, and as I sank it into my father’s back, he returned my hug. Warmth gushed from the wound I created, but I was determined and pushed from his grasp.

The Devil was surprised. “Stabbed in the back. The ultimate betrayal,” he said. “I will make you suffer for this.” He tried to reach around to grab the blade. His fingers reappeared with black blood on them. His brows scrunched together as he reached around once again. Still, he couldn’t get it.

My hands were covered in his blood, and I wiped them on my dress as I retreated. My heart pounded with nervousness. This had to work, but it would take a few minutes for Faith to get completely embedded in him.

“Rabbit,” the Devil yelled. “Retrieve the blade from my back. I cannot seem to reach it.”

The rabbit hopped over as the Devil turned so I could see Faith was gone. Buried. Her power infiltrating and stealthily taking control of him from the inside.

Hope buzzed through my veins, and the baby fluttered at my belly. This had to work for all our sakes. “Please,” I whispered.

“It isn’t there, sire,” the rabbit complained.

The Devil snarled and rushed at me, but he only got two feet before he slammed against an invisible forcefield. At his touch, it flashed gold. “What is this?” He turned and tried to go around it. But again came into contact with the forcefield. Again and again, he tried. He clapped his hands, a move used to kill the Dark Moths as well as Catherine.

This time nothing happened.

“This doesn’t change anything, Alice. If you don’t complete the third trial, you will go insane,” he said, his voice so furious I knew if he ever escaped, he truly would make me suffer by killing everyone I loved.

“I have to give up the most precious part of myself, but never once did you say I had to give up that precious part of myself to you,” I snapped.

The Devil stopped trying to escape his incarceration. “That was assumed,” he jeered.

“You know, assuming just makes you an ass,” I said and smirked. Even as naive as I was when it came to things of the world, I’d heard that saying before.

He got deathly still. “Very well. Then say the words.”

I copied him and crossed my arms and moved, so I was right beside him. “I will give up my daughter when the time comes, not to you or to the demons or your sick games, but to the man, she deems worthy of her.”

The Devil spat, and it smacked against the forcefield and slowly trickled down.

Immediately, I knew the third trial was over. The Devil had no more control over me. There was a flutter in my belly as though my baby were happy with the outcome too.

“You think you’ve won, but you haven’t. Sooner or later, I’ll escape this prison and when I do—”

“You’ll never escape,” I barked, interrupting him. *Faith,* I called, hoping she would hear me.

But there was no answer. “The Faithkeeper comes from the Creators. No one but them can alter the power holding you.” I pressed my hand against the forcefield. Warmth radiated, but the part of Faith that spoke to me was gone. Only her power remained, keeping the

Devil trapped inside. But I would meet Faith's soul again. I knew it. Gripping my fingers together, I went on. "You will remain in this prison eternally. No power. No life. Nothing but emptiness." When I finished speaking I shuddered. I wouldn't wish such an existence upon anyone, except the Devil.

I turned away and headed to the exit.

"Alice?" It was the white rabbit.

My eyes fell on him and I blinked, unsure what he wanted.

"What should I do?" He was flustered and kept glancing at his pocket watch. Then he held it out so I could see it. The minute and hour hands were spinning and spinning like they were out of control.

My heart softened for the creature. "You can work for me," I said and knew that was right.

He did something weird with his mouth, flashing his teeth.

"What are you doing?" I wasn't sure whether to be concerned or angry.

He hopped over to me. "I'm smiling, Alice. Can't you tell?" He dropped his pocket watch, and it hit the ground with a clang and shattered into pieces.

It was more of a grimace than a smile. "We're going to have to work on that." I patted his head. "Now, can you lead me back to Demonland?"

"Yes. Of course." He shooed some of the menial demons out of the way, then paused. "What about them?" He pointed at the screeching demons.

I shrugged. "I guess someone else will have to deal with them."

He opened the door and stepped through.

I went in after him.

"And the game? What about the royal demons?"

"I don't have all of the answers, Rabbit, but whatever comes I'll deal with it."

“You’re in charge, Alice. You are the next in line. The demons will look to you,” the Devil shouted, his hands banging against the invisible prison.

I paused and turned back.

He smiled. “You rule the demons, daughter. It’s all I ever wanted for you.”

A steely calm filtered through me. My father was right. I was heir to all demons and that meant what I said would become law. I returned the Devil’s smile with a grin of my own, knowing in a way I was now the villain—at least to all demons. They weren’t going to like my orders. “I command all royal demons to stop the evil game at once. There will be no more bedding and killing humans or any other creature for that matter. All *evil* demons are required to remain down here.” I didn’t want those who lived in Demonland to be harmed in any way. They were kind and good. “Once the *evil* demons have all returned to Underland, they are required to watch over the Devil. Never leave. Don’t even think about it. There is nothing but your mission.” As I spoke, my power filtered from my mouth like shadowy smoke and grew, and it would continue to grow until all demons everywhere received my decree. They would have no choice but to obey.

The Devil began to shriek and say things I didn’t understand.

I ignored him and turned to follow the rabbit.

“Come on, Alice. We aren’t late, but I’m sure Wrythe is eager for your return.” He did the funny thing with his face again. I guess it looked like a smile. Mostly it looked like he was about to sneeze.

I chuckled. “Lead the way.”

OceanofPDF.com

I WAS DREAMING. My daughter was running and flying and running again. Chasing a butterfly and I was chasing her. We were both laughing. The insect landed on her finger and suddenly it was no longer a butterfly with vibrant wings, but a pulsing golden light. “Hello,” came a voice from within. “I’ve missed you both so much.”

“Faith,” my daughter cried. Then she turned to me. “Mommy, when will we see Faith again?”

Sadness filled my chest. I missed my weaponized friend. “Someday,” I said.

When I woke, there were tears on my pillow. Years had passed since she’d been a warrior voice inside my head.

“Are you okay, Alice?” Wrythe’s voice was close and his hand rested on my hip.

The sadness dissipated and was replaced by need for my husband. I inched closer and wrapped a leg over him. “I am now,” I said, and snuggled into his bare chest.

He held me tightly, kissing the top of my head and stroking my back.

I sighed, contentedly. Since imprisoning the Devil, so much had changed.

With all of the evil demons bound to remain in the Underworld, there was no longer any need for the Dark Moths. All Moths were safe. But, Wrythe knew there were many young Moths who didn’t have a good home or life because their mother was killed.

After Wrythe and I were married, our first order of business was to open Demonland to all Moths and not just those with marks. Since they needed to be found we tasked many Dark Moths, including Wendy to track them down and offer them a place at the school. They

would be loved and taught and given a place in society when they desired.

Seth never came back, but we knew he was out there. When he found out about the Final Death of his twin brother, he would return with a vengence. When he did, we would be ready. I still had the demon orb and always carried it with me whether I wore my boots or not. That and my blade.

Some Dark Moths no longer wanted to live in Demonland but desired a life above ground. For them, Wrythe opened up the treasuries and gave each an inheritance.

Rabbit became my most trusted advisor. After a year, I put him in charge of the "good" demons. Because of my decree in the demon realm, there were many demons seeking refuge in Demonland as well. Rabbit had a big job, but I'd never seen him happier. He had a new pocket watch and could still be heard to say he was late.

And my half-brother, Jax? He helped me fix Crystal Peak, and came to visit in the human realm all the time.

When Demiangel was born, Wrythe and I took a step back from our responsibilities. We put Wendy in charge of Demonland and left. We needed to introduce our daughter to her grandparents. And once we lived in Salem, Massachusetts for a while, we knew we could never live permanently in Demonland again.

So we returned to Wonderland, Arizona and bought a grand house. Then we asked Styx and Daya and their families if they wanted to live with us. They happily agreed. We have the most beautiful and magical grounds and landscaping in our city because of the pixilettes. And Styx cooks the most incredible dishes. We are always pleasantly surprised by her culinary creations.

And the prophecy? It was as the Creators said. Once I completed the third trial, the prophecy was immediately fulfilled. Wars and contentions around the world and all the realms suddenly ended. Peace was everywhere. Supernaturals and humans were free to roam

the human realm as well as every other.

Professor Pops knew it wouldn't last long thought. Because while there was peace, the prophecy didn't rid the world of evil. People and supernaturals still had choices. Sooner or later someone would rise up and once again start a war.

Not only that, but there were those who needed help. Wrythe and I decided to open a private investigations office for the supernatural. The building was finally complete and furniture and décor went in the week before. We hired several Dark Moths as well as other supernaturals to assist us, but I still hadn't found the right person to be the face of our agency.

Wrythe put an ad in the paper and we had our first interview later that day.

But first, I intended to make love to my husband.

I ran my nose along his bare chest.

He rolled on top of me. "My sweet wife," he whispered and kissed me deeply, pressing my mouth open and stroking my face with his thumbs.

I wrapped my legs around his hips.

"Mommy. Daddy." Demi opened the door.

Wrythe growled happily and bit my lower lip.

"Later," I whispered.

"Hello darling," Wrythe said, climbing out of bed.

The man was hot even in his pajama bottoms. Since Demi turned three, we had to change our naked sleeping arrangement to wearing something more appropriate.

Wrythe picked up Demi, kissed her cheek and then tossed her into the air.

Demi giggled infectiously. "Again. Again. Daddy. Again."

I wondered if she liked to fly because I did. At some point she might even get wings. Wrythe certainly loved my wings. My cheeks

heated as I thought of all the times I'd spent in his arms—with and without my wings.

"Mommy, why is your face red?" Demi climbed on the bed and planted herself in my lap.

"Oh, just thinking happy thoughts," I said, and glanced at Wrythe.

He gave me a look that had my lower belly dancing.

"Is it because we get to go to your office today?" She stood and jumped on the bed, clapping her hands.

Wrythe and I laughed.

We'd promised Demi she could come with us today.

"Something like that," I admitted.

AFTER DRESSING AND EATING, we drove over to the offices. The three story building was in the heart of Wonderland. Our sign which read, Supernaturally, PI hung across the front.

When he got inside, Demi ran around to each of the rooms, commenting and touching everything. Wrythe followed, happily keeping an eye on her.

I sat at the front desk, waiting for the applicant to arrive.

The bell above the double glass doors tinkled.

"Just one second," I said, and quickly finished up what I was doing on the computer. When I glanced up, I gasped. The woman waiting looked like she could be my sister—except her hair was fiery red and beautiful. But her features and the shape of her face as well as her body type? Very similar. Instantly, I knew her. "Faith," I said and stood, coming around the desk.

"Hi Alice. Ready to kick some ass?" She smiled, and it lit up her whole face.

"You're here for the job?" I remembered the name on the application was Faith, but I didn't think much of it. In the human realm, it was a common name.

“I am.”

“You’re hired,” I said, and rushed into her outstretched arms.

“What’s going on in here?” Wrythe asked.

I introduced him to Faith.

Demi squirmed out of his arms and went over to Faith. She studied her a moment. “I know you,” she said and took Faith’s hand.

“I know you too,” Faith said, and blinked several times.

It only took moments for Demi and Faith to be best of friends.

Wrythe’s arms came around my waist. “Think she’d watch Demi a moment. There’s something I want to show you in my office.”

I stood on my tip-toes and touched his face.

He leaned down so I could whisper in his ear.

“Want to play a game?”

He growled and lifted me into his arms.

I laughed, my eyes meeting his, and knew Wrythe and I would live happily ever after.

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

ESCAPE

WYSTERIA

“You must hurry, Wysteria. She will return at any moment.” Leva appears seemingly out of nowhere, scaring me half to death.

I’d been gazing longingly at the view beyond my window.

High above the ground, inside my towering prison, I could see the green, green grass, the lush treetops, and the sparkling azure water that went on for as far as my eyes could see.

“You startled the hell out of me,” I say, my hand flying to my throat.

“Sorry, not sorry, Wys. Now come on.” My little pixilette best and only friend pats my cheek and flies into the room, hovering above the trap door.

“Alright. Alright.” I adjust my skirt while I move, working to find some courage.

Leva has enough for the both of us, though she’s probably only five inches tall. Sunlight from a hole in the roof envelops Leva’s body, causing her teal wings to shimmer.

“Move like your butt is on fire,” she huffs, putting her hands on her tiny waist. “If you are still here when she returns, I won’t be able to stop her from doing something worse than she already has.”

“Okay. Sheesh.” I slide on my shoes.

She lets out an annoyed sound. “Maybe this time it’ll be forever. No more living in this tower with a window where you can see so much of our land. No more anything.”

I push my extra-long blond hair off my face, going over the plan.

Once I’m out of the tower, I must travel through the thickets and to the beach where a boat will be waiting.

From there, I am to row until I reach the end of the realm.

The whole thing sounds ridiculous.

I can't do this!

At the prospect of going alone, my insides quiver.

"Leva, I can't leave. Mother will be upset." I fan my face with my hand as a nervous sweat breaks out along my hairline.

"Redyrin," Leva corrects. "She isn't your mother. She kidnapped you away from your real mother and father in the human realm. She doesn't love you. She's just using you."

I swallow down my fear. "I know. I know," I say, even though I'm still trying to figure it all out.

I don't remember my parents or the human realm.

I don't remember anything at all before I arrived here. To my mind, never had I ever been outside the walls of my tower.

Not once in eighteen years.

At least not once that I can remember.

According to Leva, my real name is Rapunzel, and I don't belong here.

Part of me is thrilled at the prospect of leaving.

I always dreamed of a life beyond my tower.

But the more significant portion of myself is dizzy with fear.

Can I abandon what I know?

"Leva, come with me. Please. I can't do this by myself. I need you."

Even though she hadn't spoken to me once before yesterday - my eighteenth birthday - she's been my companion and only friend for so long, I don't want to be without her.

"Very well, but you need to pick up the pace." She tugs on my hair, and I follow her over to the leather satchel, where she helps me pack some bread and cheese.

I want a change of clothes, but there isn't any time.

“Keep this safe,” she says, picking up and handing me a clear bottle nearly as big as her.

At the effort, her wings and hair change from teal to tawny, the color of her eyes.

I take it, studying the contents, which look like water, except when it catches the light allowing me to see strange things, almost like stars shimmering within.

“Hurry,” she says, snapping me back to the task at hand.

I tuck the potion into one of my dress pockets and tug the bag over my head so the strap rests on my shoulder.

Leva’s pointy face pinches with worry, and her large eyes that seem almost too big for her face become cloudy with anxiety.

She drops onto the escape hatch in the floor and taps it three times with her fingers. The latch clicks.

“You did it,” I say.

Part of me hadn’t believed she could.

She’d kept her magic a secret from me all these years, too, probably because of Redyrin.

My mind is still reeling at all Leva has shared since Redyrin left last evening to hunt and forage our food.

As I follow the pixilette down the steps, I relive our conversation in my mind.

Even now, I sense the rightness of Leva’s confession.

But the knowledge doesn’t change the fact that I’m so scared my knees tremble with each step.

Am I really going to do this?

Go to another realm, the human one, and find my family.

My heart shouts with joy over the possibility, but my mind recoils.

What if it’s as Moth-Redyrin says?

What if life outside my tower is too much to handle?

My extra-long hair catches on one of the nails sticking out of a wooden step. “Ouch,” I cry, rubbing my head and working to untangle my hair.

My locks have never been cut. According to Redyrin, doing so will be detrimental, but sheesh, it’s annoying.

“Your hair is obnoxious,” Leva says, confirming what I already know.

She flies over and carefully unhooks my hair.

When it’s free, she speaks several words.

I guess it’s a spell.

Without stopping, I hurry after Leva.

Down, down, down all of the circular stairs. The turret is dark and damp, and the steps are covered in moss.

Redyrin did spells all the time.

She would wind some of my hair around her hands and then say words I didn’t understand. All sorts of things would happen. Paintings came to life and talked to Redyrin.

Our tower would be clean in seconds after a few words uttered from Redyrin’s mouth.

Strangest of all, whenever Redyrin began to look tired and her hair began to gray, she would whisper the words that brought youth back to her body.

Many times I asked Redyrin about my hair. She always said I was unique, and she needed me to survive.

At that thought, I shudder.

Would Mo-Redyrin die if I left?

I didn’t like that she took me away from my real parents, and I didn’t like that she kept me locked away in the tower, but she had been good to me in her own way.

I didn’t want her to die.

“Wysteria,” Leva says, frantic. She snaps her fingers, and a spark of magic snaps me out of my thoughts.

I study her, working to keep my eyes from crossing.

Before I can say anything, my hair, which has been dragging along behind me, is suddenly pulled away from my face and secured back into a braid.

“Thank you, Leva,” I say and sigh. One less thing to worry about.

At the bottom of the steps, I pull open the door. Leva flies out, but I don’t follow right away.

“Will Redyrin die without me?” I ask quietly.

Leva opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Like she changed her mind.

“Probably not,” she finally says.

Then under her breath, she adds, “But it would serve her right.”

I disagree. “No, Leva. I can’t do that to her.” I don’t move, debating whether I should go back up all of the stairs and just settle into my fate.

Leva’s face becomes bright pink, and she clenches her hands at her sides in fists, her body shaking. I thought she might burst.

“Leva?”

She lets out her breath and turns back to the tower, saying some words.

“What did you do?” I ask.

“If she stays in this realm, she won’t die, okay?” Leva says.

“Thank you,” I say, relief washing over me. Even though I don’t understand what the pixilette did, I trust my friend.

“Whatever.” It’s obvious Leva is upset with me, but I can’t help how I feel.

“Humph.” She flies away and disappears into the shadow of the trees.

I rush after her. "Wait."

When I reach the woodland's edge, I glance back, clutching my hands to my heart.

My tower is all I know, and the unknown terrifies and excites me.

Plus, I have a feeling there is still much for Leva to tell.

On the boat ride, I intend to get my questions answered.

"Wysteria!" Leva is irritated. To prove it, her wings and hair shift to deep green, the color of the leaves.

"I'm moving as fast as I can," I say but pick up the pace, tripping over roots and rocks and whatever else is on the ground.

My dress snags on a bush, and I yank it away, causing it to tear.

Leva doesn't notice but speeds along faster and faster until I'm running to keep up.

It isn't too long before we reach the water.

The sandy beach is covered with white sand.

Driftwood and seaweed linger near the water's edge, sending the smell of salt and wet wood into the air.

The water is so clear I can see the sand.

Orange fish dart around, searching for food.

Leva flies over to the boat. "Help me untie the rope," she says.

I walk over and unwrap the thick rope, tossing it into the small wooden boat.

It seems too small for such a vast ocean.

"This will get us to the end of the realm?" I ask.

"Yes, now climb in." Leva crosses her arms, waiting impatiently, her ever-changing hair and wings shifting to the same blue as the water.

"Hurry, please," she commands, her eyes flitting along the landscape behind me, probably searching for Redyrin.

Lifting my dress, I carefully step in.

The boat rocks precariously, and I grab hold of both sides to steady myself.

The wood is smooth with a shine on it.

“This won’t sink, right?”

“Definitely not.” Leva clucks her tongue, frustrated I’m questioning her. “I wouldn’t lead you to a leaky boat, Wys.”

“You’re right,” I say, though I’m still not feeling very confident. Because what if there’s a windstorm? Waves could easily capsize this boat.

“Or should I call you Rapunzel now that you know the truth?” She studies me thoughtfully, tapping a finger against her lips.

“No, please don’t. I prefer Wys, thank you.” I sit and grab hold of the oars. I haven’t been out in the world, but I’ve read about it and know what these are for.

“Very well.” She touches each of the oars, and they begin to row on their own, making my hands unnecessary. “And we’re off.” She gives me a brilliant smile, suddenly much more relaxed.

I put my hands in my lap, watching the pixilette. She is daring and bold, and I want to be more like her.

First, I need answers.

“Tell me why Redyrin stole me away from my parents? What’s the human realm like? When we get there, how will we find my family? Are there towers in the human realm? Why do - ”

“Stop, you’re giving me a headache,” she says, rolling her shoulder back and coming to sit on my hands.

“First things first,” she begins. “The reason Redyrin took you is - ” She trails off at the sounds of a hundred banshee’s screaming.

It’s Redyrin. She found my tower empty.

“Not good,” Leva says and flies up above my head. Then she starts chanting words in rapid succession.

Two things happen at once.

The boat starts moving really fast. So fast, in fact, that the oars pull themselves into the boat.

The other thing is a glittering field falls around Leva, shrouding the boat and me.

OceanofPDF.com

THROUGH THE CURTAIN

WYSTERIA

“Don’t make a sound,” Leva hisses. “The boat is invisible, but if she looks just right or if she hears you, we’re done for.”

“Lev - ” I wonder why she didn’t do this in the first place, but don’t question my friend and rescuer.

“Quiet!”

I clamp a hand over my mouth but spin around in time to see Redyrin burst through the thicket, her eyes searching the beach.

Her pale and lovely face is tainted with fury, and I suck in a breath.

I’ve never seen her so angry.

The boat continues to speed along the water swiftly without making a sound.

In no time, Redyrin is just a dot against the shore.

A few moments later, I can’t make out her dark hair.

It’s another ten minutes before Leva finally relaxes her shoulders and sits on the edge of the boat.

“It’s okay now. We’re far enough away.” As she speaks, she glances back at the way we came and then nods.

“It won’t be long now, but my magic is waning. You may need to row for a few minutes.”

“Sure,” I say as the boat slows. That’s why she didn’t do it right away. She has magic, but it only lasts for so long before she has to recuperate.

I pick up the oars and place them in the water. But before I can begin, something dark appears, like a shadow in the water a ways off.

“What is that?”

Leva is on guard again and jumps into the air, flying near me with her hands out as though she intends to harm whatever is swimming toward us.

The shadow turns into a woman’s head and shoulders covered in long, dark hair. “Hello,” she says when she reaches us.

“A mermaid,” Leva says. “Watch yourself. They can be vain creatures. If she feels you’re too beautiful, she may try to drown you.”

“Wonderful,” I say without sarcasm.

Then I wave at the mer-fish-lady. “Hi, I’m Wysteria.”

The mermaid rests her hands on the side of the boat.

So close, I can see her scales and her skin. She is partially like me, but the rest is that of an emerald green fish.

“I’m Ellora. What are you doing out here?” she asks, her voice soft like the lapping of the ocean against the shore.

“Don’t tell her,” Leva snaps.

But I don’t listen.

“We’re trying to get to the end of our world.” I feel myself smile so big my cheeks hurt.

Other than Leva and Redyrin, she is the only other talking creature I’ve come across.

“Mind if I swim along with you?” she asks. Her jeweled eyes turn cloudy with sadness.

“Not at all,” I say, thinking her voice makes the most beautiful sounds I’ve ever heard.

I push the oars into the water and begin to row.

Ellora swims alongside, flipping her glorious tail, causing it to glisten in the sunlight.

Leva is ignoring me, sitting with her face turned in the opposite direction, but I can’t help myself.

“Are there a lot of mermaids in this water?”

Ellora gives me a strange look. “Of course, there are. I am one of the thousands. My people live under the sea.”

Her face crunches with curiosity. “What’s it like to have legs and to be able to stick your toes in the sand?”

I think that’s a strange question. “I don’t know,” I admit.

She lifts herself out of the water and peers inside the boat. “But you do have feet inside those what-do-you-call-them? Shackles?”

“Shoes,” Leva huffs. “They are called shoes, Miss Mer-Person, and yes, she does have feet, but she’s been a prisoner in a tower. Now, if you don’t mind, we need to hurry.”

Leva lifts her arms like she intends to speed up the boat again.

“Wait, Leva. Don’t be rude,” I say, not wanting to be done talking with the mermaid.

“Are you going to the human realm?” she asks, her lovely features blooming with interest.

“Yes,” I admit, surprised she knows that’s where we are heading. “Have you ever been?”

She shakes her head, and her eyes fill with tears.

“No, but I long to. I want to be human like you and walk in the sand and dance and know what it means to fall in love with a human man.”

That seems oddly specific, but who am I to judge? I have dreams too. “Then I’ll come back for you. I promise.”

“You mean it?” Ellora asks.

She tilts her head to one side as though she’s trying to decipher me.

“I never break a promise,” I add.

An enormous and beautiful smile breaks out across her face. She waves. “Then I’ll be waiting. Good luck, Wysteria.”

Ellora dives, her long and beautiful tail appearing before she vanishes beneath the water's depths.

"Goodbye, Ellora," I say, staring into the deep water until I can no longer see her.

Leva turns and flies in front of my face. "Did you enjoy that?" she asks, sticking out her tongue. "Because we're nearly there."

I want to ask her more about mermaids, but before I can, I notice we are nearly at the edge of the realm.

It's like a black curtain has risen out of the ground and covers what lays beyond.

The winds pick up, and the clouds darken.

"What's happening?" I dig the oars deeper into the water and strain to hold the boat in place, but it continues to chuck forward.

"We've reached the edge," Leva shouts over the wind.

Her wings flap so quickly I can barely see them, and her hair turns white as snow while her body flushes scarlet from exertion.

"What are you doing?"

She doesn't answer, but when the boat starts speeding along the frothy water toward the blackness, she doesn't have to.

I know she's summoned all of her power.

I pull in the oars again and clench my hands together, wishing to help in some way.

The closer we get to the blackness, the more scared I get.

There's a drop-off in the water, like a waterfall. Steam seems to be rising.

"Is that where we are going?"

I don't want to. It looks like we're going to fall into Hell.

I hold my breath in anticipation.

"Get the bottle ready," Leva shouts.

I fumble with my dress until I find my pocket and retrieve the

bottle. “Now what?”

“Don’t throw it until I say so,” Leva says, her arms still spread out to her sides like she’s dragging the boat.

“Okay.” I grip the bottle tight, nervous about what’s going to happen.

A few seconds later, Leva drops her arms and lands on the seat beside me.

She looks exhausted.

“Leva?” I question. Fear racks through my veins.

“Should I throw the bottle?” I ask.

“No,” she says softly, obviously waiting for something.

We are so close. Any second we will go over.

With each ticking second, my fear rises.

And I decide I’ve changed my mind.

I don’t want to leave Redyrin.

“Now,” Leva shouts, her voice hoarse from all her effort.

For the briefest moment, my mind goes blank.

But then I remember what I am supposed to do and stand, throwing the bottle at the inky curtain.

The darkness swallows it, and I wait, letting out my breath in a huff.

The curtain starts to shake and open.

There is something on the other side.

“Is that the human realm?” I ask, picking up Leva.

“Yes,” Leva says and closes her eyes.

I cup my hands together around her to keep her safe from the spray of water as the boat is sucked through the curtain.

On the other side is a vast yellow country with mountains in the distance.

Before I can study our surroundings close up, the boat strikes the ground with a thud, and I'm sent flying backward, landing on the hard ground.

My breath is knocked out, and I suck in several times to catch it, rolling over and onto my knees, still holding Leva in my hands.

"What the hell?"

Directly in front of me are a set of dusty cowboy boots.

I glance up and into the face of a handsome man with dark hair pushed under a tan cowboy hat.

"Where did you come from?" He glances beyond me and at the boat, pulling his hat more firmly on his head.

He's wearing jeans and a plaid shirt tucked in at the waist. In his other hand is a rope. There's a sound, and a calf takes off running away from us.

I try to stand, not liking to be at a disadvantage.

Before I can, a bunch of images - memories - of a time before I was taken rushes back all at once.

Pictures of my real parents.

Their smiling faces.

The love they have for me.

My friends. One in particular.

A boy about my age with dreamy eyes and a sweet smile.

Emotion after emotion racks through my body, and my knees buckle at the weight of all I'm reliving.

It feels like I'll die, especially when I see my parents lying on the floor in pools of blood.

Dead.

Then my heart seems to crack from my chest. My parents are gone, and I am truly alone.

Except, from the dark recesses, I see a man with golden hair the

same color as mine.

He is hanging back, a shadow within all of the images.

As one after the other flicks through my mind, I notice the man and somehow know he is my brother.

I have a brother.

Unless he's dead now too.

A moan escapes my lips, and I feel my body being lifted.

OceanofPDF.com

MY DEEPEST DESIRE

CHRISTOPHER

There are only so many ways I can try to forget what I lost, who I betrayed, and the gulf of loneliness in my heart.

Women work the best - for a while.

The scent of their skin and the taste of their blood - that is the drug I love the most.

Sweet, erotic, and filled with hope and longing.

But the problem is, after a while, the glorious haze of them dissipates, and loneliness consumes me once more.

That is my state of being when I hear the first whisperings of the fountain of youth, and I know they are speaking about my sister.

Even before Wysteria was taken, I knew what she was.

Our mom and her dad knew as well, but they refused to listen to my pleadings to take precautions and keep my sister safe.

Now they are gone.

The room I lay in is extensive.

Windows line two of the four walls, letting in the dark and starry night. The windows are open, allowing the scents of exotic spices to fill the air.

Light curtains sway lazily in the breeze.

A harem of women rests on one side of the room, and I lay on a four-poster bed on the other.

The women believe I'm sleeping, finally satiated, so their conversation starts softly.

"Vampires will take over the world someday," one says quietly.

"Why would you say that? They aren't all like that one."

I assume she means me and smile internally.

“True, I guess.”

“I think the world will be overrun by elves before vampires,” another says, her voice quiet but intense.

“You might be right,” the first says. “Have you heard of the one they call Rapunzel?”

Another woman answers. “She vanished many years ago, but it’s believed she’s returned and is the living, breathing fountain of youth.”

“Don’t let Charming hear that, or he’ll eat her.”

I flinch at the way she says my name - like I’m a monster, but then I decide she isn’t wrong.

Still, I won’t eat my sister. Not that they know that, though.

The women continue to talk as I think of Wysteria.

She is my mother’s daughter.

I learned of her by keeping tabs on my mom over the years.

She remarried a kind man who also possessed one of the most exotic of the seven magics, unicorn blood.

He and my mom together were a remarkable combination.

He was a healing balm for my mother’s soul, and when they were together, an immediate change came over her.

She was a good mother to Wysteria, and I was only slightly jealous of the bond they shared.

And then, my mom and her new husband were killed because of Wysteria.

I trembled with anger at learning the news.

By the time I returned to Gothel Springs, Wysteria was gone. Snatched without a trace.

No one seems to know who took her or killed our mom and her dad, but I have my suspicions.

After years of searching for Wysteria, I came to the conclusion she

must be in another realm. So, to hear someone else talking about my sister being back?

That is news, indeed.

And no surprise, she is already in danger.

“ - the Sisters have spoken. This girl is the fountain of youth,” one of them says.

“I wouldn’t want to be her. She probably already has an enormous bounty on her head. Dozens are probably hunting her if someone hasn’t gotten to her already.”

“Isn’t it true her parents were hunters?”

“Yes, they worked under the vampire queen, Snow White, as part of a supernatural task force. But they were brutally murdered.”

All of this, I know.

It had been great seeing my mother do something good with her life. Working for the good of the humans and the supernatural community had brought her and me some peace.

“What exactly did the Sisters say?” one of the women asks.

My ears perk.

The Sisters they speak of are a trio of witches.

Some believe they are as old as the dragon, Abernathy, while others say they are directly connected to the Unknowns.

I don’t care one way or another, but I am interested in what they said about my sister.

“Yes, tell us what they said.”

“I cannot. It’s forbidden. Go to their temple and find out for yourselves.”

“Speak,” an older woman barks, and I flinch at the bite in her voice.

She might make a good vampire one day, not that I would change her anytime soon.

I'm still in trouble with Snow White for changing the half-elf and half-human kid, Austin, in Gothel Springs last year.

The whole scenario surrounding the boy was somewhat regrettable.

A crazy mishmash of coincidences, but since changing him, I'd grown to like the kid, probably because he reminds me a lot of myself.

Thankfully, the vampire queen has a soft spot for me, especially since her daughter, Jasmine, and the girl's beloved are somewhere in the realms, searching for Troy's mother.

"Fine. I'll tell, but if anyone asks, you didn't hear it from me," the woman says, and I cut away from my thoughts to listen.

The women giggle and readjust themselves.

"It goes like this: The one who was taken shall be returned. Powerful supernaturals will seek her, all desiring the power she holds. For she possesses the greatest of all the gifts, the fountain of youth - "

"Why do supernaturals care about the fountain of youth? Aren't they all pretty much immortal?"

"That is true, but imagine the influence a supernatural could have over humanity with the power to grant them eternal life and without the need to become supernatural. Not only that, but think what this girl's power could give an already eternal supernatural."

Her voice shudders as she speaks. "They would become more powerful than any others." She sounds terrified, and I don't blame her.

To rule over humans is considered by many the greatest accomplishment.

At one point, even I had such a desire.

And this woman is saying my sister is the key?

For the briefest moment, I allow old needs to resurface.

Though it was years ago, there was a time when I craved power so

badly I betrayed Snow White and everything I believed in for it.

Thankfully, Snow forgave me.

But, I worry about what seeing my sister again will do to me.

Should I seek her out?

I want to protect her, but there's a genuine possibility I could slip back into my old ways again.

“Shall I continue?” the woman asks.

“Go on then.”

“Knowing she possesses the greatest of all gifts, the fountain of youth, she will be hunted and condemned to a life of misery unless she accepts her fate and becomes the hunter, slaying those who seek to claim her.”

The room is silent, except for their rapidly beating hearts.

I hold my breath, reciting the revelation over in my mind, committing it to memory.

“The poor dear. I feel sorry for her,” one finally says.

An angry fire builds in my chest.

No one should feel sorry for my sister.

I will protect her and help her, no matter the cost to myself.

It’s the least I can do since I failed to protect her parents - my mother.

With that determination in my heart, I wait until the last woman is asleep and rise.

It saddens me to leave them, their supple bodies and warm blood freely offered, but I have a purpose once again, and my need for blood is satiated.

Yes, Sharra, the old vampire queen, had lied to me a long time ago.

She told me she loved me, and I believed her.

Mostly, I wanted what she offered, the power she promised.

And then she stripped it away like I was nothing.

Like a gnat, she swatted me aside.

After that devastation, I was banished, and for a time, sought revenge.

When the original vampire, Jasmine, got older, my needs changed, and I believed myself to be her true love.

Regret fills my heart at those memories.

That had been a dark time in my life.

Now Jasmine is a friend, and her mother tolerates me.

But one thing is certain.

I refuse to allow myself to be swayed by power.

Again, my needs have shifted.

This time it isn't about me. It's about my sister.

Okay, there might be a small piece of my soul that is hopeful. That maybe one day, I can have the same thing Snow and Jasmine have.

I want true love.

In silence, I sneak out of the room. Using my vampire speed, I dash through the streets, like a shadow, until I reach the edge of the sea. As I go, I can't help thinking about my deepest desire.

It's embarrassing, but it's the truth, and I've denied it too long.

Even as I stare out into the dark water and watch the waves amble onto the beach, a feeling enters my soul.

My time is coming.

My beloved is out there somewhere, and I will find her.

I take in a deep breath, enjoying the briny scent, allowing it to fill my lungs.

And I feel calm.

It's time I return to Gothel Springs and tell my sister the truth about herself.

OceanofPDF.com

BREATH OF FAMILIARITY

AUSTIN

Two Months Later

Gothel Springs college cafeteria is lame.

The food isn't much better.

But, the beautiful young woman who scared the crap out of me on that hot summer day while I worked the calves, the same one I took to the hospital, is always on my mind.

A breath of familiarity.

Whether it's the pertness of her nose or the way her lips are shaped, I'm not sure.

Her hair hung so long I thought she wore a wig, and she had on an old-fashioned dress like she came from another time.

Or, more likely, another realm.

The scent of her blood lingers in my mind, as well - a hint of sweetness combined with the copper. I'm guessing it's magic, but it might be something else.

Not that it matters.

When I lifted her and carried her to my Jeep, it took everything in me not to drink her dry. It would've been so easy.

In Wyoming, there were plenty of wide-open spaces and very few people.

My job also left me alone with the cows and the horses for much of the day.

No one was around, and no one would miss her.

But each time I convinced myself to suck her blood, something held me back - a damned feeling.

Like the girl was so much more than just a body full of liquid refreshment.

So I resisted.

I didn't want to leave her at the hospital, but they wouldn't let me stay since I wasn't family.

But she's always on my mind.

I even dream about her blood - the way it would taste and feel going down.

Those thoughts make my mouth water, and my fangs press against the inside of my mouth. I feel confident her blood would sustain me like no other blood did.

"Austin, snap out of it," my cousin Evan says, punching me in the arm.

I pretend it hurts, so he and the others at the table don't get suspicious.

No one knows my truth.

That I basically died, and a vampire named Christopher brought me back to life a year ago.

Well, changed me into a vampire.

Not that supernaturals are a big deal.

They aren't.

In fact, since the Darkness disappeared and the vampire queen, a woman named Snow White, started working with the world's governments, new laws have been implemented, and supernaturals are even allowed to attend human colleges if they want.

What is the big deal?

That Christopher changed me.

That I started out as a human with elven blood, but he made me into a vampire.

There are strict laws against that.

Accordingly, he should've been banished from the human realm, and I should've been executed.

But like I said. No one knows.

Except maybe the vampire queen.

Christopher commented the last time I saw him, one that leads me to believe she knows.

But he also told me not to worry about it. So I'm not.

"Eff off." I glare at Evan and push around the food on my plate.

"Are you okay, Austin?" She's one of two girls sitting at the table with Evan and me. Her girlfriend calls her Baby.

The newbie freshman who asks the question and her look-a-like friend batt their eyelashes flirtatiously.

I appreciate all of the attention.

Even before I became a vampire, I was a good-looking guy.

Now, though, I'm irresistible.

I smile but not too big. My fangs are more prominent than they used to be, and I don't want to scare them. "Fine, thanks for asking."

"So, are you in?" the other girl, Beth, asks.

I've never met these girls before today, but they walked into the cafeteria like they knew I was here and asked me to be the third body in their threesome.

"I'm thinking about it," I say. Part of me wonders if these girls are supernatural. They don't have to wear a sign or announce what they are, so they could very well be.

If I had to guess, I'd say they are witches.

Evan, who is sitting next to me at the table, reaches over and slaps me upside the head. "Don't be an ass, Austin."

I grind my teeth to keep from punching him.

The one who introduced herself as Baby slides a hand under my t-shirt and says, "You, me, and Beth. It'll be fun."

I set down my fork. Lean back in the cafeteria chair.

The room is buzzing with the excitement of new freshmen, and the stench of coffee and garlic bread stifles the air.

“If he isn’t interested, I can help the two of you out,” Evan says, smacking my knee with his.

I’ve known Evan my whole life.

He’s an asshole. Likes his own space.

We live in side-by-side apartments instead of with each other or at home. Which is cool by me, especially at times like these.

Fresh meat.

The whole reason we decided to eat on campus.

Evan and I are juniors.

Baby pouts. “Thanks, but I want Austin.” Her fingers run along the waist of my jeans.

Her blood smells good enough.

Nothing like that girl I took to the hospital, but I am hungry, and if we’re together, I can compel them both to let me drink from them.

Beth chimes in, “Baby is mine, but she likes guys and girls. We picked you together. You’re our number one choice.” She smiles, her eyes on Baby.

Baby’s eyes and hands are all over me.

I get the feeling Beth doesn’t want to be a part of this, but she’s doing it for Baby.

“You chose him because you haven’t feasted your eyes on this.” Evan raises his shirt and touches himself.

A group of girls, each carrying a tray of food, walk by. They squeal their approval in unison for Evan’s nakedness.

I chuckle. Now he’ll be worse than unbearable.

The fact is Evan and I look alike - same dark hair, same square jaw.

It’s probably because our fathers were brothers.

Twins.

Once, when Dad was drunk, he revealed that he and my uncle were banished from the elven realm and that he could’ve been king.

I never brought up what he said to his face, but the drunken comment explained a lot about him and my uncle.

Beth releases a heavy breath, bringing me out of my thoughts.

Baby laughs. “You’re cute, Evan, but I - we,” she quickly glances at Beth, “have decided on Austin.”

Evan leans back in his orange chair and snorts. “Whatever.”

I can’t help but laugh.

Evan’s an idiot, and he thinks way too highly of himself.

Obviously, he gets that from my uncle too.

After my dad died, Evan was the one who filled in the blanks.

Our dads were second and third in line.

The king didn’t trust our fathers and had them banished to the human realm. I

t was that or death, so, of course, they chose to live here.

Baby and Beth get up from the table.

They didn’t have any food. “Later tonight? We’ll catch up with you at the Sigma Nu party?” Baby winks.

I can’t help but wonder why she calls herself Baby.

She is nothing like one.

“We on?” Beth asks. I might be wrong, but I get the feeling she hopes I’ll say no.

I clear my throat. “Who am I to deny two pretty girls?” I shrug unapologetically.

“Cool,” Beth adds.

Baby squeals and claps her hands.

Beth puts her hand on Baby's waist, and they walk out of the cafeteria.

It's then I notice they're wearing matching outfits: Short skirts, socks that go to the middle of their thighs, and black shirts.

Evan whistles, following the girls with his eyes.

"Holy shit, bro. You're so lucky."

I'm a vampire. They never stood a chance, I think, but just smile.

He slaps me upside the head again. "By the way, have you seen Pudgy Wudgy?"

My bright mood immediately turns somber.

"Wysteria," I correct, and I suddenly know why the girl I took to the hospital looked familiar.

Her first name is Rapunzel, but no one ever calls her that.

She always went by her middle name.

He snorts. "Whatever. She's registered. A brand spanking new UBS freshman."

I drop my hands to my thighs as dozens of questions run through my mind.

The girl I saved was my childhood friend. Wysteria. She vanished after her parents were killed years ago.

Dad said she was probably dead too.

Turns out she isn't.

"How do you know?" I ask carefully.

"It was on the news. Damn, don't you pay attention? Her aunt and uncle recognized her and took her in." He shook his head. "The girl is fine. No longer pudgy, that's for sure."

When we were younger, Evan and some other kids called Wysteria "Pudgy Wudgy." It annoyed the hell out of me then, and it still does.

"I mean it. Don't call her that."

"Fine. It looks like she's going to be taking English with Ms.

Spears. How you gonna handle it?" He's smirking, and I want to punch him.

I'm not sure how to react. "Great. That's great," I growl between gritted teeth.

Because it is great.

Growing up, she was my best friend.

When she vanished, I sort of fell off the deep end, and that's when Evan and I became close. But now she's back, and I'm desperate to talk to her.

"I've got to go." Without waiting for a response, I exit the cafeteria and run to my Jeep.

OceanofPDF.com

LIKE A DRUG

AUSTIN

I drive around for a while because I have no idea where Wysteria is or if she'll even want to see me.

Either way, I'll see her in English the following Monday.

So I take a deep breath, glad I told those girls I'd spend time with them tonight after the party.

I need the distraction and their blood.

Flipping on my music, I drive back to my apartment.

Inside I walk to the piano.

It's thirty minutes of endless playing before I'm able to calm down.

I've decided to play it cool.

Hell, we were kids when she left.

She was eleven, and I was thirteen.

I'm a man now - twenty, which means she's eighteen. And beyond beautiful. I groan and continue to play until someone knocks on my door.

"Open up, Austin. It's me."

I'm surprised and stand, smacking the piano keys with one hand.

Christopher has been gone for months. He changed me. Taught me how to handle my vampirism and then left.

"Chris." I open the door.

"Hey, we need to talk." He's all business.

"About Wysteria?" I ask, letting him in.

Before he left, our last conversation revealed Wysteria to be his half-sister even though she didn't know.

It was a big deal then, and it still is now.

The vampire usually doesn't share things about himself.

"She's back," he says, sitting on my couch and leaning back.

Christopher was born human in the nineteen seventies, but he looks my age.

It's weird, especially since that's how it's going to be for me.

Because I have elven blood, I would've lived longer anyway.

Now though, it's a whole new ball game.

"I know," I say and sit on the chair across the room.

"She appeared out of thin air and fainted right in front of me. Freaked me the hell out. I'm the one who took her to the hospital."

I debated whether to ask where he'd been the last several months but resisted.

In the time before he left, he hadn't talked a lot about himself.

"So what's the deal? Where was she all those years?" I ask, deciding to focus on her.

"In another realm, apparently. A pixilette she calls Leva spent all of the last seven years working to put together a spell to rescue Wysteria from a woman she believed was her mother. A woman named Redyrin. I took Leva to Snow White. She said she would make sure Redyrin's realm is sealed off for good from this one, but we have no idea whether Redyrin already came through or not. I suggested Snow keep Wysteria safe in Sharra, especially when I told her what Wysteria is. Snow agreed, but Wysteria refuses to go. She says she's been imprisoned long enough, and she wants to live her life." Christopher lets out a frustrated breath and runs a hand through his hair.

The vampire looks exhausted.

And thirsty.

I wonder when is the last time he fed.

I'd guess it's been a while.

But it isn't my place to question him.

"What is Wysteria?" I ask, hoping he'll tell me, so I'll have a better idea about why her blood smells so delicious to me.

He eyes me curiously. "Ever heard of the fountain of youth?" He rubs his eyes like he hasn't slept in years.

I snort. "Sure, but it's fake, right?"

He shakes his head wryly. "It was bogus until my sister was born. She is the fountain of youth, and if everyone doesn't know about her already, they will soon, which means she is in serious danger."

My vampire heart races. "But you told her that, right?"

"Of course I did," he snaps. "She doesn't care. Not even her best friend can convince her to go into hiding."

"So, what do we do?" Anxiety washes through me.

I've cared for Wys since we were kids.

Knowing she's here brings back old feelings.

But I've changed a lot since she left.

I'm a vampire now.

Will that matter to her?

Christopher's face softens. "Sorry, man. Listen, I've asked a friend to help, and she put a spell on Wysteria, like a protective barrier around her, so someone can't find her through magical means. But that doesn't change the fact anyone can walk into school, night or day, see her and take her." He stood, his apprehension getting the best of him.

"How did she get in? To college, I mean." Not that I'm complaining, but she never attended high school - at least not in this realm.

She has no ACTs or SATs or any sort of transcript that would allow the college to accept her.

"You know I can be quite convincing when I want to be," Chris

said, looking pained. “The dean of admissions and I had a lovely dinner, and I encouraged her to admit Wysteria.”

I know he’s talking about compulsion. Using it is against the law in the human realm, but obviously, Christopher doesn’t care.

It isn’t like there’s a way to track it either.

I try never to use it, but for vampires, that’s easier said than done.

“I’ve signed up to attend school here too. And there are others I’ve enlisted to help as well, but you and Wysteria used to be friends, so she’ll trust you.”

I nod. Christopher’s nervousness is rubbing off on me. “Yeah, we were best friends until she vanished.”

“Use that. Do whatever it takes to stay close to her.” He went to the door. “I’m counting on you.”

I’m confused about exactly what he’s suggesting.

“Like you want me to date her?” I ask, hoping I don’t sound foolish, but I need him to clarify.

She’s magnificent, but her blood is like a drug to me.

If I date her, I might kiss her, and that might lead to more.

I think about telling Christopher about the significance of my need for her blood but change my mind.

Because he might decide I don’t deserve to live any longer if he knows I’m a danger to her, and I’m too selfish to let that happen.

Christopher growls. “No one will ever be good enough for my sister. But according to her aunt and uncle, you were the first person she asked about in the hospital. There’s a relationship between the two of you. So, yes. Date her. Whatever it takes to keep her close.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Don’t do anything that will piss me off, though. She’s still my sister. Got it.”

As a teen, I liked her. Hell, I believed I loved her. But that was a long time ago. “I’ll do all I can to protect her,” I say.

“She’s taking English with the teacher I’m a TA for. I’ll see her

then, if not before."

"Good. And I'll be around too. She's a music major." He smiles. "Still loves the piano and plays beautifully. I guess her captor allowed her to play."

His eyes flash red when he says, captor. "You're on scholarship for music, too, right?"

It surprises me, he knows, but it shouldn't. The vampire seems to know everything. "Yep."

"Another opportunity for the two of you to spend time together." He exits my apartment in a flash and rushes down the steps. Then uses his vampire speed to disappear.

I lock my door and return to the piano.

But I can't play.

All I can do is think about Wysteria.

OceanofPDF.com

SHE'S HALF ANGEL

WYSTERIA

“Are you ready to parrr-tayy?” Sage hollers at a random group of girls crossing the soccer field next to us as she conjures a spell of light and shoots it into the air like a firework.

In the darkness, the magic is beautiful, but I still flinch.

My roommate is so aggressive.

The half a dozen freshman Sage yelled at speed up, seemingly desperate to be as far away as possible.

I can’t blame them.

I want to abandon half our duo, but we’re on our way to our first college party.

Sage is so different from me, I wonder if we’ll work out.

It’s like the people handling the roommate selection process wanted to mess with my head.

I can almost hear two evil senior girls cackling. “Ohh, she likes to read, she’s into classical music, and she is good at puzzles? Haha.”

They high-five each other and pull an application from a pile. “Let’s give her this one. Half witch and half chayot. No one wants this one either.”

Bam! I get Sage. Apparently, she was born in a land called Polonias, but her mom and dad moved to Sharra and taught at the Seven Magics Academy.

She also mentioned more than once that she can’t stand her parents, which hurts deeply, even though I refuse to let her see that. I’d do anything to have my parents back.

Plus, it’s cool she’s half chayot. They are special angels whose sole purpose is to help humans. I guess he used to be their leader once.

The only music Sage listens to isn't even music. It's screaming.

Posters of bands are plastered all over her side of our dorm room.

Plus, she plays their songs over, and over, and over.

If that isn't bad enough, she doesn't own a single book - at least, she didn't unpack any.

Worst of all, she has no idea what Sudoku is.

Not that I did either, until two months ago.

But thanks to my aunt and uncle, I love working the numbers into their proper row and box.

I owe my aunt and uncle a lot and am beyond grateful to them for reluctantly supporting my need to go to college.

I need this.

Normalcy.

Parties.

Leva isn't happy about my coming here either, especially when I asked her not to go with me.

I think she went to the land of Sharra and is living there, but I don't know.

After she told me I was an ungrateful friend, she went away.

That was a month ago.

It makes me sad to be without her, and I miss her beyond words.

At the same time, she didn't agree with my decision to attend Gothel Springs college, and it's better if I don't have to hear about it every five minutes.

I haven't told Sage that I have magic too, probably because it's embarrassing.

I mean, how do I bring up the fact that my dad had royal unicorn magic and my mom was the illegitimate child of an elf - not that I've met any of my magical family.

In a lot of ways, stories about them are like the fictional books I

read while I was in prison.

“It’s funny,” Sage says, bringing me out of my thoughts. “I scare them,” she points at the scurrying girls and continues, “but they’re heading into the lion’s den.”

She shakes her head. “Are you scared, Wysteria?”

“A little,” I admit.

Not that I’ll get hurt physically.

I’ve never had so much as a scratch.

But I am worried about what will happen when I see Austin again.

Plus, I’ll never admit it, but this whole place makes me nervous.

I mean, it’s college, and I’ve been here for two days.

It still boggles my mind that I’ve gone from living in a tower with only Redyrin and Leva as companions to attending a college with over twelve thousand students.

Unsupervised.

Unfettered.

Free as a bird.

Yeah, it’s scary as hell.

More terrifying than I thought it would be. But scary is better than imprisoned. Plus, I get to play the piano.

Playing the piano kept me sane in the tower.

Here in the human realm, it’s the only thing that brings me peace.

As I walk the field with the rest of the girls from my dorm, I still find it hard to believe I’m not the pre-teen girl with the scared eyes trying her best to survive.

Or the young adult in her tower doing her best to be happy.

Sage’s features turn serious as she studies me. “It’s okay to be scared. That means you’re growing.”

I’m shocked. Her words are profound. “Well, don’t be surprised if I wake one morning as a giant troll.”

She smirks, tucking some hair behind her ear.

“My roommate is a comedian. You go.” She pats my shoulder awkwardly.

I don’t think she knows I’m the girl who vanished seven years ago, but she might and is just doing a good job pretending that didn’t happen.

I am too. “I have my moments,” I say, eyeing her, hoping I haven’t crossed a line.

Sage looks intimidating.

Shaggy long blond hair reaches her waist, but the top is spiked. Gobs of black eyeliner circle her blue eyes.

A slinky black dress and black motorcycle boots complete her outfit.

Her vibe doesn’t say, “Hey, I’m sweet.” It’s more, “Look at me wrong, and I’ll kick your ass.”

I wonder if the girls crossing Asher Field with us are as nervous about being at college like I am.

Sage doesn’t seem to be.

Millions of stars sparkle overhead, and I can’t help but get lost in them.

Darkness covers the wilderness the College sits on, complimented by the occasional streetlight.

Sage and I are staying in Irvine Hall, the tallest dorm on campus.

At first, that freaked me out.

Up in a tower again.

But I accepted it because I’m not alone.

Our dorm is across the street from the cafeteria.

The smell of overcooked food swirls in the air, as does a feeling of exhilaration.

“We don’t have to go, you know. I’ve got - ” I begin, but Sage

interrupts.

“Don’t even try it, Wysteria Hart. We’re going to this party, and I demand you have fun.”

“It’s Wys,” I say, correcting her for probably the twentieth time. It’s not that I hate my name. In fact, I love it because it was my mom’s middle name. It’s actually also mine.

My parents named me Rapunzel Wysteria Hart. Rapunzel is so fifteenth century.

Wysteria is nice, but it also reminds me of my mom.

Her smell, the way she would always cut shapes into my sandwiches and tuck me into bed every night, even when I was too old for it.

“Why do you care if I have fun?” I ask.

Sage looks like I slapped her but recovers quickly.

It’s a fair question. Two days ago, she didn’t know me.

“I’ll call you Wys as long as you do two couch shots at this party. Deal?” She smacks me on my arm.

I rub the spot, worried. I have no idea what *couch shots* are, but after a moment, I agree. “I guess.” I try to smile even as a vision of my mom training me in the art of wielding a stake comes to mind.

If only Sage knew the kind of girl, I was supposed to be.

Certainly not a cowering simpleton.

I roll my shoulders back, determined to channel the type of woman my parents were grooming me to become - an agent for the supernatural task force like they were.

My brother even gave me a stake to protect myself, not that I’ll need it. But still. I could’ve brought it to defend Sage.

I didn’t because I’m embarrassed.

I mean it isn’t like it goes with anything, except maybe my mother’s coat.

I'm not ready to wear that yet.

On top of that, weapons are prohibited on campus.

Sage gives me a quick once over. "And next time we go out, you have to let me pick your clothes and do your hair and makeup. You look like you don't care what the boys think. Those jeans. Really? They're like two sizes too big."

I blush, thankful she can't see my embarrassment in the dark.

Casually I glance at my clothes: *slightly* baggy jeans hanging off my bony hips, tan ballet flats, and a pink t-shirt.

"What do you mean? This outfit - works."

It isn't stylish like hers, but it isn't bad. I like my jeans. They are comfortable and not a dress.

She huffs. "Did you even brush your hair?"

I'm not one for confrontation, but Sage is getting on my nerves. "Yes, I brushed my hair," I say, discreetly running a hand along the ends. It's super long, definitely longer than anyone else's.

Leva had been doing it for me while she was with me. Now she's gone, I've just been leaving it down.

My aunt suggested I cut it. I didn't tell her I already tried and it didn't work.

"Rude much?" I say, but pull it all to one side. It hangs down past my knees.

Her face falls. "I'm sorry. My therapist says I need to work on thinking about what I say before I say it."

"It's fine," I lie, and shrug, working to separate my hair into three thick strands so I can braid it.

We walk in silence until we are across the field and standing directly in front of the frat house.

People are all over the lawn, on the expansive wrap-around porch, and hanging out the second and third story windows.

Everyone appears to be having fun.

I want that too.

“We good?” Sage asks as we walk down the sidewalk to the front of the house.

“Sure.” No sense holding a grudge.

The party-smile returns to her face. “Cool! Let’s rock,” she shouts, raising a fisted hand in the air.

Several kids at the frat house yell their agreement.

If outside is crazy, inside the party is wild, filled with young, sweaty bodies gyrating to music so loud it’s rattling the windows.

Everyone has large plastic cups filled with a red liquid.

People are laughing in groups while couples are making out.

My cheeks feel hot, and my eyes water.

It’s like I’ve entered another world.

This place is like nothing I’ve ever known.

It’s harsh, sordid, and raucous.

The noise, the brilliant colors - it all makes my head spin and my heart racket against my chest.

It’s obvious how naïve I really am.

I had no idea people did stuff like this.

Living in my pampered prison.

Up until a couple months ago, my only social life was meals with Redyrin.

Now, the atmosphere around me is electric and everything I never imagined.

“Come on, let’s go nuts and do something stupid,” Sage says excitedly.

I follow her, trying hard not to run into anyone, but it’s complicated.

Sage moves ahead of me, her lithe body sliding around people like they aren’t even there.

In the living room is a ratty green couch.

Around it is a lot of commotion. Students cheering.

Bewildered, I stop to watch.

A guy kneels on either side of the sofa. Two girls sit down.

The guys tilt the couch back, and two more guys pour liquid in the girls' mouths.

On either side, students are chanting, "Go. Go. Go."

A couple of seconds later, the guys tilt the couch back up. The girls squeal, looking flushed, their eyes glassy.

Giggling, they wobble as they stand and stumble away.

Two more girls take their places, and the guys repeat the process.

If that's what Sage means about couch shots, then she can call me Wysteria for as long as she wants.

It's what Redyrin called me for years.

I turn away, looking for my roommate, and she's in my face, two cups of the red liquid in her hands.

"Here you go, Wysteria."

I take the cup from her and sniff. Orange, lemon, and lime chunks are floating on top.

The liquid smells like gasoline mixed with citrus. "What is it?"

OceanofPDF.com

I WANT MORE

WYSTERIA

"It's called Jungle Juice." She tips the cup and chugs down the whole thing, takes out a piece of fruit, and bites the meat off the rind.

"Drink up, it'll take the edge off, I promise."

I bring the glass to my lips and flinch, the smell burning my nose, and I debate whether I'm ready to experience what's inside.

Before I make a decision, someone bumps into me, and I get some in my mouth. I swallow without thinking as the rest spills down my chin and gets on my shirt and in my hair.

"Welcome to the best part of college," Sage says, touching her cup to mine with a plastic clink.

I gasp as the drink scorches my throat, and I pull the cup from my mouth, unsure about what to say.

My mind is reeling as a magical fire slowly blooms in my belly.

It could be that I didn't eat dinner tonight, and my stomach is empty, except for the fruity liquid.

But I also think maybe I've been waiting my whole life for this.

And suddenly I want more.

There's still some in the cup, and I chug the rest.

But I'm also sticky and in desperate need of some water so I can clean myself up.

"Where can I wash this off?"

Sage snickers, brushing a piece of fruit off my chest. "I'm sure there's a bathroom around here somewhere."

"I'm gonna go find it," I say, and a gurgle of laughter escapes my throat.

Sage winks. “I need a refill. Want one?”

“Why not.” My fingers cover my mouth. I’m shocked.

Where did that voice come from?

I sound so full of eagerness. Happiness even. “I’ll meet you back here when I’m done.” I point at the red juice staining my shirt.

My top is ruined, but I don’t care.

The fire’s been stoked, warm, and lovely.

I’m relaxed, more than I ever thought possible, and I want to explore.

“‘Kay, see ya in a few.” Sage takes my cup and disappears into the crowd.

I’m stumbling a little, leaning into people. Smiling a lot. Apologizing more.

Someone hands me a drink. It’s frothy and sparkling glitter hovers above it like it’s been laced with some kind of enchantment.

I sniff it, and the bubbles tickle my nose. “Thanks.” I gulp it down in three swallows without thinking about the consequences.

This liquid isn’t red and fruity, but I don’t care.

My throat, my stomach, each and every one of my veins is fueled with this luxurious mellowness.

My head feels heavy and light at once.

It’s freeing.

I forget for a moment what I’m doing.

What was so important that I left Sage and the fruity drinks?

“What’s on her shirt?” A girl asks, pointing at me.

“I think she puked,” someone answers.

I look down and remember the red stain. Like my heart is bleeding even though that’s impossible. “Someone spilled on me,” I say, laughing.

“Do you know where there’s a bathroom?” I’m bold,

unencumbered, and ready to make friends with the world.

A giant weight has lifted.

So, my parents died.

So, I'm the fountain of youth, and everyone is after me.

So I spent the last seven years in a tower with my memories gone.

This is why I wanted to come here.

To live a little.

Experience all college has to offer.

"That way," the girl says, rolling her eyes.

I don't even care. "Thanks." I wave and move on until I find a bathroom.

When I jiggle the handle, it's locked.

A girl pushes my shoulder. "Hey, there's a line." She's got wings, and they flutter angrily as she points at a group of kids leaning against the wall.

It seems to go on forever.

"Whoops." I'm not deterred and decide to see if there's a kitchen. There should be. This is a house of sorts.

I spot an entry with swinging western doors and push my way in.

It's the kitchen, all right.

There's an island with pots hanging above it.

To the left is a microwave, a stove, and cupboards.

Straight ahead is the sink, but it's occupied.

There is a girl situated on the edge. A guy is standing in front of her, their hands roaming as they kiss each other. She wraps her legs around his hips and laughs, then sinks her teeth into his shoulder.

I'm about to leave when her eyes flash open and lock on mine.

She smiles before closing them again, losing herself in the moment.

My face heats and blisters at their abandon.

“Sorry,” I say, but either they don’t hear me, or they don’t care, and I’m not waiting around to find out.

A delicious ache spreads low in my belly.

Seeing the way they were so into each other, lost in the moment.

I can’t help but wonder what that must be like except for the part about getting my blood sucked.

I doubt it would even be possible for a vampire to pierce my skin, but even if one could, I don’t want to find out.

At the end of the hall is a set of stairs, and I climb, still thinking about the pair, my body singing with a hunger for something I’ve never experienced before.

At the top of the stairs is a long hallway, several closed doors on each side. I’m thinking maybe I should forget about cleaning my shirt and go find Sage.

Get more jungle juice and try a couch shot after all.

But as I’m debating, I’m walking, and open a door.

The room is full of blue smoke and a strange smell.

Two guys sit on the lower bed of a set of bunks, holding a python that shifts into what sort of looks like a dragon and then shifts back.

I blink several times, thinking what I saw must’ve been a trick of the light.

Or magic.

The snake looks at me, its tongue tasting the air.

It must be ten feet long. Its slithery body is trying to coil around one of the guys’ thighs.

A couple of girls are in chairs across from them. They’re laughing until they notice me.

The guy whose thigh isn’t being strangled stands. “Come on in. We won’t bite unless you want us too,” he says and laughs, indicating a place next to him on the bed as he smiles, showing off a dimple.

“That’s okay.” I close the door and head back down the stairs.

My sticky shirt is going to remain sticky - at least until I get back to my own dorm room.

This house is strange in an exhilarating way.

Every step, every turn is filled with odd and thrilling horrors.

I carefully make my way back to the living room and search for Sage.

She’s talking to a couple of guys.

They laugh.

A coy smirk flashes across her face, and she places a hand on each guy’s chest.

“Sage! Sage!” I wave, but the party is too loud.

Moving past people, I push my way toward her.

Another set of girls is being couch tipped.

It’s like a weird ritual, and I can’t help but stare.

Which is terrible because that means I’m not watching where I’m going, and I walk right into someone. “Oof. Sorry,” I say and look up.

“Hey,” he says, his voice low. “Watch it.” He smells like fresh laundry and aftershave.

I’m about to utter another apology, but the words freeze on my lips.

His eyes are brilliant blue. Twin glaciers. Bright. Cold. “It can’t be.”

I step back, falling into someone else.

My heart is pounding against my ribs, dying to break free, to run like wild horses.

It’s in my throat.

He’s here. Austin.

Right now. In front of me. He’s here.

Austin catches hold of my arms and pulls me against his chest. I

debate whether I should twist out of his grasp, ignore the way his warm fingers ignite memories. Instead, I cling to him.

“Austin,” I whisper, smiling against his shirt. Smiling like I haven’t smiled in seven years.

“Wysteria,” he responds, his eyes flashing recognition.

“Hi.” I can’t help but focus on his sexy lips and his white teeth. They look -

“Hi yourself.” He pulls me against him, wrapping his arms around me.

“I missed you.” I’m uninhibited and desperate to make up for lost time.

Because I’ve missed him.

Even at eleven years old, I knew he was the only man for me.

Now, with his body pressed against mine, I’m sure I don’t ever want to let him go.

My hands travel up his muscled arms to his neck.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’m on my tiptoes.

“Kiss me, Austin.”

His smile vanishes, and he lowers his head, pressing his soft lips to mine.

They move slowly, massaging my mouth into submission.

A need burns low in my belly, and when he pushes my mouth open and slides his tongue inside, I gasp at the electricity shooting through me.

After I don’t know how long, he gently lifts his head, a bemused smirk on his face.

I feel mine get hot, and I glance around.

Two girls, both with perfectly styled chestnut hair and beautiful faces, look at me like I’ve slaughtered a lamb.

He follows my gaze, and his smile gets bigger.

“If you’d care to join us, I’m sure we can make room.”

I have no idea what he’s asking, and I peek at him.

Surprised.

What is he suggesting?

“Austin?” I want to talk to him. Alone. Just the two of us.

I take in all of him at once.

He’s probably two feet taller than the last time I saw him.

Dark, wavy hair, a little on the longer side, hangs in his eyes.

He keeps flipping it. His body is lean but muscular like he plays a sport.

He always liked basketball and hockey when we were growing up.

His skin is tanned, but then, it always was. His eyes are the same, as is the way his lips form a smile.

Austin, I think, my heart smashing itself to pieces.

The girls are talking fast. Some of the words are vile, and I realize what I’ve done. I knew Austin a long time ago, but a lot can change in seven years.

Obviously, he is different.

Maybe even like his father.

I gasp as a memory of finding my dead parents enters my mind.

And suddenly it doesn’t matter that he’s the boy I’ve loved since forever.

I shove him or at least try to.

He’s much stronger than he was at thirteen.

“Get away from me,” I say and take off.

Tears fill my eyes as I search for Sage.

She isn’t in the same place. I can’t find her anywhere, and I need to leave.

The smoky air, the stench of sweat and perfume, and the loud

music - it twirls my stomach in knots, and I no longer feel free and unencumbered, but woozy and sick.

I need fresh air.

“Wait,” Austin calls after me.

I don’t turn back.

I can’t.

OceanofPDF.com

SNEAKING OUT

WYSTERIA

As I head back to my dorm, my mind is reeling with horrible thoughts of the night my parents died.

I can't believe when my memories returned two months ago, they didn't include the part where Austin's dad killed my parents.

Damn.

It's like what transpired before is happening all over again.

I'm walking home from a friend's after sneaking out.

My parents had been distracted when I left, playing cards with another couple, so it was easy. Now though, it's after two in the morning, and the lights are still on.

They must know I'm gone, and I brace myself for the consequences.

But as I come around the corner and into my backyard, I see two men exiting my house by the back door.

The light from the porch is on.

I hide in the butterfly bushes, worried it might be my dad talking to one of his fellow hunters.

My parents work on a special task force headed up by Adam Henry and overseen by Snow White, the vampire queen.

Sometimes they are terrifying.

Quickly, I realize neither of them is my dad.

One of the men is holding a stake and a purple bag that looks like my mom's. He tucks the stake into his back pocket and pulls out something shiny.

It flashes in the porch light.

A hunter's gun.

My heart races with worry. Why does he have a gun?

Was something supernatural trying to hurt my parents?

"Hurry up," the other man whispers. "We need to find her."

"She went to a neighbor's. I'll get her," the man without the gun says.

The man with the gun turns, his gaze searching my back yard, and I see it's Austin Morrison's dad.

He's also the Chief of police for Gothel Springs and is a liaison with the supernatural task force.

Hatred pinches his face, and I'm confused.

Afraid too.

So, so scared.

I never liked Austin's dad.

He always gave me the creeps.

A fierce tightening clenches my chest, and I don't know why.

As soon as the men leave, I run inside the house.

"Mom! Dad!" I whisper-shout, in case the men come back.

I pass through the kitchen and into the family room.

When I enter, my feet slide to a stop.

Mom is on the floor, blood pooling under her.

Dad is lying beside her, his arm draped over her waist.

They look like they're sleeping, except for all the blood.

So much blood.

My mind shuts down.

I'm not prepared for the scene in front of me.

It can't be right.

Nothing's happened. Nothing happened, I tell myself over and over.

It's a mistake.

I'm dreaming.

I will not cry, I think, even as tears leak from my eyes.

And I wish there was some way I could make Chief Morrison pay.

My parents trained me to be a hunter like them and have been since I could walk.

They never worried about me getting injured because, for some reason, I can't get hurt.

At least not physically.

Mentally though, I feel myself crack and break and shatter into so many pieces, I doubt I'll ever be whole again.

Before I can decide what to do, a light swirls a few feet away from me.

I try to run, but a woman with inky black hair steps through the light and directly in front of me.

It's Redyrin.

She casts a spell and my eyes close, making everything go dark.

WITH THE MEMORY STILL LINGERING, I work to focus on the here and now as I cross the field. But

I'm in a haze.

My parents. I never got the chance to mourn them.

Not really.

Redyrin stole me from the human realm, and she also stole my memories.

It feels as though my body is being torn in half.

My hands shake, and tears spill onto my cheeks.

When I reach the main entrance to my building, I wipe my eyes, hoping no one notices I've been crying.

Inside the elevator, there are three super-tall guys and me.

Two of them are Black, and one is white. They each hold a basketball. One spins his on his pointer finger.

They're laughing and joking.

I do my best to ignore them.

One of them says something, touching me on the arm, but I don't turn, and they leave me be.

When the elevator doors slide open, I exit, run down the hall, and once I'm in my room, I rip off my stained shirt, tossing the smelly thing into the hamper.

My bra is stained too, and I unhook it, throwing it into the hamper as well.

Pulling off my jeans, I kick them near the hamper and put on an oversized t-shirt.

It was my dad's.

Across the front are the words: *Supernatural Task Force*.

I fall onto my bed, my breathing erratic, and pull my comforter around me for warmth and protection.

I miss Leva and wish she was here with me now.

But I have no way of getting a hold of her.

Besides that, I was rude.

She saved me, and I repaid her by telling her I didn't want her around.

Stupid. Stupid.

I lay in bed for a long time, thinking about Leva and my life.

Christopher told me Austin's parents are dead too.

I don't have to fear his father.

At the time I felt relief, because of what his dad did, but now?

I'm just sad.

For me.

For Austin.

Losing one's parents isn't something I would wish on anyone.

When the sun comes up, I finally sleep.

A DOOR SLAMS, and I blink, sitting up.

“Leva - ” I rub the sleep from my eyes and work to focus.

It isn’t Leva but Sage.

She’s still wearing her slinky black dress, but her makeup is smeared, and she has bed-head.

“Why did you leave the party?” She sits gingerly on the edge of her bed, grabbing a fluffy cream cat with one eye missing.

Sage clutches it against her stomach.

I don’t answer. Warning bells are flashing behind my eyes. Something’s wrong.

“Sage,” I finally say, and move toward her. “Are you - okay?”

She waves me away. “Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

I notice her lashes are wet. She sniffs and lies down on her side.

“I asked for it.” She rolls over, facing the wall.

I stand there like an idiot, unsure whether to comfort her or leave her alone.

My time in the tower hasn’t prepared me for real interpersonal relationships.

I’m not sure what she thinks she asked for, but I’m terrified for her.

“Can I get you something? A coffee?” I sound like an effing jerk, and the worry in my gut builds.

She turns over gently. I see she’s crying. “Why do you care if I’m okay?”

She’s flinging my words from last night back at me.

My first instinct is to agree and walk out.

But she’s hugging the cat so tightly I feel sorry for it.

I sigh and sit on her bed.

“I think it’s because you and I are meant to be friends. And friends care about each other. If you’re sad or hurt, I want to help.” My voice is calmer than I feel.

Two enormous tears drop on her pillow. “You mean it? You don’t

think I'm an outrageous bitch?"

I force back a snort at her choice of words.

She's the epitome of outrageous with her crazy outfits, hair, and makeup, and music.

Even her black boots scream *outrageous*, but she's definitely not a bitch.

"I think your outrageousness is going to be one of my favorite things about you." My hands are tucked into the end of my shirt, but I feel like I need to comfort her somehow.

I grab a tissue from the table between our beds and hand it to her.

She takes it and wipes her eyes, then blows.

When she's finished, she chucks the wadded tissue toward the trash. It lands at the end of her bed. She reeks of alcohol and cigarettes.

"You wanna talk about it?" I ask.

She takes a deep breath, yanks off her boots, and lies back down. "First, I need to sleep." She pulls her covers up and rolls over.

"'Kay," I say softly, wishing I knew what else to do.

But I'm tired, and it feels like I have grass growing on my teeth and tongue.

I need a shower, some toothpaste, and some toast.

Maybe when I am back from the cafeteria, she'll be ready to share what happened.

I know it isn't good, and anger burns in my veins. I want to protect her and hurt those who hurt her. "I'll try to keep it down."

When I return to our room, she's gone.

I don't speak to her again until Monday.

SHE CAME in again after three in the morning and is now sound asleep.

It's the first day of classes.

I feel like I should remind her about going.

But she seems so broken.

I can't bring myself to speak the words.

I quietly pick up my towel and bathroom necessities, pulling on a pair of fluffy pink slippers. I grab my keycard and open the door.

As I'm leaving, Sage whispers, "Gave a great first day of classes, Wys."

She didn't call me Wysteria. Things are worse than I thought. "Thanks."

There's only one other person in the bathroom.

She gives me a curt smile, takes her stuff, and walks out.

Not that I mind.

The tile floor is wet. Most of the shower stalls are dripping water.

I step inside one, close the bright white curtain, and set my stuff on the ledge.

I keep on my shower shoes and hang my shirt on a hook before turning on the water.

Icy liquid sprays my body. I quickly adjust the faucet, wondering who would be crazy enough to shower in cold water.

Within seconds the water warms, and my body relaxes.

I wet my hair and wash it.

As I'm rinsing, I close my eyes.

And Austin is there, in my mind, as though he's been waiting.

His smile, the one he gave me at the party Friday night, lights his face. He kisses me, and my knees turn to jelly.

I don't have to look to know my hair is glowing indigo. That happens when I'm overcome with emotion.

I can feel it.

After showering, I scrub my teeth. Pay close attention to my

tongue. Spit. Then dress in oversized jeans, ballet flats, and a black tee.

My hair is still wet, and I wind it around until it's in a bun on top of my head before swiping gloss over my lips.

There are dark circles under my eyes, so I apply concealer and brush on a little mascara.

My caramel eyes are flecked with green.

Sometimes, depending on my mood, they get darker.

Today, they're almost almond in color.

I know why.

Austin.

It isn't only his kiss that has my body vibrating.

It's more than that.

I want to know him again.

I want to be his friend and more.

But I shouldn't. His father was evil.

What if Austin is evil too?

It occurs to me that Austin might be here because of his father.

Revenge or something.

Is Austin out to get me?

On the news yesterday, they broadcaster spoke about the dead body found on Saturday night.

She was a student at the school.

We'd received more than one email telling us to be careful and watch out for each other.

Evan Morrison found the body - that's what everyone's saying.

It doesn't surprise me he's involved.

I never liked Evan.

Since he's Austin's cousin, I can't help thinking about everything

my parents said about him as a kid.

But supposedly, the murderer is a vampire.

All vampire students are required to be interviewed by the campus police and the Supernatural Task Force.

Even though I'm sad someone died, I'm grateful for the extra security nearby.

Giving myself one last look in the mirror, I pull a couple tendrils of hair from my bun and let them dangle on either side of my face.

Put away my makeup.

There's no sense dwelling on what can't be changed.

I need to focus on the now, on what I can do to rectify my situation.

I told my aunt and uncle and my brother, Christopher, I wanted to attend college to have a regular life.

It's getting clearer and clearer that might not be possible.

And maybe I don't want regular anyway.

With a new attitude, I sneak back into my room, careful to be quiet.

From off the desk, I grab my backpack and sheet music and leave like the slayer my parents trained me to be, without making a sound.

OceanofPDF.com

GREEN EYED MONSTER

WYSTERIA

Outside, the early morning sun beats down as though it's desperately trying to elevate my mood.

There's a slight chill in the air, but I like it.

In my tower in whatever realm I'd been held captive, the temperature always hovered around the same balmy seven-two degrees.

I hurry into the cafeteria, punch my code into the console, and grab a bagel, cream cheese, and a glass of orange juice.

The smell of coffee and bacon fills the room.

I debate grabbing some but the line is long, and I don't have time.

I want an hour to practice the piano before my first class.

There's a tiny round table in the corner near one of several large windows, and I sit.

After I smear cream cheese on half a bagel, I take a bite. The air is crackling with anticipation.

It's my first day of college classes.

I feel grown-up and free.

The cafeteria is packed.

People are in groups, the same as what I imagine high school was like.

One long table is filled with kids, all chatting and laughing loudly.

I can't help watching and wondering what they're talking about.

I take another bite of bagel and put my earbuds in.

Scrolling through my music, I find the piece I'm going to practice - *Nocturne No. 2 in E* - and press play.

It starts out slow, whimsical.

As I listen, Austin walks in.

His hair is wet and rumpled.

Like he got out of the shower and shook it dry.

He's wearing a tight blue t-shirt that accentuates every muscle in his arms, chest, and abs. His jeans sit low on his hips.

The girls from the party the other night is beside him.

I guess they've been spending a lot of time together.

And that makes me crazy jealous.

My heart starts to race, and my cheeks get hot. Envious beyond belief, I look away, taking another nibble of my bagel, but I can't keep my traitorous eyes from tracking him.

The music playing in my ears speeds up, and so does my breathing.

Austin glances over, his eyes locking on mine, and a smile spreads across his lips.

I know that look.

Even if he is a man now, I'd recognize it anywhere, which makes me more excited than I thought possible.

All the times we hung out together - in his room, in my room, listening to music, talking about what we wanted in life, rushing through homework so we could ride bikes through the field or play video games - it bubbles up and runs over.

I've missed him terribly.

He whispers something to the girls and then strolls over, leaving them to fend for themselves.

My heart leaps.

Butterflies escape and spread their wings, fluttering lightly in my stomach.

What will he say?

I can't help but notice the way people in the cafeteria watch his

movements.

He's like one end of a magnet. Everyone is drawn to him.

Including me.

I sit up straight and pull out an earbud.

"Hi," I say when he's close. My heart skips several beats.

"Hey." He places both hands on the edge of a chair and leans forward.

I can smell his aftershave and a hint of vanilla - his shampoo?

"About the other night," he begins.

I blink several times, open my mouth, close it, and try not to look like a trout. My bagel drops onto the napkin.

"Yeah?" I ask, desperate for him to continue.

One of the girl's he left behind saunters up next to him. She's wearing a white button shirt, tied to expose her belly button, a navy mini skirt, over-the-knee navy socks, and black, super high shoes.

She drapes her arm through Austin's and glares at me before smiling brightly at Austin. "Let's eat," she coos.

Trying not to gag, I stand.

His father was the enemy, which I guess makes him the enemy.

"It doesn't matter. I thought you were someone else," I lie.

He knows it too but doesn't call me on it.

I pick up my music and my bag and move to leave. "You're welcome to sit here, if you want," I say, edging around them.

His smile falters, but only for a second. "Wysteria, don't go," he says, his eyes pleading.

"I - have to," I say.

"Fine." He makes a point to pull the girl in close and kiss her.

She squeals and giggles.

Yeah, he's a jerk.

I want to scratch his eyes out.

But my heart doesn't care, and an image of Austin kissing me enters my mind.

THE FINE ARTS BUILDING is on the other side of campus. When I'm only halfway there, I'm sweating. I'm so out of shape. It doesn't matter that I have supernatural blood in my veins.

I'm still pooped and wishing I had a bike or a car.

I stop and lean over, heaving in gulps of air.

"If you were a vampire, this wouldn't be an issue."

I smile and stand, turning toward the sound of my half-brother's voice.

"Hey, Chris. I wondered when I would see you."

He told me he would be on campus as a student, and that's exactly what he looks like. Jeans. Boots. And a button-up.

His dirty blond hair is rumpled, and his hazel eyes study me with worry and wonder.

"Hey yourself, sis," he returns and tucks a hand in one of his front pockets. His other hand is holding a backpack in place on his shoulder.

A couple of months ago, when he told me he was my brother, I hadn't been surprised. Because I had the memory of him always in the background of my life before I was taken.

He'd been my on again off again protector.

Then when he told me I was the fountain of youth and that there would be all sorts of supernaturals coming after me, I hadn't balked.

He wanted to take me to the land of Sharra where he said I would be protected.

But all I heard was that I would have to leave and be put in another prison. I wasn't having that, and I told him so.

He and my aunt and uncle pleaded with me to listen, but I refused

to leave.

I refuse to cow to bullies for another second.

If they want me, they can come, but I want to live my life freely until then.

My family reluctantly agreed and let me come to college, but there are contingencies. One of which was that Christopher enrolled in school here too.

As we study each other, I have a feeling even though I haven't seen him, he's been close by.

"Where are you off to?" I ask, moving again.

He steps in pace with me. "Wherever you are," he says. "You've heard about the death on campus, I presume?"

"I have," I say, gripping my bag. I glance over at him. "What's the matter?" It's obvious he has a problem.

"I figured once you saw Austin again, the two of you would be spending a lot of time together."

Was Chris trying to pawn me off on Austin? "Yeah, well, you thought wrong," I say, adjusting my bag.

"Are you mad at him?"

"I am," I say but know it's more than that. I'm jealous. "He's been spending a lot of time with these other girls." I shrug. "I'm not sure what to think of him."

"Give it time," he says, but I see him grind his teeth. He's angry about something.

I debate whether to ask him what, but think better of it. The piano is calling me. "Maybe," is all I say, and pull open the door.

"Wysteria?" he calls.

"Yeah?" I face him.

"You're carrying that thing I gave you, right?" He looks around to make sure no one is listening even though vampires and werewolves, and other supernaturals have hyper-sensitive hearing.

So, really, it doesn't matter that no one is nearby.

But whatever.

"No," I say calmly. I just don't have the heart to put the stake in my backpack.

It's weird.

His face contorts in frustration, and he walks over, unzipping my backpack.

I can't see what he's doing but assume I now have a stupid stake inside.

"Keep it with you at all times," he says, zipping it back up and coming around so I can see his face.

"It's for more than stabbing vampires. It's also been spelled so it can harm just about any supernatural."

"Super," I say and turn away.

He calls my name again.

I sigh. "What?"

"There are those who want to take you and use you. Don't forget that."

"I won't," I say and step inside, letting the door close behind me.

I expect him to follow, but he doesn't, and I'm grateful.

Heaving a deep breath, I head down the steps.

The practice rooms are in the basement.

As I go, my shoes skim down the stairs, the padding echoing off the walls.

I push open one of the heavy double doors and am rewarded with one of my favorite sounds.

Music.

It's loud and soft.

Heavy and light.

Staccato and *legato*.

Classical and jazz.

Rock and roll.

All sorts of amazing sounds as stringed instruments play, people sing, and piano keys plunk, each to their own rhythms.

It's the sounds of every emotion that ever existed, all bottled up into individual rooms.

I make my way down the hall slowly.

Music is my church.

My home.

The best kind of magic.

I stop in front of one of the practice rooms and peer inside. It's empty except for a piano and a bench. My breathing slows, my heart settles.

I step inside, allowing the door to close behind me with a click.

My body unwinds. I sit on the bench and place my hands on the keys.

Another breath.

I play the first chord. Nothing exists but the sound.

I scoot the bench, shift my butt, and play another.

Then run through my scales. I start at middle C.

The left-hand plays down, and the right plays up in synchrony.

Without skipping a beat, I move to the next set of scales.

My breathing keeps time with my hands.

I rock back and forth slightly, allowing my body to feel the beat, my fingers to warm up and modify to the keys of an unfamiliar piano.

By the time I'm halfway through, my world shifts, and I feel better.

For the first time in days, there is no Sage and her sad face, her words shredding the room with hurt.

No Austin and his beautiful smile.

There is only this room, and these keys and my fingers forming notes. There is only *crescendo* and *decrescendo*, *allegro* and *adagio*.

After a while, I move on to the piece I want to play for Professor Jenkins.

I'll see him tomorrow for my private lesson. It's an honor to be taught by the Professor and not one of his graduate students, so I want to be prepared.

But as I begin, Austin's face fills my mind.

It blocks out my peace.

Instead of notes, I see his dark, messy hair and his glorious, blue eyes.

Slamming my hands against the keys, I stand.

The clock on my phone says my first class starts in ten minutes. I grab my stuff and dash out the door. I don't want to be late.

OceanofPDF.com

I WANT HIM

WYSTERIA

After being in the basement, the light of the outdoors burns my eyes, and I squint. My first class is close, but I need to hurry.

The day I arrived, I took the map they gave me and did a walkthrough of my classes. Then we had orientation, and a couple hundred bored freshmen followed perky guides around for three hours.

Luckily, most of my classes are near each other.

Dorms and the cafeteria are located to the south. The sororities are north of the dorms. Asher Field and a hangout known as The Mall sit behind the sororities.

Then there are the fraternities.

Behind them is a graveyard.

To the west of Asher Field is the library and colleges in specific fields - Education, Agriculture, Anthropology, Engineering, Physical Sciences, and the Arts and Sciences.

To the east are the Law Building, the Fine Arts Building, the Mikesell Building, the Arena-Auditorium, an athletic center, the stadium, the College of Molecular Biology and Animal Sciences, and finally, the Center for the Visual Arts.

Buses can take me where I need to go, and I'll probably use them when it gets colder, but for now, walking is better.

English is a required course.

I enter the Mikesell Building along with several other students.

A tall guy wearing the University of Gothel sweats pushes past me. He has a basketball in one hand. With the other, he touches my shoulder, his palm swallowing it up.

“Sorry about that.” His face is friendly.

“That’s okay.”

He takes off in the direction I’m heading and walks into an auditorium-style classroom.

The room is packed, filled with fresh-faced new students, the same as me.

I find a seat near the back and slide in.

The doors close with a resounding clack.

A tanned woman with bleached blond hair twirled into a perfect bun walks to the podium. She’s wearing irresponsible heels and a navy suit.

There’s a pencil protruding from the flawless bun.

She looks tiny from way back here.

“After today - ” The door closest to me springs open, interrupting her. The Professor stops and waits.

Sage walks in. She looks rough in a pair of navy sweats, but at least her face is missing the smeared black liner she’s been sporting since Friday night, and her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. I wave her over when she catches my gaze.

Once Sage is seated, the woman continues, “These doors will be locked at exactly nine o’clock beginning next class. If you’re even one second late, you will not be allowed to take part in my lecture, and you will be docked participation points.” She gives a pointed look in our direction.

I feel myself sink down in my chair.

“Sheesh. College is serious,” Sage pouts.

I give her a sideways look and see she’s smiling. None of the hurt from the weekend is apparent in her features.

“My name is Professor Susan Spears. You may call me Professor or Ms. Spears. I will not answer to anything else, including Susan, Ma’am, or Teacher.” She makes a face. Moves to grab a thick stack of

papers and hands them to someone sitting in the front row.

He stands, and my heart freezes.

Holy crap, it's Austin! My pusle rachets against my chest.

"What's wrong?"

I turn to Sage. "Nothing," I say, but the word catches in my throat. Austin is in my class. I shake my head and return my attention to Austin. He's sending papers down each row and he's already on the third one.

"Mr. Morrison is my TA," Ms. Spears continues. "He's passing out your syllabus. Don't lose it. It's the only one you'll receive, so protect it with your lives." Her eyes linger on Austin and a pang of irrational jealousy dances along my skin.

"Dramatic much?" someone says.

Professor Spears breaks a pencil - snaps it in half with her fingers. "This isn't high school. You don't have to be here. If I sound dramatic, that's because this class is necessary to graduate." Then she points to someone and says, "Get out. You're no longer welcome."

I hear a gasp. A girl rises and steps around other student's feet. "Witch," she stage whispers. There are a few giggles.

But I think she might be right. No one can look that perfect unless she's using a spell. I should know. Redyrin used my power to keep herself looking young and beautiful.

"Keep it up, and I'll have you thrown out of school," Ms. Spears continues.

The girl clamps her lips shut and walks to the door, throwing it open. The door closes behind her, and the room is silent. Even Austin has paused in passing out the papers. It's so quiet. All I hear is breathing and the pounding of my heart.

"Please continue, Austin," Ms. Spears says.

He does as she asks and moves to the next row. Three away from mine. I'm tempted to get up and leave, but unlike some, I want to be

here. I want a degree.

Sage scribbles something on a piece of paper and shoves it toward me.

What's your problem? Witchy Spears? Or hottie TA?

I don't respond.

"Anyone else feel the need to leave my class?" Ms. Spears asks.

No one says anything, which isn't surprising.

"Excellent. Once you have your syllabus, review it. You'll notice there's a paper due each week - " She continues speaking, but I've stopped listening.

My body is trained on Austin. Two away.

Sage adds more question marks to the paper.

I swallow. My first thought is to deny, deny, deny. What's the point, though?

She sets her pencil on top of the paper.

I scribble back, *I'll tell you later.*

A grimace crosses her face, and she sniffles. I'm worried that she's crying and look over. She gives me a huge smile. I notice her eyes. They are wide like she has them pinned open with invisible toothpicks. She writes, *so it's the hottie TA*. She sniffs again.

Maybe she's getting a cold.

Are you sick? I write.

No, she answers.

Okay.

A slight breeze moves my hair, and I immediately know why. Austin is at our row. My pulse is pounding so loud like it wants to knock me over, drag me down, and punch me out.

I should stay away from him.

He's probably dangerous, like his father.

But my body doesn't give a crap what I think.

The sight of Austin, the way he moves, stands, and breathes; he makes my body aches in places I didn't know could ache.

The cotton balls in my mouth are now accompanied by sandpaper.

Don't look at him. Don't look at him. Don't look at him. I chant those words over and over.

But I can't resist, and I glance at him through my lashes.

He shakes his head, glances at the paper Sage and I have been writing on, and then smiles, an enormous, beautiful, all-consuming smile. At me.

He read what we wrote. My face heats, and my hands start to shake. I'm humiliated.

Sage laughs, and takes the stack of papers he hands her, grabs one, and passes the rest to me. I do the same, giving them to the next person.

Never in the history of syllabuses has the one in my hands been more interesting. I pretend to focus, keeping my eyes on my paper, praying my heart will slow down.

Seconds that feel like hours slip by, and Sage sets the condemning paper on my desk. On it is masculine writing with a number and the words, *call me!*

OceanofPDF.com

CAN'T HELP MYSELF

WYSTERIA

Ms. Spears is still talking. Probably about the syllabus, but I can't hear a word.

La Traviata: Prelude to Act 1 is playing in my head, the aching opening notes matching the feeling in my heart.

My lips part, and I let out a noise, which causes Sage to glance at me.

I shrug, mortified at the reaction I'm having to him. I'm losing all grasp on reality.

Still, I can't help myself.

I watch Austin descending and am mesmerized by the way his shoulder blades move effortlessly under his shirt, the way his muscles flex when he takes a step.

Sage steals the paper and scribbles four words, meaningless when separated, but together they bring my face to scalding.

You want him bad, it says.

I take a deep breath, working to convince myself her words aren't right. That any feelings I'm harboring are residual from when I was younger.

I've seen the way the current Austin behaves, and there is nothing about him to like.

Except for his smile.

And his eyes.

His damn fine body.

And the way he moves, like a predator stalking its prey.

Lithe. Liquid.

An image of the two of us kissing enters my head, and my body warms.

I shake my head and try to glare at her.

Sage covers her mouth with a hand, stifling a laugh.

I squeeze my thighs together, forcing myself to listen to Ms. Spears and her overdramatic ruminations.

When class is over, I follow Sage out of the room and into the hallway.

My next class is Biology.

First, I need to head back to my dorm and get a water.

“Who is he?” Sage asks as we slowly push our way outside.

I ignore her, focusing on the landscape surrounding us.

The pine trees and the wild daisies, the red bushes, and the crabapple trees.

In the far distance are the Rocky Mountains.

The grass on campus is lush and green.

With Wyoming’s harsh winters, it won’t last much longer.

I sigh and inhale a deep breath. The air is crisp.

“Wysteria?” she says, smacking my arm.

“What?” I respond automatically, then sigh heavily. I’ve got to tell her something.

Not that Austin was my first crush or the first and only person I dreamed of marrying.

I won’t tell her how his father killed my parents. I can’t tell her any of that.

Instead, I say, “He’s some guy from the party Friday night.”

“Uh-huh. I need details. You act like you’re ready to have his babies.” Sage is half running to keep up with me and still be able to see my face.

“No, I’m not,” I say, stomping toward Irvine Hall.

“Um, yeah.” Sage laughs. “He’s cute, and you’re smitten. Is he good in bed? Is that why you left that night? You two hooked up?”

“Stop,” I tell her, picking up my pace. Anything to get away from her questions.

I don’t want to talk about this. It infuriates me that I don’t have more sense, more control over my reaction to him.

A person can change a lot in seven years.

I’ve sure as hell changed.

The last time Austin saw me, I’d been a happy, altruistic, glass-half-full kind of girl.

Not anymore.

But I can’t help thinking about his number. He wanted me to call. Should I?

No!

I take the elevator up to the tenth floor.

Sage follows, but I hurry away.

She doesn’t say anything until we’re in our room.

“Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” She sits on her bed, and I finally take the time to really look at her.

Not too many days ago, she was a ball of broken curled on her bed, hugging a one-eyed teddy bear to death.

Her eyes are still kind of wild, and she’s jittery. I’m guessing too much caffeine.

“I don't want to talk about him.” That's the truth and I hope she'll leave it alone.

I take a water bottle from our mini fridge. Crack the lid and take a drink. “I’ve got biology. What about you?”

She flips on her stereo, blaring it loud, and I get the feeling she’s mad.

“Sage?” I touch her on the arm.

She jumps like I've physically hurt her. I quickly tuck my hands behind my back.

She rubs her nose with a finger, sniffles. "I don't have another class until one o'clock." She picks up her purse and goes to the door. "I've got to pee. Want to meet at Perky's for lunch?"

"Okay," I reply, but she's already gone.

TWO FULL WEEKS of school have gone by and I haven't died. No one has tried to take me.

Maybe my brother was wrong.

I've been living my life, just like I wanted.

Except I haven't talked to Austin since that first day in class.

I should be glad. Now that I know it was his dad who killed my parents, I should hate Austin by association.

Instead, I ache at his absence.

To take my mind off him, I've been practicing piano for hours at a time and doing homework.

Professor Jenkins, my music teacher, loved the piece I played for him. Said I have a real future - whatever that means - and asked me to play a duet for the end of year Winter Gala.

I agreed, of course.

Playing the duet will guarantee me a full-ride scholarship for the next year.

In a few weeks, I'm supposed to meet my partner so we can choose our song and begin practicing together. The Professor didn't give me a name. He was mysterious about it, or maybe he was vague because he isn't sure who my partner will be yet.

The prospect of doing something musical calms my nerves.

When I was stuck in my tower, music was my balm, the one thing that brought me comfort. Plus, practicing means less time thinking about Austin. Less time pining for a man I don't even know.

But no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, I can't stop thinking about him.

The paper he wrote his phone number on is folded small and stuffed in my back pocket. It feels like a fifty-pound weight.

Every time I move, I feel it.

I keep pulling it out, studying it, deliberating.

Several times, I put the numbers into the phone my aunt and uncle gave me, but I always delete them before I actually call.

I want to throw the blasted paper away. Toss it, and every thought of Austin, right in the trash.

Doing so would make my life so much easier.

I managed to do it once.

Five minutes later, I pulled it out.

"Why don't you burn it?" Sage asks when she walks into our room and catches me staring at it again. She pulls a lighter from her pocket and flicks it on. "Go on, set the sucker on fire."

Like a moth, I move toward the flame, holding the paper out.

It's a good idea.

If I torch it, the unpleasant thing will be gone, and I can't gawk anymore, even if I want to.

The heat licks my fingers and catches the edge of the paper on fire.

But I can't go through with it. I blow it out.

"Call the dude," she says, tucking the lighter back in the pocket of her black leather jacket.

"I can't," I say as smoke caresses the air.

"I get that he's gorgeous. Hell, if you weren't my roommate, I'd be all over him, but still, he's just a guy." She laughs, sniffs, rubbing her nose a little.

I glare. "What's your problem?" I ask, heading to the door. Her nose has been runny for days, and I'm concerned.

Sage shakes her head, clears her throat. “Maybe a cold or allergies. All the freakin’ tumbleweeds are getting to my sinuses.” She grabs a tissue and wipes her nose.

“Probably,” I say, even though it feels like a lie.

But I mean, she did grow up in Chicago.

At least that’s what she tells me. When I ask what she’s doing in little Gothel Springs, she gets vague.

I wonder if someone’s after her.

That could be another thing we have in common, but she won’t tell me.

“What about the other day? After the party. You were so sad. We still haven’t talked about what happened. Is everything okay?” I ask the question tenderly, hoping she'll finally talk to me about it.

She waves me off, but I catch a glimmer of sadness cross her face. “I’m good. Better than good actually, and tonight we party again.”

“I’m not - ”

“No excuses. I’m going to give you a makeover.” She turns her music up louder.

I nod and push my lips into a smile. “Sounds fun,” I shout.

It doesn’t sound fun.

I’m worried about her idea of a makeover.

But I get the feeling she needs something to look forward to.

"Later," I say, and leave our dorm, walking to the elevators. Several other students enter as well.

When the doors are closed, a girl with straight black hair asks, “What’s burning?” She’s searching the elevator for the culprit.

I’m guessing she smells the singed edges of the paper tucked away in my pocket. I keep my eyes down, staring at nothing.

A phone vibrates, and one of the guys pulls his cell out of his pocket.

His fingers click across the screen.

I could text Austin. That might be easier.

On the sidewalk outside Irvine Hall, I pull out my phone and enter his number. Then stare at the screen, debating what to say.

Just as I start typing, someone bumps into me, and my phone crashes to the ground. I bend to pick it up, but before I can, a giant foot freaking steps on it, crushing it.

“What the hell? Watch where you’re going.” I glance up, and it’s another basketball player. He looks like a giant.

“Hey, sorry. I didn’t see you there.” He bends down and picks it up. “Damn, it’s destroyed.” He hands it to me. “You should be more careful.”

“Thanks for the tip,” I say, frustrated as he jogs to catch up with his friends. The glass is smashed, but I try to use it anyway. The screen flashes, but won’t work.

“I guess that takes care of that.”

OceanofPDF.com

IT'S NOT A DISEASE

WYSTERIA

“You look hot!” Sage squeals as she applies the last of my mascara. She’s in full makeover mode.

“Even with all the hair,” she adds. She mentioned cutting it, but I told her no.

I could’ve said it was impossible to cut, but that would’ve opened us up to a whole new level in our friendship, and I don't think Sage is ready for that.

I hop off the bed and check my reflection.

Sage has lined my eyes in a smoky gray liner. A darker shade of gray is on my lids, and she’s put on several coats of mascara. On my lips and cheeks, she put light pink lip-gloss and a touch of blush.

She ended up braiding my hair in a reverse french braid, which looks fantastic.

I wonder if Austin will like it, I think, and then mentally kick myself.

“Wow, Sage.” I carefully run my hand down the braid. "It looks and feels so cool."

“Yeah, I know. The guys are going to be fighting over who gets to go home with you.” She pushes me back down onto the bed.

“Especially one in particular.” She sniffles. She still has a cold or allergies, it seems. “I got the scoop for you, by the way.”

I turn to face her. “The scoop?”

“Yeah, the scoop about Hottie TA.” She spritzes hair spray along my braid to keep it in place.

I clear my throat. “And?” I don’t want to give anything away.

He doesn’t seem to care about me, so I’m going to pretend I don’t

know anything about him.

Like the fact that he used to sleep with a nightlight. Or that he would tickle my back so, so gently while we listened to music. His favorite band was The Cure, and he wanted to be a poet when he grew up.

Once, he wrote me a poem. I don't have it anymore, but I have it memorized.

You make me laugh.

I'm torn in half.

When I'm with you, I feel whole.

I'll never let you go.

That's the Austin I remember. Sweet. Kind. Caring. And a little dorky.

College Austin doesn't even seem real, but I know it's him, a version of him I don't understand, but still, it's him.

"Earth to Wysteria. Come in, Wysteria." Sage snaps her fingers in front of my face.

"Oh, sorry," I say, and smile. "Thanks again for fixing me up. I love the dress, though the shoes make me wobbly."

She sniffles. "You're welcome. Now, do you want the scoop or not?"

"Sure," I say, standing, following Sage to the door.

It's ten-thirty on a Friday night. The perfect time to get the party started, according to Sage. I have to admit I'm excited about going to another party.

"His name is Austin Morrison," she begins.

That I already know.

"He's a junior, and apparently our English teacher, Witchy Spears, thinks he's a genius."

I didn't know that. Maybe he still writes poetry.

Her eyes meet mine. “He’s kind of - how can I say this without harming your sensibilities.” She raises an eyebrow. “Loose with the women,” she finally finishes. Snickers.

“There are rumors he might be a vampire, but according to his cousin, he isn’t. His dad was half-elf, which would make him one-quarter,” she continues.

We’re riding the elevator by ourselves, and I watch her, wondering what she’s getting at.

“What’s it like having an angel for a dad?” I ask, deciding to change the subject.

She makes a face. “Boring,” she says. “He’s always working. Either with the Supernatural Task Force or teaching at the school,” she says and rolls her eyes. “Keeping the - ” She stops and looks at me. “You’re supernatural, too, aren’t you.”

It isn’t a question but a statement. “Yeah,” I say, wrapping my arms around myself.

She squints her eyes and studies me. “I’d guess elven blood and something else.”

“You’re good,” I respond, but don’t elaborate.

“I thought so.” She taps her nose.

“Have you ever met a vampire?” With the death at school and the suspect being a vampire, not to mention my newfound brother is a vampire, the bloodsuckers are on my mind.

At my question, she physically shudders. “Why would you ask me that?”

“Sorry,” I say, surprised by her response and eyeing her curiously.

“Every vampire I’ve met is either a douche or an arrogant asshole,” Sage adds. “In fact, I have a plan for a few of them.”

“What, like a spell?” It’s against the law to do unauthorized magic, but Sage doesn’t seem to care. Plus, there’s more she isn’t telling me.

“A witch never reveals her secrets.” She giggles lightly. Then

changes the subject back to Austin. “I hope for all our sakes, Austin isn’t a vampire, but either way, he might be more than you can handle.”

I lean against the handles along the elevator walls and don’t tell her he can’t be a vampire. I knew him when he was young. “You’re probably right.”

“And from what I learned, he’s made the rounds more than once,” she adds.

“What do you mean, rounds?” My eyes blink several times as I try to imagine what she’s saying. I think I know, but I don’t want to be right.

“Dang, roomie. Have you been living in a nunnery?”

“I - ” I’m going to tell her the truth, but the elevator opens on the main level. There are dozens of students in the common area. We silently push through and head outside.

Once we’re basically alone again, she shakes her head. “He’s done a lot of dating with his penis.” She speaks slowly like that’s supposed to help.

I open my mouth. Close it. My heart is pounding. I’m way out of my league.

Which is what you want, I tell myself.

“I - ” How do I respond to that? I have no words. So, I don't say anything. Not about where I've been and the reason I'm naive. Besides, now all I can think about is Austin's penis.

Her brows pinch together. “Are you a virgin, Wysteria Hart?”

My face heats up. “So, what if I am?” What’s the big deal? I’m sure lots of people are virgins.

Austin is the only guy I ever wanted to give myself to. And his dad killed my parents. That knowledge kind of takes the romance out of everything.

“I’m blown away.” Sage scrunches her hair and walks in a circle. “I

mean, wow, wow, wow. This is serious. I've never been friends with a virgin."

"Sheesh, get over yourself. It isn't like I have a contagious disease." I cross my arms.

"You're right, it isn't, but it might be worse."

"Sheesh," I say studying my roommate.

Tonight, Sage's wearing a black bustier attached to a tutu. It's lacy and hooks in the front, with long black bow ties under her chest. Black leggings and her ankle boots complete the outfit.

Her eyes are lined in black again, and her hair is everywhere, but flawlessly placed. She looks gorgeous, but something feels off.

I'm guessing it has something to do with vampires and whatever happened the night we attended our first college party.

Her clothes make me wish I could be so daring. She put me in a red sheath dress. My legs are bare, and I'm wearing red strappy heels. I'm an inch taller, but Sage and I wear the same size clothes and shoes.

This outfit is bolder than I've ever been.

Nothing like the long dresses I wore in the other realm.

At that, I think of Leva. I miss her terribly and wish I hadn't sent her away.

"Okay, I get it," I say, adjusting my cleavage. "You're shocked I'm a virgin. Whatever. Let's get to this party already."

She grabs my arms and looks directly into my eyes. Hers are twinkling with surprise, shock, and maybe disgust. "Wow," she says again, this time smiling.

"Wh-when did you do it?" I ask, glancing down at her tutu.

"I was fourteen." Her voice trembles slightly, and she covers her mouth. "Don't ever repeat that." She glances around to make sure we're alone. "My parents would kill me and probably the guy I did it with, too."

I look at her. “They would - ”

“Totally kill me,” she finishes.

A part of me wants to tell her about myself. About my time in the tower and my parents actually being dead, but I can’t.

“I think we have to do what’s right for ourselves,” I finally finish.

She laughs, her face filled to brimming, shocked joy. “If you could see yourself. Someday you’ll tell me what you actually meant to say.”

OceanofPDF.com

HEAVEN OR HELL

WYSTERIA

Tonight's party is by invitation only.

The card in Sage's hand is fancy, printed on thick paper, and embossed with a phoenix. Every once in a while, it flies off the page, circles around us, and then returns to its position. I'm guessing that particular magic is allowed.

Sage is taking me as her plus one. It's being held at another fraternity, but I forget the name. She got the invite from some guy in her Biology class.

The party theme? Heaven or Hell.

I should've known that was code for *slutty*.

When we arrive, a guy takes our invitation and directs us to a sitting room. All the guys are in suits and ties, except the pledges; they're wearing black pants and black bow ties. No shirts. And they're carrying around silver trays of cider that literally sparkle. When I take the offered drink, it tickles my nose.

"This party is lame." Sage is leaning back in a plush love seat, and I'm sitting next to her. She rests her head in her palm and closes her eyes.

"Total snooze," I agree, though I'm too nervous to be bored. All I can think about is seeing Austin.

The décor in the sitting room is luxurious. The furniture is black leather. The carpet is white, and the curtains are black and white. Greenery - plants, shrubs, and trees - are spread throughout the room, and paintings - Van Gogh, Klimt, and an artist I don't know - are hanging on the walls. A black grand piano is off to one side, and a guy in a tux is playing "Suite No. 2" from *Romeo and Juliet*. There's even a

sparkly chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

People are milling around, chatting quietly. One guy appears to be sleeping. The whole scenario reminds me of a party from the book *The Great Gatsby*.

"Where's everyone else?" I ask, and immediately regret it.

Sage raises an eyebrow. "You've got it so bad."

I pretend not to know what she means and shrug. "Is this fraternity for wealthy kids or something?" I whisper.

"I guess. If this is how they party, then rich people are too uppity for my tastes." Her right leg is bouncing up and down. She's antsy.

A clock on the mantle says it's nearly eleven.

"Should we get out of here?"

"Yeah." She looks around the room in disgust. "Snooty and boring. Eesh." She stands, and I'm about to follow when a guy in a tux walks in.

He's handsome in that *someday-I'll-be-a-senator* way.

"My name is Sam. I'm the president of Alpha Kai. If you'll please follow me." He turns and walks from the room.

Everyone rushes forward. Excited whispers fill the room.

"What's happening?"

"Where are we going?"

Sage and I follow the crowd.

"Should we duck out? It looks like he's leading us past the front door," Sage says.

I'm curious, though. "Let's see where he's taking us."

Sam walks us through the kitchen and then opens a door.

"Welcome to Hell," he says with a grand flourish. A huge grin lights up his dark brown face.

Several girls squeal with enthusiasm. It's like a herd of elephants clomping down the stairs.

Sage and I exchange a look.

Loud music is pumping below.

Without a word to each other, we make our way down.

At the bottom is a thick black curtain. Another shirtless guy with a bow tie holds it back. Beyond, mist dances in the flashing lights, and it smells erotic, like cocoa butter, vanilla, and coconut oil. Somehow, the aroma fits perfectly with the music. This is what I meant when I said I wanted to live my life. I push back the curtain and can hardly believe my eyes.

“This is more like it!” Sage hollers, moving past me, her hands in the air as she sways to the music.

A disco ball sends sparkling lights around the room to the beat of the music. There are girls in bikinis dancing around poles on small circular stages. Their movements are slow and seductive.

In the center of the room is a dance floor. Dozens of college kids are jumping up and down, partying like there’s no tomorrow. To the right are small round tables. Couches shaped in a C are nestled around them. Behind the chairs is a bar. Shirtless guys are whipping up drinks. The room is packed. And I wonder why they kept us waiting around upstairs for so long.

Like the last party, the music, the energy, and the idea of drinking push away the pain that’s continually dwelling in my soul. Here, it’s too loud to feel anything but the beat.

I glance at Sage. She is swaying, and I get the feeling being here pushes away whatever sadness she harbors as well. Since I consider her my friend, I decide we need to get to know each other better.

A pretty boy with blond highlights, wearing only red boxers, sticks a tray in my face and smiles. “Jell-O shot?”

Surprised, I step back. “What’s in it?” I ask, wrinkling my nose.

He leans in and whispers in my ear. “Heaven.”

My face heats up, and I have no idea why. But I figure I’ll give it a

try. He hands me a cup filled with blue Jell-O. I don't know what to do with it.

Sage grabs a yellow one, tips it, and squeezes the contents into her mouth. She shakes her head and swallows. "Yummy." She tosses the empty cup on the tray, picks up another, and does it again.

"Give it a try," the guy says, smirking at Sage.

I'm still hesitant until Sage adds, "It's filled with booze."

I can't help the smile that breaks over my face. "Sweet."

The mostly-naked guy and Sage laugh. "I guess I should've led with that," the guy says.

My mind is reeling, ready for the gooey warmth that comes with the potent liquid. I tip back the small cup. The contents fall into my mouth, and I swallow. "Mmm. Good."

"Have another," Boxer Guy offers.

I take a red one and tip it back. "It's like candy," I say and do a third.

The music changes to a song I know. My body moves on its own.

"The best kind of candy," he says. "My name is Doug, by the way." He sticks out his hand, and I shake it.

"Hi. I'm Wysteria."

"Nice to meet you."

Someone shrieks, and we turn. Sage has jumped on one of the stages and is moving her backside against the pole. The scream must've come from the girl Sage kicked off.

I'm a little horrified.

"Your friend's name is Sage, right?" Doug asks.

I search his face. He's watching her, a strange look on his face. Then he clears his throat. "I've heard about her. Sage is a party girl. That's why we invited her."

He hasn't said anything that isn't true. Obviously, she likes to have

fun. But, for some reason, the way he said her name makes me want to lock him up and throw away the key. “What did you hear?”

He turns to me. “Oh, nothing. Hey, you want another shot?”

The alcohol buzz hasn’t hit me yet. “Sure.” I tip it back.

Doug moves closer and runs a hand along my waist.

My heart jumps into my throat. His hand on my body does not feel right.

“Want to come to my room? I can show you things that will make you - ”

“Go refill your tray, grunt!” The command has come from behind us.

We both jump.

Doug turns toward the voice, and I follow.

It’s Austin, dressed in a black suit, a crisp white shirt, and a black tie. At the sight of him, I melt into a puddle on the floor. The man can rock jeans and a tee shirt or this look. I'll take either.

“Don’t be a douche,” Doug seethes.

“I’ll be whatever I want. You, on the other hand, are to be nothing more than a waiter.”

“That girl’s a tease. I didn’t do anything she didn’t want - ” Doug begins.

Austin rams his hand into Doug’s throat and opens his mouth slightly. “Finish that sentence, and you’re out.” Austin pushes him away.

Doug coughs and sputters. “Asshole. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.” He grabs at his throat and stalks away.

“I can’t wait to talk to your lawyer, tell him about the tests you aced but didn’t study for, the side hustle you’ve got running with the trolls in 7D, and the - ”

“Asshole!” Doug shouts again.

“Yeah, I’m an asshole. Remember that the next time you think about getting handsy.” Austin shakes his head when Doug flips him off before disappearing into the crowd. Then he faces me, and his expression changes. Softens. “Stay away from that guy. He’s messed up.”

“I will,” I say, enjoying the way my insides are warming, and my inhibitions are disappearing.

We study each other, and I imagine two assassins sizing each other up before going in for the kill. Okay, wrong analogy since I am no assassin-at least not officially. All the things my parents taught me have come back, and I’m sure if I tried, I could use them to hurt someone. But this? Between Austin and me. It’s more like a hunter sizing up his prey. Thoughts of his teeth grazing my neck, his hands pulling me to him -

Is he a vampire? Could the rumors be true? Is that what’s different about him?

“Hey,” he says, moving closer.

I don’t respond right away, thinking I must be right. He is a vampire. But how? When? It’s against the law for a vampire to change a human. Snow White put the law in motion, and it was passed by all governments. I know what will happen in the supernatural hunters find out. In the same moment, a surge of protectiveness overpowers me. I’m sure it’s the alcohol talking, but I don’t care who his father is. I want him, and I’ll do anything to keep him safe. Vampire or not. And that’s a revelation.

“Want to dance?” He’s so close I have to tilt my head to see his eyes.

Austin, I think, remembering the guy I used to love. *Austin didn’t kill my parents.*

A man this beautiful cannot be evil. He’s made the rounds - “Tell me what that means,” I blurt, my face getting hot because I said what I’m thinking aloud. I’m scalded with mortification.

He chuckles. It's low and sexy, meant only for me. "Are we talking about the meaning of life or something else?" He's smiling - his perfect lips, framing perfect teeth, attached to a flawless face.

"Never mind," I blush hotter, grateful for the party lights and the darkness. He's so close I can feel his breath on my face. Sweet. And I wonder how many shots he's had. Whether his lips taste like lemon or strawberry. Orange or lime. My fingers touch his lips. It feels like forever since we kissed. I imagine they'll feel like a pillow or a cloud. *Hell has beautiful scenery*, I think, my body moving up, placing me on a collision course with his lips.

He presses his to mine briefly before sweeping me onto the dance floor. We move as one. He puts his hands on my hips, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

"You're beautiful," I say and know it's the shots talking. But I don't care.

"So are you," he says, his gaze lingering on my mouth. "You never called. I thought you didn't want to spend time with me."

I pull back. "Um, yeah, sorry. My phone broke."

His fingers are touching my arms, scorching a trail. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"With you?" I ask, unable to tear my eyes from his face. My hands are on his chest. I'm not sure when I put them there, but they feel like they're in precisely the right place.

He chuckles again. "Yes, with me." His eyes roam around the room before they return to my face.

"I would love to," I say. My words are slurred, and I cover my mouth. Not only that, but my legs feel like rubber bands. The shots have hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Come on," he says, wrapping an arm around my hips.

OceanofPDF.com

BODY AND KISS

AUSTIN

Wysteria is so drunk I have to carry her to my Jeep. She keeps touching me, almost like she's making sure I'm real. It's sweet, and I'm protective of her. At the same time, my fangs press against the inside of my mouth. I want all of her. Blood, body, and soul. It takes everything in me not to drink her dry right here in the parking lot.

But I resist and get her buckled.

"I love you - Austin is a vampire - "

At her words, I freeze. "Wys, what did you way?" Did Christopher tell her what I am? I wouldn't put it passed him even though he swore he wouldn't tell anyone. "No longer a virgin - "

Holy hell, my body aches for her. But more than that, I care, so I shut the damn door and drive away from the party.

"Don't leave - The tower - Leva - "

I'm guessing she misses her friend. The pixilette saved her life. But Wysteria sent her away so she could be normal. I still think it's a bad idea. Had Leva remained, Wysteria would've had extra protection. But Wysteria wouldn't hear of it.

"Sad, sad, sad."

From the sounds of it, Wysteria misses her friend more than she realizes. The next chance I get, I'll tell Christopher.

"It's okay, Wysteria. I'll keep you safe." Her dress is hiked up to her hips, revealing way too much. Or not enough. I try to be respectful, but the girl is stunning. Every magnificent inch of her and she smells so damn good. One taste, I think, and move in, feeling I'll graze the skin along her neck.

Her eyes pop open, and for the briefest moment, I think the alcohol

has completely burned off. “Where are you taking me?” she mutters, her head flopping from side to side.

“My place,” I answer, and pull back, steeling myself and put a hand in hers.

She tightens her fingers around mine, places her other hand on top. “I’ve missed you, Austin. I’ve missed home. I miss my mom and dad. Remember when I was going to marry you?”

The last part makes no sense. Marry me? I don’t recall that conversation. But the idea that she ever considered her and me together in that way does something to my insides. Between that and the scent of her blood, I’m ravenous for her.

“Shot. Blood everywhere.” Tears fall to her cheeks as she babbles.

“I’m so sorry,” I say and wish not for the first time since becoming a vampire that alcohol could have an effect on me. But it doesn’t, and I can’t even feel sorry for myself. There’s so much pain rolling off her I can feel it as if it were my own. She’s as broken as I am. We need each other, whether we can admit it or not.

She laughs, and I’m surprised until I understand why. A guy is standing on the curb, peeing into the street. “Gross,” she says.

I chuckle. “Hold tight.” I place my arm across her body, protecting her. Make a right and pull into my apartment complex.

“You live here?” she asks when I open the door on her side.

“Yep.” I unbuckle her, and she falls against me, her cheek on my chest.

“You smell good. Mmmmmm. Austin. Austin. Austin.” Her voice breaks, and she’s crying again. “Why?”

“Can you walk?” I ask, clearing my throat. I haven’t shed a tear since my mom died, and definitely not when my dad died a few years later. But seeing Wysteria cry, recognizing all of the sadness in her, is choking me up.

Wysteria wraps her arms around my neck. “I never want to feel

trapped again," she whispers.

I don't understand what she's saying. Does she feel like I'm holding her hostage? I lift her into my arms. "Hang on." She isn't in any shape to answer questions coherently.

Wysteria weighs next to nothing, even if I wasn't a vampire. Her body settles against my chest. Her head resting on my shoulder. She snuggles her face into my neck, and I feel the wetness of her tears.

My apartment is at the top of the stairs. When I reach the landing, I set her down so I can unlock the door. She keeps her arms around my neck.

Evan walks out of his apartment, a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. "Looks like you got your hands full, bro. Want some help?"

"Nah, it's all good." I unlock my door and carry her into my apartment and close the door with my foot.

Evan sticks his damned boot in the way. "What's her name?" Evan asks, flicking his cigarette away.

"It's Wysteria," I say, annoyed he's followed me in.

"She'll break your heart all over again. I thought you were going to blow her off."

"Get out," I growl, annoyed, working hard not to flash my fangs. Why am I still friends with him? Oh yeah, because he's family.

Wysteria takes a deep breath and sighs; her lips press against my neck. There are so many things I want to do to her right now. Instead, I carry her into my room and lay her on my bed.

"Whoa, she tramped it up tonight. No more Pudgy Wudgy, huh? Look at those legs. And that ass." He chugs the rest of his beer, his eyes raking over Wysteria's body. It's obvious he's on something else as well as alcohol. Probably a drug spell. When those witches concoct something, it's worse than acid.

"I've asked you nicely once. Don't make me ask again," I snap. My

nerves are shot, and my patience is gone. I won't have him talk about her like she's a piece of meat.

I walk out of my room and into the kitchen. Grab a water bottle and twist it open. It's all for show. Water does nothing for me, but no one can know.

Evan follows me. Sets his empty bottle on the counter and grabs himself a new one from my fridge. He's shorter and less broad than I am. He's also a two-time kickboxing champion, but I'm a vampire, so I win. I grin internally.

I push him toward the door. "Out."

Evan lifts an eyebrow, daring me to challenge him. "You gonna break your hand on my face again, cousin?"

"If I have to," I say, thinking about the last time we fought. That was before Christopher changed me. This time things would end much differently. "Leave."

Evan smirks. "I don't think so. This is too much fun." He takes a pull on his beer and tries to skirt around me.

I swear silently and try another tactic. "Look, man. I want to be alone with her. All right." I smile, letting him believe I have less than honorable intentions. "We have a lot of catching up to do if you know what I mean."

He smacks me on the arm. "Why didn't you say that in the first place?" He peeks around my shoulder. "She's hot. Mind if I have a turn when you're finished?"

It takes every ounce of self-discipline I own not to haul off and punch him. But I want him gone. "We'll see," I respond.

He ruffles my hair. "Have fun, bro. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I snort and smack his hand away. "Oh, I'm sure I will." I walk him to the front door.

When it's closed, I lock it, breathing deeply, convincing myself I

need to relax.

I can't help my frustration, though. Since my mother died, he's treated me more like a brother than a cousin. But Evan's got no respect for women - for anyone, really. Most times, I go along with Evan's shenanigans, but when it comes to Wysteria, I won't budge even a little bit. With her, it's different. It always has been.

I'm about to walk into my room when I hear shouting coming from outside. I want to ignore it, and I decide to when something slams against my door.

"Evan," I grumble and pull open the door.

Some guy I've seen before but don't know is crumpled on the ground. He smells like magic.

"Get up." I kick him slightly.

He groans, but he isn't going anywhere. He's out cold.

Evan is at the bottom of the stairs. A couple of guys stand in front of him. One of the guys says, "Manny wanted his money yesterday."

"I'll have it tomorrow. I told him that when I saw him earlier today." Evan lights up another cigarette and blows it into the guy's face.

"Sure. Of course. But Manny wanted us to stop by and make sure you understand he's serious. If he doesn't get the money tomorrow, he's going to your father. And we both know you don't want that."

Evan clears his throat. "You'll get the money, dammit."

I know my cousin is into some shady shit, but he's obviously gone way over what he can handle. And my uncle? What did he know about it? I doubt he's involved, but the guy makes it seem like he is.

The guy not talking to Evan walks over to the stairs and looks up at me, giving me his full attention. "What you looking at, dick weed? Get back inside and mind your business."

I'm half tempted to listen. Turn around and disappear inside my apartment. Evan got himself into trouble. I should let him be the one

to get himself out. But that isn't in me. I can't leave him alone to deal with these guys, even if he is a pain in the ass. "Why don't you and your friend do us all a favor and get out of here?"

The guy smiles a vile grin that shows off his gold front teeth. "How about I break your hands first, piano boy?"

I glance down. The guy has me at a disadvantage. He knows who I am.

"I can't believe he's part of your family," Golden-Teeth says to Evan. "Your uncle must be so proud."

The guy snorts. "What a pansy."

Evan chuckles, giving me a barely-there nod. It's his non-verbal way of telling me to stay chill.

I'm not feeling that, though. It's time to kick the guy's teeth in. "Why don't you say that to my face," I say, heading down the stairs.

Golden-Teeth rolls his eyes. "Pans - "

Before he finishes, I send my fist into the guy's jaw. Not as hard as I can, but close. His head snaps back, and he falls to the ground, out cold.

OceanofPDF.com

HEAD SPINS FASTER

WYSTERIA

I'm not sure how I get to his room. My vision is blurry. I think four Jell-O shots were four too many. My stomach is in knots, rebelling against the sugar and the alcohol swimming inside. A moan escapes my throat.

"How are you feeling?"

My head snaps in his direction. "Austin," I whisper.

The room spins, and he helps me sit up.

"Give me your feet, I'll help you with your shoes." His voice is tender. Smooth, like chinchilla fur, and I think about stroking him.

Instead, I focus. He wants to help me take off my shoes. My feet are screaming, yes! There are probably a thousand blisters. "Please." I lay down, hoping my head will stop spinning. The pillow smells like him. It's earthy, manly, with a hint of vanilla, and I take a deep breath through my nose.

He unhooks my shoes, slips them off. "These are deadly." He chuckles, tossing them away.

"They're Sage's." I close my eyes, but my head spins faster. "Whoa."

"Hang on."

I hear him move away, and I miss him. Water runs in the background. He returns quickly.

My eyes peel open. "You're back," I say and try to smile.

My hands find his arms. He helps me up.

"Take these." He hands me a plastic cup and two white pills.

"What are they?" I try to gauge his facial expressions. "You aren't

trying to drug me, are you?"

He kneels beside the bed so I can see his face without looking up. "I wouldn't do that," he says softly, and I want to lose myself in him.

I focus on his eyes and sigh. They're such a strange shade of blue. Like the way ice looks at sunset.

"Why don't you kiss me?" I slide off the bed, onto his knees.

He catches me, rests his hands on my hips, and holds me steady. My dress is around my waist, but I can't make myself care to fix it. His body feels so good, and I promise myself that I'll stay here forever.

Austin shakes his head. There's something in his expression. Like he's trying to make a decision, or maybe he's in pain. His movement spins my head like a merry-go-round.

"It's been too long," he says and groans, pushing some of my hair off my shoulder, sending tingles along my skin. His hands are so gentle, and I can't help but imagine them everywhere. Against my back, dragging along my thighs.

I shudder. "Austin." I close my eyes, tilting my face toward his. "Kiss me. Please."

He inhales. Touches my lips with his fingers.

I close my eyes, eager for him.

They press against mine softly, like a whisper, and I let out a sound at the feel of him.

"Harder," I say, my hands on his face as I press into him.

He complies, pushing my mouth open and exploring me with his tongue. I reciprocate, tentative at first. He tastes good, like toothpaste, and I breathe him in, thinking there will never be a better moment in all of my life than this one.

He lifts me like I weigh nothing and lays me down. I grab hold of his shoulders, wanting him here with me, but he moves away. I try to open my eyes, but they're so heavy. Damn alcohol. I don't think I like it as much anymore.

A soft weight covers me, and I know it's his blanket. I can smell him on it.

"Sleep well, princess," he says.

Instead of a dream, I have a memory. He was thirteen, and I was eleven -

"Why is your dad so mean?" I ask.

He wipes angry tears off his face. Stares up at his dull white ceiling. I lay beside him and watch the light flicker. The bulb's been about to die for weeks.

"I watched him leave," I say. "He seemed - um, grouchy."

Austin snorts. Rubs his jaw in the spot where his dad hit him. "That's an understatement," he says.

I pat his stomach, and I tingle. Austin has a way of making me feel better, no matter what's happening. "I'm sorry, Austin."

"Yeah, me too." Austin shrugs. Pushes the pillow behind his head into a ball and leans against it. "But what can I do?"

I lift my hair and press it against his cheek and near his eye. My magic flows to life as though something within senses, Austin needs healing. An indigo light shines against his cheek, turning my hair the same color for a moment. I know it comes from my father's unicorn blood. "Unicorns were healers first and foremost," my mom told me once. As the bruising on Austin's face vanishes, I know she's right. Weirdly, I can heal people, and I'm grateful for it - anything for Austin.

"Thanks." He touches my hair, staring at me wondrously. "Wanna listen to my new CD?"

I smile. It's so great he doesn't treat me like some weirdo. "If it's a song about bringing sexy back, I swear I'll snap it in half." I laugh, and he smacks me on the arm with the case.

"Rude! I guess I'll put it away." He pretends to for a moment and then changes his mind, leaning over me. He smells so good like man and vanilla. "It's The Fray," he says, looking at me like he wants to kiss me.

“Okay, let’s listen.” I can’t help but stare breathlessly at him. He does things to me. I can feel his heart beating rapidly against my chest. “But first, kiss me,” I say.

His gaze takes in my lips. Focuses on my eyes. I’m mesmerized by the way his features change, so I can almost always tell what he’s thinking. Like right now, he’s thoughtful. And as excited about what’s happening between us as I am.

“Like on the mouth?” he asks. A finger absently strokes my bottom lip.

I grab the finger and kiss it. “Yeah.”

It seems like a perfectly natural thing. He’s my best friend. The person I care about most in this world. Kissing him would be incredible. I know it.

His eyes find my lips again. “Okay.” His lips press against mine.

And I know there will never be another man for me. Not ever.

OceanofPDF.com

BURIED IN A PILLOW

WYSTERIA

I wake abruptly, my head pounding. Open my eyes and push back a scream.

Where am I?

There's pressure across my middle, and I look down. Even in the dark, I can make out an arm. A guy's arm. It's resting across my stomach. I turn my head ever so slightly and see him.

It's Austin. He's lying on his stomach with half his face is buried in a pillow. Nervous dread swallows me whole.

What have I done?

Carefully, so carefully, I try to scoot out from under his arm. I can't be here. I can't. I can't. But I have no idea where *here* is. I mean, I remember Austin telling me we were at his place, and I remember him kissing me, but - I touch my head. Alcohol is not my friend. Panic sets in. Did we do it?

Please, no.

And, Sage! I ditched her again. She probably thinks I'm the worst friend. She wouldn't be wrong. Sick horror fills my throat.

I scoot further away.

His hand tightens around my waist. "Don't go," Austin mumbles.

"I-Hi," I say, trying to play it cool. "I need a bathroom."

His eyes open, and he lifts up onto his forearms. My eyes take hold of his defined arm muscles and the rumpled waves in his hair. His features are soft from just waking. He's glorious.

Oh my.

He seems to notice where his hand is and grips my waist tighter,

pulling me closer. “Nothing happened,” he says, probably reading the terrified look on my face. “I mean, we kissed. You remember kissing me?”

I press my lips together. “Yes,” I say and pray my face isn’t as red as it feels. My heart is beating so fast I fear it’ll burst through my chest, my skin, and reveal all my secrets.

His face shifts nearer to mine. I almost reach up and trace his jawline, his nose, and those lips. Run my fingers through his untamed hair, down the muscles on his back, his arms, and his chest, but I hold back.

“You asked me to kiss you.” He’s close, so close I can almost taste him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, peering at him under my lashes. “Maybe I shouldn’t have?” In the light of the day, I can’t help but think about his murderous father.

“It was amazing.” His voice is gruff, coursing with the desire I feel but can’t show.

My heart is bleeding, tearing itself into pieces. I want him to kiss me again. I do - more than anything. But if we were to go there, then what?

“Where’s your bathroom,” I ask, looking away.

Austin blows out a frustrated breath and climbs out of bed. I can’t help but notice he’s in nothing but boxer-briefs. They hug his legs and his butt in all the right places. He picks up a shirt and tugs it over his head. His body fascinates me, the way his back muscles tense when he moves.

“You should be more careful. If you’re going to go to a party, there are rules, like don’t have more than one shot and one regular drink, especially since you’re obviously such a lightweight.” He drags on his jeans.

My eyes follow his movements, but I keep quiet, too shocked that he’s scolding me to say anything in response. Not that I don’t deserve

it.

He goes on, “And never, ever leave a party by yourself without telling someone. I could’ve been an ax murderer.” He shoots me a glare, his jaw tensing. Why is he so mad?

“You’re right,” I say and really look at him. Is he a vampire? I remember thinking that last night. As I study him now, I decide it's possible.

“You’re lucky I didn’t take advantage of you.” He runs a hand over his face, goes to his dresser, and picks up his phone.

I’m stupefied again. Watching him move is like hearing a heartbreaking melody. He’s the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.

“Not that I would,” he goes on.

I swallow. His words have me boiling with shame, though, because he’s right. Every word he said is almost the same lecture I received from my aunt when she dropped me off.

“I’ll take you home. You’re staying in the dorms?”

“Yeah.” I untangle the sheets and climb out of his bed. I’m still in my dress. Obviously, nothing happened. That says a lot about Austin. He could’ve done whatever he wanted, but he didn’t. He took care of me, kept me safe. “Thanks,” I add.

“Don’t thank me yet. You left the party with me. People saw us together. Nearly every person at that party knows what happens when I leave with a girl.”

My mouth drops open, and I think of the girl he was with in the cafeteria. The one wearing the over-the-thigh socks. Sage said he’s made the rounds. My thoughts are spiraling into a dark place I never even imagined. I glance at Austin. He doesn’t look like that kind of guy. But then I’m clueless. Maybe he’s exactly that kind of guy. I’ve been gone a long time.

“Mind if I turn on a light?” Austin asks, pulling me out of my contemplations.

“No.” I can’t seem to find my shoes, or, more specifically, Sage’s shoes.

The light flickers on, and I catch him staring. “So, there might be talk - about you. I’m sorry.”

He’s apologizing? I can’t believe it. There’s no doubt that if Doug had taken me back to his place, the scenario would be different. I might not be a virgin any longer.

And I can’t help but think of Sage. Is that what she meant when she said she *asked for it*? My stomach twists, and my head whirls. I have to sit back down.

He walks over and picks up a glass full of water and two white pills. “I tried to get you to take these last night.”

I take the glass and the pills.

“They’re pain relievers. Nothing dangerous.” I hear the smile in his voice and glance at him. “The bathroom is in there.”

“Thanks.” I drink them down in two swallows, then chug until the water is gone, and set the glass back on the nightstand. The water is refreshing, and Austin is amazing. I don’t see or sense an evil bone in his body. Carefully, I go through the door he pointed at, close it, lock it, and do what I need to. After washing my hands, I open the door.

“Let’s go.” Austin is at his bedroom door, waiting for me to follow.

I sigh. Pick up Sage’s shoes. I’m not going to put them back on. My feet still throb. At the door, I glance around. His room is nice.

So is his place. Nothing fancy, but it isn’t disastrous. There are a few dishes in the sink. Empty beer bottles on the counter. The living room has a flat-screen, a couch, and two recliners. They look worn, but definitely not trashy. There’s a half bath off the living room, and two more doors on the other side. I’m guessing behind them are bedrooms, and I wonder if he has roommates.

We walk through the living room, and he opens the front door. A gust of cold wind blasts my face, making my eyes water. I step out,

but he seizes my arm.

“Hang on.” He moves away, leaving the door open.

Cold, I walk over and close out the early morning air and raise an eyebrow. “Did you forget your keys?”

Austin doesn’t answer. Rushes to his bedroom.

The kitchen has a counter with two stools underneath. So, the person in the kitchen can cook and talk to everyone sitting in the living room. My aunt would say the space is functional.

“Put this on,” Austin says, coming back. He hands me a thick red sweatshirt.

My eyes light up. He’s surprised me again. “Thank you, Austin.” I pull it over my head.

He steps closer and gently tugs my ratty braid from the sweatshirt opening. “It’s way too big, but it’ll cover you up, keep you warm.”

For some reason, tears fill my eyes. It shocks me. I’m not much of a crier. I can’t decide whether it’s because I’m glad or sad or just hungover.

Whatever the problem, I can’t resist flinging myself into his chest, wrapping my arms around him. “Thank you,” I say again.

He doesn’t do anything at first. Just stands there. Finally, I feel his arms encircle me. And it isn’t a courtesy hug. He hugs me tight. “Anytime, Wys.”

At the way he says my nickname, my heart melts. But just as quickly, I have a feeling. What if he knows what his father did? I’d like to think he has no idea. But I can’t be sure. And then I remember why we can’t be together. I’ll always doubt him. Seeing his face will remind me of his father, of the evil in his family tree, and I can’t live with that.

“I’d better go,” I say, pulling away and opening the door.

He looks confused but swiftly recovers. “Sure.”

Austin leads me to a black Jeep. Somehow, it fits his personality -

rugged, efficient, and intense. He opens the passenger door and helps me get in. My dad used to say, if a man gets your door, he's a keeper. It's a sign he'll treasure you.

As Austin pulls out of his parking spot, I glance at him and wonder if he's a keeper? I want him to be. But I'm so confused. Unsure about him and if it's possible to have a future.

Turns out, he lives off-campus, though not far.

"Which building is yours? McKinley or Irvine?"

"Irvine," I answer, keeping my eyes facing forward.

As he takes me through the empty streets, I'm melancholy and wishing I could do or say something that would make him reveal the truth of him.

Up ahead are several flashing lights. The police cars are blocking the streets. Austin glances at me, his eyes roaming to my bare legs, and I quickly pull down my dress. He comes to a stop, and a police officer walks over. "Hey, Austin," the policeman says. "You'll have to turn around."

"Sure thing, but what happened?" Austin plays it cool. Obviously, these two know each other.

"There's been another murder. The body's been drained, same as the others." He shakes his head. "Damn vampires." The guy adjusts his belt, and his gun flashes in the light. Next to it is a wooden stake. It's the new world order where the police are trained to protect and serve humans and supernaturals. I should probably start carrying mine.

"I know, right?" Austin says, but I sense something is off.

The cop glances in through the window and glances at me. "Miss." Then he walks back toward the crime scene.

Austin doesn't say anything as he turns around and takes side streets. Finally, he stops in front of my building and puts the Jeep in park. "Thanks for hanging out with me last night."

I open the door, forcing myself not to look at him. I'm so torn. I

want to smile, tell him I think he's wonderful, and ask if he wants to spend more time together. But my brain won't shut up. Because even if he doesn't know what his father did, even if he's completely innocent, it doesn't change the fact that he is his father's son. I can't forget that. Not to mention I'm eighty percent sure he's a vampire. Did he kill the latest victim while I was sleeping? I also think about my brother. I need to talk to him but I have no idea where he is or how to reach him.

"Sorry I was such an idiot." I step out. "See you in class," I say.

"Not if I see you first." His eyes twinkle, and for a moment, I think of pushing away all of my worries. Vampire or not and whatever his father's sins, Austin is amazing. Instead, I slam the door, frustrated with myself and walk to the entrance of my building without looking back.

OceanofPDF.com

THOROUGHLY TOUSLED

OceanofPDF.com

BEHIND THE MURDERS

WYSTERIA

Since receiving my freedom and my memories returning, I've wondered on more than one occasion what happens after we die.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I hope there is something more. That somehow my murdered parents are out there somewhere.

As I ride up the elevator in Irvine Hall to my floor, I can't help thinking about the latest murder victim and offer a silent plea on their behalf.

Thankfully, this most recent death didn't occur on campus.

Gossip circulates about the dean closing the school.

Selfishly, I don't want that to happen. Even as I think about it, I worry about Sage. I should've asked the policeman if he knew the identity of the dead.

Vampires are behind the murders.

That's what everyone is saying.

I don't doubt it, but why? They're committing an act of terror, as stated in the laws.

The Supernatural Task Force is undoubtedly around.

Which leads me to think about Austin.

Somehow, he's a vampire. I know it, even though I don't know how.

I know he's been changed.

Next chance I get, I'm going to ask Christopher.

At the door to my room, I unlock it cautiously and go inside.

Even though it's four-thirty in the morning, Sage isn't here.

Her bed is an untidy mess of covers, but she isn't amongst them.

On her bedside table is a stone bowl with smoke rising out of it.

I rush over and flinch as the stench hits my nose. It smells horrible. I pick it up and turn in a circle, debating what to do with it. I could dump it down a toilet, but if what's in the bowl is the remnants of a spell, that would be bad.

My training comes back in a whoosh of emotions, and I must sit down.

While other kids went on ski trips or camping trips with their families, I went on outings where I learned how to capture and slay different supernaturals.

As a kid, I found the training fun.

My parents kept it upbeat.

But now, as I watch the blue liquid turn to red and then gray, I know the time for games is over.

But what can I do? And where to start?

If the spell Sage concocted hurts someone, she will be kicked out of school and possibly imprisoned.

My throat constricts, and I glance at the digital clock on my nightstand.

The party can't still be going, and I'm worried.

Sage wrote her cell number on the whiteboard hanging on the door, and I walk to it.

Write the number on my hand and head out, passing the communal bathroom on our floor and reach the common area.

There's a TV hanging on one wall with seating and coffee tables, but no one is out here so early in the morning.

The room is quiet except for the rattling vents.

Sitting near the phone, I dial Sage's number.

It rings several times, and I get her voicemail: "You've reached the voicemail of Sage St. James. I can't talk to you right now because I'm out having fun, which is what you should be doing. So, hang up and

go party. Oh, and if you're hard up to leave a message, do it now."

I smile, despite the tension in my body.

When I hear the beep, I say into the phone, "Hey Sage. I'm back in our room, and you aren't here. I'm wondering if you're okay." I pause. "Sorry I left. I won't do it again. Promise." I hang up, frustrated and worried.

Back in our room, I pull off Austin's sweatshirt and toss it on my bed. Carefully I remove Sage's dress and hang it on a hanger. I'm not sure if she'll want to get it cleaned, so I don't put it back in her closet but drape it over the closet door. I set her heels back in their box.

The girl is very organized when it comes to clothes and shoes.

Everything else, not so much.

As I'm putting the shoebox back where I found it, Sage bursts into the room. Her eyes are wild.

I'm in my undies and can't help the screech that escapes my throat. She barely glances at me before falling on the bed.

"Sage." I grab a shirt from a drawer and rush to her bed. "Sage," I say again. "Are you alright?"

She sits up, and I see the rage on her face, feel it radiating off her body, through her pores - like tiny daggers, all aimed at me. "I'm fine," she shouts. "Can't you see I'm fine?"

I flinch. Her breath smells of cigarettes, and she's most definitely not okay. Her tutu is ripped. So are her leggings. Her makeup is streaked like she's been crying.

I don't know what to do, what to say.

Her breathing is ragged, and she sniffles. Tears fall from her eyes and drip down her cheeks.

Like an idiot, I sit there, my hands in my lap, waiting. For what, I'm not sure. But I want her to know I care, that I'm here if she needs me.

Finally, I decide to do what I did last time. I hold out a tissue. She

rips it from my hand and wipes her face, blows her nose.

“What happened to you?” Sage asks through gritted teeth.

I tell her about the four shots, about Austin, and him taking me back to his place. As I talk, her eyes get bigger and bigger. And I know what she’s thinking. Exactly what Austin said everyone would.

“Nothing happened, though,” I finish, sitting beside her, tucking my hands between my knees.

“Right,” she says, standing, ripping her clothes from her body like they have been doused in the plague. She then gets into PJ pants and a tee. “Just like nothing happened with me, either.” She giggle-snorts as another sob escapes. “But this time, they’re gonna wish they were never born.”

My pulse quickens. It doesn’t matter whether she believes me about Austin.

“What *didn’t* happen with you last night?” I ask gently.

Her anger seems to have abated. “Well,” she begins, sitting gingerly. Her eyes are unblinking. “I *didn’t* end up going back to Doug’s room with him and another guy. We *didn’t* have sex. I *didn’t* let them drink from me, and I most certainly *didn’t* - ” She trails off and blinks back tears.

I’m in shock. Doug gave me the creeps - the way he looked at her and put his hands on me.

“I *didn’t*. I - ” Sage stops, breaking down, putting her head in my lap. “Wys.” Sobs rack her body.

I’m frozen. Unsure of what to do. How can I comfort her? Clearly, whatever happened, she didn’t want it to. My blood boils.

Doug is a vampire.

“If I ever see Doug again, I’m going to drive a stake through his damned heart,” I hiss and mean it.

Sage snuggles her head against my knee, and I stroke her crazy hair.

“I’m so sorry, Sage. So sorry.”

She sniffles. “I may have broken a rule or two, even a few laws, but trust me when I say Doug and his friend are going to wish for death by stake.” She lets out giggle-sob and wipes her face on her blanket.

“What did you do?” Not that I’m complaining. Whatever she did, I’m sure they deserved it. I just want to know so we can prepare for any consequences or retribution on their part.

She sits up. “Let’s just say their fangs are no longer in their mouths but have been magically relocated to another part of their anatomy.” She crosses her arms.

I feel the question form on my face as I think about where she could’ve put them. “Like on their - ”

“Penises,” she says and snort-laughs.

My hands fly to my mouth as I gasp. “Crap, Sage! Are you serious?” I’m in shock but also think she rocks. “You’re brilliant.”

Sage wipes her nose on her comforter. “Thanks, Wysteria.” With effort, as though she’s in pain, she sits back up. “Now that it’s done and I said what I did out loud, I’m kind of worried, though. Like if they tell and I’m sure they will, I could get into a whole hell of a lot of trouble.”

She’s right. “How can I help?”

Sage picks up the stone bowl, studying the contents. “I don’t know the reversal spell.” She sucks in a breath and starts to cry again. “I drink too much. I like to party. Sometimes I forget guys will take advantage of that. It’s nothing I haven’t been through before, but they freaking deserved what I did to them.” She shrugs. “I’m sure Snow and the supernatural courts won’t see it that way.” She picks at a string on her comforter, pulling and pulling and pulling until finally, it breaks off.

“Sage, you were - ” I pause, not wanting to use the word rape even though that’s exactly what it sounds like. “Human or supernatural,

that isn't okay, and they deserve to be punished." Even as I say the words, I know it won't matter. The fact that she broke supernatural laws will trump what they did to her. And that burns me up inside. Rage filters along my veins. Doug and the other guy deserve great suffering.

"Um, Wys, I don't mean to alarm you, but your hair is glowing."

I pull my hair over my shoulder. Sure enough, it is glowing, and that gives me an idea. "I can fix it," I say.

"What?" She looks confused.

"I need to borrow your phone."

Still unsure, she hands over her cell.

I call Christopher. He answers on the first ring, and I tell him what happened. He promises to come over right away. After I hang up, I hand Sage back her phone. "My brother is coming over. He'll help us."

"What can your brother do?" She falls back on her bed, tucking her hair behind her ears and staring up at the ceiling.

"A lot," I say, falling back on the bed beside her.

The murder is forgotten.

Austin's scent is still on my skin, but I push away thoughts of him as well.

Right now, I need to focus on helping Sage.

So I tell her about Christopher.

"He's a vampire?" Fear flickers through her eyes. "My aunt is a vampire, but she's different than those I've met since coming here. I don't like them."

I want to ask her about her aunt, but focus. "He's one of the good guys." I think. I hope. "He's been watching out for me a long time. Plus, he knows lots of people on the council as well as the vampire queen. He'll know what to do."

Sage rolls onto her side, facing me. "My aunt is the vampire queen,

but it won't matter. When she and my parents find out what I've done, they won't have a choice. They will have to come down on me with the full extent of the law." A tear trickles down and across her nose, landing on the blankets between us.

I won't let that happen. Sage doesn't deserve anything but kindness. If the vampire queen and her parents can't see that, then to hell with them. "Come on," I say, jumping to my feet.

Her brows crunch together, and she sniffles. "Where are we going?"

"You know where Doug lives? And you know what this other guy looks like?"

"Yes, but - "

"Change into something else. We aren't waiting for Christopher. I'm going to fix this." I go over to my side of the room and tug on a pair of jeans before sliding into a black pair of ballet flats.

I debate on a coat and decide on the black one that used to be my mother's. It's faux leather and cropped and totally cool.

It's the one she wore on all of her Supernatural Task Force missions.

When I was ten and eleven, I sometimes used to sneak and try it on. Then it was too big, but as I slide it on now, I'm filled with nostalgia.

Plus, it fits perfectly.

Like it was made for me.

My backpack is on the floor. I unzip it and retrieve the stake Christopher put in there a while ago. Then tuck the pointy thing down the middle of my back.

When I'm ready, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I look so much like my mom, it hurts, and my chest tightens.

How I miss her and my dad.

I grab a fat elastic from off my bedside table and wind my hair a

dozen times before securing it in a thick bun. “Are you ready?” I ask, turning toward Sage.

She’s dressed but looks freaked. “You are kind of a badass,” she says, giving me a once over. “I love the jacket.”

“Thanks,” I say and walk to the door.

As we ride down the elevator, I catch Sage giving me sideways looks.

“What?” I should be more afraid and not feeling this calmness that’s winding its way through me.

For the first time in months, I feel like I’m in control of my life and not the other way around.

“Are you going to use that thing?” She nods her head toward me, but I know she means the stake. It feels weird and right, pressing against my back. The wood is soft, the pointy end facing up toward my bra strap, the way my parents taught me to carry it.

“Only if I have to,” I say, crossing my arms.

OceanofPDF.com

COMPELLED ME

WYSTERIA

The sun is beginning to rise, but we still have the anonymity of the darkness as we drive in Sage's car through the dead streets of Gothel Springs.

For vampires, sunlight isn't a problem, but according to my training, their weakest time of day is when the sun starts to rise, which means we have an advantage.

"After I take care of this, you have to promise me you'll report what they did to you," I say, studying her profile.

She laughs a harsh dismal laugh. "And tell them what? That I came on to those guys? I asked for it. I thought I wanted them to bite me and other stuff. And then they got rough and mean, so I asked them to stop. They compelled me to keep going the first time and they tried to compel me last night too. Except for this time, I used a spell, so the compulsion wouldn't work. When they realized they couldn't compel me, they got madder and rougher." She shrugs again, closes her eyes, and more tears fall.

"That is against the law. And aside from the supernatural stuff, the other stuff they did is wrong too. No means no," I say, quoting the words my parents told me from a very young age. They wanted me to be a strong, independent woman. They just hadn't planned on dying or me being kidnapped by a crazy old bat.

"You're sweet and naïve," she says and turns onto a street I recognize.

I agree and hold my breath as she heads toward Austin's apartment complex. "What are we doing here?" I eke out, trying to keep calm. Austin couldn't have been one of the vampires who compelled her but Sage has driven us to his apartment complex.

“Doug lives in one of the bottom floor apartments,” she says, pointing at the building.

Relief washes over me. At the same time, I wonder if the complex is like a vampire coven or hang out or something.

Sage parks and faces me. “Thank you for suggesting I report them. That means a lot, but if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s what they will say to me after I give them my statement.”

“What’s that?” I ask softly.

“They will tell me to stop drinking, to stop putting myself in sketchy situations. They’ll look at me and blame me. And then they won’t do anything about it. Not even the fact that those supernatural jerks compelled me will matter. In this town, supernaturals rule over everyone.” She puts her hands in her lap and studies them.

As much as Sage dresses and acts like she’s confident, at this moment, I can tell she’s harboring a lot of insecurities.

A rush of protectiveness wells up inside me. Like Austin, she is part of my family, and I’ll do anything to protect her. “What about your parents?” I say. “I mean, your dad is an angel, right?”

“I don’t want to talk about my parents,” she says, turning away, looking out the window on her side.

I’m about to try again, but she interrupts, glancing back at me, her eyes hard once again.

“What’s your plan?” she asks, point-blank. “You evidently have some sort of magic. Why don’t you tell me how you’re going to fix this.” She’s equal parts irritated and intrigued. That much is clear. But how much to tell her at this moment?

I touch my bun. “My hair glows blue because I do have magic. It comes from unicorns and elves and - ” I’m about to tell her I’m the fountain of youth, but someone exits one of the downstairs apartments.

At the same time, Sage sucks in her breath. “That’s the other one.”

Her face pales, and her eyes widen. She's afraid. Not that I blame her.

"Okay. Stay here." I open the door and get out, keeping my eyes locked on the guy. He's preoccupied, his phone in one hand, and the other is cupping his junk. I know why and have to force myself not to laugh.

Sage put his fangs on his penis. I mean, it's brilliant.

"Hey," I say, feeling braver than I have in years as I stride toward him.

He looks up. "Do I know you?" He looks freaked and slightly chaotic. If I suddenly had fangs on my private parts, I'd probably behave the same way.

"You were at the Heaven or Hell party last night, right?" I pull my hair from its elastic, letting it fall as I tilt my head back.

He notices and smiles. "Yeah, I was there. Too bad we didn't get to party. You're divine." He takes a deep breath through his nose. "And you smell mouthwatering." He opens his mouth, I'm guessing, to flash his fangs, but there's only gaping holes where they should be.

"Thanks," I say, fighting the need to puke as I pull my hair around to the front and wrap the ends around my hand.

"What are you doing here?" His eyes fall to my hand, and he tilts his head in question.

"I have a friend who lives in this building." I shrug, trying to act nonchalant as I reach out and take his hand in mine, knowing I'm going to have to wash it and my hair really good after this, but it has to be done.

As soon as my hair touches him, it begins to glow. He tries to pull away, but I hang on. "Let's party now," I say, trying to distract him by batting my eyelashes.

"Aren't you flirty," he says but is preoccupied with what I'm doing. "You seem to be having a problem with your hair. It's, well it's blue."

"It does that sometimes," I respond, trying to act casual, but I feel

the spell Sage cast over him reversing.

His eyes flash with surprise. After putting away his phone, his free hand goes up to his mouth, touching the fangs that are back in his mouth. Then he grabs himself and makes a face, one that can only be described as a relief. “Did you do that?”

I nod, glad he’s healed and whole once again, for Sage’s sake. “Think of this as a one-time gift,” I say, removing my hand and pulling the stake from my waistband, aiming it at him. “But, if you ever go near my friend, Sage again, I’ll kill you. Do you hear me?”

The vampire freaking smirks, stepping right into my stake. “I’d like to see you try, glow stick. That’s quite a trick you performed. How does your magic work?”

I swallow. My plan was to reverse the spell and heal him, but I didn’t think beyond that. “Just get away from me.” I shove him with the pointy end.

He steps back, his eyes narrowed. “You better watch yourself.” He flashes his fangs.

I force myself not to flinch and try to make myself taller. He can’t kill me. At least, I don’t think so, but he might be able to compel me and then do to me what he did to Sage.

He grabs me by my arms. “Let’s have a little fun, shall we? Look into my eyes,” he commands.

I don’t, keeping my eyes on his chest as I try to pull away from him. But he’s so strong.

He grips my face in one hand, forcing my chin up. “Come on. I want you to use that stake on Sage,” he says.

I try to shake my head, closing my eyes. “Let go of me,” I whisper harshly and jab the stake into his neck deftly before pulling back, ready to stab him again.

He squeals like a pig, releasing me.

I open my eyes, catching myself before I fall back.

He's pressing a hand to his neck. Blood gushes out, pumping through his fingers and down his hand and arm. "You bitch," he seethes.

The wound won't kill him, but hopefully, it hurts like hell.

"Wysteria?"

A quick glance around the bleeding vampire reveals Austin is on his balcony, staring down at us.

"Saved by the pretty boy, but there will definitely be a next time." The guy takes off using his vampire speed and is gone.

Austin jogs down the steps and comes straight for me. "What the hell?"

"Hi," I say, wiping the bloody stake on my jeans before tucking it back into my pants. My parents used to have holsters they kept under their jackets.

"Hi?" he asks, his face a mask of fury. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," I say, but realize if I'm going to fix Doug too, I need his help. "Okay, that's not true. Did you know Doug is a vampire?"

"You live here too?" Sage asks before Austin can answer.

I'd momentarily forgotten about her.

She's out of her car, her hands on her hips, a shocked expression twisting her face.

"Yep," Austin says, glancing from me to Sage before landing back on me. "Which one of you wants to enlighten me?"

"I was about to," I say, looking at Sage.

Her face falls, and she glares. "I'm out of here." She climbs back into her car and takes off, leaving me without a ride home. Not that I blame her. It's twice now that I left her.

"Great." I will have some serious explaining to do when I return to our room, but I still have a job to finish here.

Doug needs his fangs put back in his mouth.

“Wys?” Austin asks.

“Doug is a vampire, and so are you, right?”

Austin’s lips pinch together. “What did he do?” He doesn’t answer my question.

“He and that guy who just ran away hurt Sage. They compelled her and used her.”

As I speak, Austin’s face gets more and more furious, but he doesn’t say anything, and I go on.

“Last night, she did a spell, and they ended up with their fangs removed from their mouths and attached - ” I don’t finish but point to his pants.

He looks down. Then starts to laugh, a deep guttural laugh. “You’re kidding?” he asks.

“Nope. If you ask me, that was well deserved. But since she doesn’t want to go to jail or worse, I told her I would heal them by reversing the spell.” I expect him to ask me how I will do that, but he doesn’t. He just nods.

“The guy you were talking to, the one you stabbed in the neck, that’s Gary. You healed him already?”

I nod, wondering just how much he knows about me. “Yes, but I still need to do the same to Doug. Can you help me get inside his apartment?”

“Hell, yes.” His eyes twinkle, and he heads back over to the complex.

At the door, as he’s about to knock, I take his fist in both my hands. “You are a vampire, right?” If he isn’t, I don’t want him to go inside. Because Doug is, and that would make him stronger than Austin. Sure, Austin has elf blood in him, which gives him some sight, but that’s nothing compared to all a vampire possesses. I refuse to let him get hurt.

He cups my face in his hands. “Are you worried about me,

Wysteria Hart?"

My heart is racing at his nearness, and my gaze drops to his luscious lips. "Yes," I say.

"That's what I thought." He kisses me swiftly, then bangs on the door.

"You are, aren't you?" I ask again, breathless, needing to hear the truth from him.

The door flings open, and before I can get a grasp of what's happening, Austin shoves Doug inside and has him on the floor in a chokehold. "Do your thing, Wysteria."

Jumping into action, I run over to Doug, who is swearing and struggling, and let my hair drape against his bare arm. My magic flares to life.

Doug quiets, and his eyes widen with fear.

Austin is looking at me with fascinated wonder.

I can feel the spell reversing and Doug healing. When it's done, I pull the stake from my waistband and stick it to his throat.

Doug starts to writhe again, fighting to get out of Austin's hold, but he has a tight grip.

"I healed you for Sage's sake, but if you ever go near her again, I'll shove this stake into your chest," I say.

I may not be an official member of the Supernatural Task Force. I may not be sanctioned for such a threat, but I don't care. What he and Gary did deserves punishment.

"And if she doesn't, then I will," Austin hisses. "With pleasure." He releases Doug and stands, pulling me up with him, and more rapidly than I can blink, we're out of Doug's apartment and whooshing across the landscape like someone pressed fast forward. In seconds, we are in the alley behind my building on campus.

My breath is coming in rapid bursts as my feelings swirl all over the place. "I knew it," I say. There aren't any people around, but I tuck

the stake away and then look up at Austin.

His face is a muddled mess of emotions. “I am,” he grits out. “But no one is supposed to know. Swear you won’t tell anyone, not even Sage.”

I search his eyes, desperate to know how such a thing happened.

Who changed him?

There’s also Doug. Austin wrestled him and used his vampire speed. He knows Austin is a vampire now too.

Before I can ask any of the sixty-five questions swirling in my brain, he leans down and kisses me.

At first, it’s soft, but then he presses my mouth open, diving in with his tongue, and I’m lost in him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

I kiss him back, my body on fire with need for this man who used to be the boy I had a crush on. This man who used to be part elf but is now all vampire.

This man who is the son of the man who killed my parents.

But none of that matters.

Because the man holding me and kissing me is all I’ve ever wanted, and I hope he never lets me go.

Sadly, my hope is dashed to pieces when someone whistles and asks if she can join in.

“I’ll call you later,” Austin says, touching my swollen bottom lip with his thumb.

“My phone, remember. It’s broken.”

“We’ll see about that,” he says. “Later.”

I watch him walk away, waiting for my thighs to stop shaking.

With my elastic, I wind my hair back up into a bun before starting around to the front and the entrance so I can go up to my room.

As soon as I close my bedroom door, my eyes flick to Sage. She’s

sitting on the edge of her bed, rocking back and forth.

"I'm sorry, Sage," I whisper. "I promise to be a better friend, and I swear never to leave you alone at a party again."

She falls back, her head smacking the pillow. "Don't get all Mother Theresa on me. What happened isn't your fault." She throws her arm over her eyes and sniffles. "Did you fix Doug or stake him like you did the other guy?"

I press my head against her pillow, so our heads are touching. "Yeah, both jerks are physically back to the way they were before your spell, and I didn't stake him."

"So, they're both still alive?" She sounds disappointed.

"Sadly," I say.

She sighs heavily. "Thanks, Wysteria. Really. You're a good friend." Her voice is quiet, and I look over at her. "I'm beat, but let's talk later. I want to know all about your magic hair."

I snort. "You got it." I climb off the bed, tuck the stake back in my backpack, change my clothes, and leave.

The piano rooms open at five. And I need to play.

Play until my fingers are raw.

Until I can't see Sage's devastated face, or Doug, and the way he looked at her.

I need to play until I can't see the blood, so much blood, and the way my parents were lying still, so still on the carpet. I have to play until I can't see the smug smile on Austin's dad's face.

I need to play until the pain stops, and all I feel is the music and the keys.

The *staccato* and *legato*.

Until all of my frenzied anxieties disappear, and there's only the music.

OceanofPDF.com

SLAYER TYPE

WYSTERIA

When preparing for college, there's never a mention of its dark underbelly.

Talk is always about the classes, finding a major, living on your own, social clubs, and getting a degree.

They don't say anything about the parties and the drinking.

They leave out the way our bodies thrum for more than books, studying, and tests. They don't tell us what happens at night when classes end, and the real learning begins. The difficult decisions that can affect the rest of our lives.

"There's another party tonight," Sage says, half-heartedly. She's lying on her bed on her stomach, her Psychology book propped open.

I'm not sure if she's reading it or perusing through the pictures. Psychology is her major, which I find slightly hilarious.

"Want to go? I'm sure Austin will be there."

At the thought of him, my heart lurches. He helped me with Doug, kissed me, and flat out told me he's a vampire. He and I have a lot to talk about.

I glance up from the Sudoku puzzle I'm working on.

Sage is smirking like she knows what's going on inside my head.

"Aren't you worried about those guys?" I ask carefully.

"Nope, this time I'm prepared." She shows me she also has a stake.

"Where did you get that?"

"I made it," she admits. "I also added a little something-something extra to it." She wiggles her nose and waves her fingers.

A sparkle of magic swirls above them.

It's then I realize just how powerful her magic must be.

She really isn't living up to her potential.

But I don't say that.

"I have that paper due in English. I was going to work on it. Plus, I need to do laundry. I should probably - "

She holds up a hand. "Yeah, me either," she says, snickering.

I let my composure falter and release a giant sigh. "Good."

Sage looks better. Seems a little better, too. She's showered. Wearing cutoffs and a white tank, but I've no clue what's going on under all of that blond hair.

"Want to do laundry together?" I ask, false hope in my voice.

Neither of us has been to the basement laundry room since our Resident Assistant gave us the tour.

She taps a finger to her lip and looks at the ceiling as though debating the mysteries of the universe. Finally, she says, "It's an exciting prospect. But no. I can clean my clothes with a spell so I'll pass. Have fun, though."

I laugh, wishing I knew a spell to do my laundry. "I will."

She flips on her music but keeps it down, and I go back to working on my puzzle. "Where did you get your stake, and how did you know how to use it?"

"Huh?" I raise my head, feigning innocence, though there's no point. Of course, I should've known those questions were coming.

"Don't play coy. You could've killed that vampire." She turns down her music. "You keep surprising me. I didn't peg you for the slayer type." Her face is lifted, waiting for me to answer, but I'm caught off guard.

I've thought about telling her, but the timing's been off. And now? She's dealing with so much. How can I further weigh her down with my problems? If I tell her how I know what I know, I'll also have to tell her about my parents.

Sage closes her book and climbs off her bed. “Talk to me.”

My heart starts to race, and I press my arms to my sides. She’s standing in front of me, her arms crossed, interest on her face. But I’m not ready to talk about my parents. Not yet.

I shake my head. “I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

She spins around and throws herself back on her bed. “I spilled my guts to you this morning. Told you private stuff, and you can’t even tell me how the hell you know how to use a stake. Lame.” She flips open her book, whipping the pages so hard I think she’ll rip them.

“It isn’t that I don’t want to tell. I do. It’s just kind of heavy.” My insides are quivering just thinking about talking to her about them.

“Yeah, whatever. You’re a tragic soul. Your life is hard. Blah. Blah. Blah. And boo-hoo.” Sage stops flipping pages and glares. “You’re nothing special, you know. Whatever problems you think you have, someone else always has worse.” She slams her book shut, slides on a pair of black combat boots. “I’m out of here.” She flings open the door.

A guy is standing at the opening, his hand raised to knock.

“Hey.” He waves nervously.

“What do you want?” Sage asks in a huff.

“Is - ” he pauses and looks at the card. “Wysteria Hart here?”

I notice he’s holding something in his hands, like a present. I climb off the bed.

“I’m Wysteria,” I say, curious.

“Of course, it’s for you. The virgin magical-hair girl.” She shoves past the guy, knocking him out of the way.

I’m sad she’s upset with me but focus on the guy, instantly leery of him. Christopher said people are after me. And even though I have a cloaking spell over me, that won’t stop everyone. Not only that, but it wouldn’t be hard for the vampires I threatened to find out where I live. “Who’s it from?” I ask cautiously.

The friendly smile he wore moments ago vanishes. “Look, I have no clue. Do you want this or not?” He holds out the bag like it contains poison.

“Yeah, okay.” I take the card and the pink gift bag.

The guy walks away, shaking his head. “Stupid Freshmen.”

“Thanks,” I holler after him.

He raises a hand but keeps walking.

I close the door and sit on my bed. The card has my name on the outside. Inside are two words: *Call me.*

Underneath is a phone number.

I know that phone number.

I’ve got it memorized.

Nervous butterflies flutter in my belly, not because this is from some scary supernatural, but because this is from Austin. I set the card on the bed, push aside the tissue, and look inside the bag.

It’s a cell phone.

I can’t believe he bought me a new one. That’s thoughtful. I pull the phone out.

It’s one of those prepaid ones.

Opening the instructions, I figure out how to turn it on and then find out how many minutes I have. It says 5000, and that they can be used for texting.

A rush of excitement shivers down my spine.

I’m still new to the whole cell phone craze with the music and the internet and the gazillion social media sites and dating apps.

This one isn’t fancy. It doesn’t even look like it can play music, but still. He bought me a phone.

Sweet!

I study the card again. The phone pings in my hand, and I jump.

A message pops on the screen: Wys, call me!

I stare at the words on the screen and know they're from Austin. My heartbeat picks up speed. I try not to be too eager, but I can't help it. I stare at the message wondering how to respond.

Should I call or play dumb?

I decide on the latter, just for fun.

I text back: Who is this?

Pushing the gift bag off my lap, I lean against my pillows, crossing one leg over the other.

Several seconds pass, and I start to wonder if he's going to respond.

I try to relax and focus on my Sudoku, but the numbers on the page are a blur.

I think about Sage and the way she huffed out of the room.

Sitting up, I punch her number into my phone and type a message.

I text: Sorry, Sage. I want to tell you all about my life. I don't know what happened earlier, except I was in shock you brought it up all of a sudden. Hope you're okay. By the way, this is Wysteria, and I have a new cell phone.

She texts back: Who gave you a phone?

I pause, debating whether I should tell her. Then type: Austin.

She responds: Are you still a virgin?

I snort. Heat blooms through my whole body. Why would she ask me that? What does my still being a virgin have to do with Austin giving me a phone? Unless -

"Ugh," I shout at the ceiling. "I'm not easy."

I text my answer quickly: Yes, I'm still a virgin! You've been gone five minutes.

Sage answers in a flash: Nothing magically kinky going on?

I respond: No!

Sage texts back: Would you tell me if you and Austin did get

kinky?

The woman is wild. I say back. No handcuffs or whips were involved.

She texts back: Handcuffs and whips? I didn't think you were that kind of girl, but I guess we can work something out, if you'd like.

"What?" I sit up. Reread her message, and start to text back when I see the name at the top of the text. It didn't go to Sage.

It went to Austin.

“Frack!” I toss my phone away as though it’s a red-hot coal.

I bury my face in my pillow and scream with humiliation. I’ve done plenty of embarrassing things. Like the time the heel of my shoe caught on the hem of my skirt when I stood after playing my song at a piano recital when I was ten. That’s why I wear ballet flats now. No heels to worry about.

Or the time I went down a slide at the waterpark and my top came off, which is why I no longer wear bikinis.

And there are more, many, many more.

But in all those times, in all those places, never have I been more mortified than I am right now.

My phone is at the foot of my bed, and I hear it ping. I sit, desperate to know what it says, but at the same time, I’m terrified.

I chant over and over in my mind: I don't care what he thinks. I don't care what he thinks.

But I do care. A lot.

At that moment, I think of my parents.

What would they think of me being with Austin? Am I honoring them with my feelings for a murderer’s son? Ugh, I need to stop dwelling on that.

Another ping. I can’t resist.

Ever so slowly, I pick up the phone, turn it over and read the text.

It’s from Sage: No response :(Does that mean you're doing the deed now?

I hurry and text her back: Texting shame. I sent the message meant for you to someone else. The words handcuffs and whips were included.

Sage messages back: OMG. Who?

I type out: Austin.

She responds: LOLOLOLOLOLOLOL

I can’t answer that.

Sage is laughing at me - in writing.

I’m sure that’s what Austin is doing too. My face blisters hot.

Austin texts: Wysteria, why won't you call?

I send back: Why don't you call me?

I would call him, but the idea of dialing the numbers, forcing myself to recognize the truth. I want to talk to him. Each digit bringing me closer to the inevitable. I’m not brave enough to do it. But if he calls, then all I have to do is answer. Or ignore it.

Austin texts: Fine. I will.

The phone rings. The ringtone is a lovely minuet. I stare at the screen, recognizing the number.

It’s Austin.

Before I answer, Sage pushes open the door. I click ignore and stuff the phone under my leg. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” She’s fidgety and seems a little out of it. "Austin isn't here. I half thought he would be." She kicks off her shoes.

"Nope. Still a virgin. Nothing kinky," I say, hoping to make her laugh.

She sniffles and rewards me with a strange smile.

“So, you wanna talk?” I ask, patting the spot next to me on my bed. Austin will have to wait. It's time Sage and I have a heart to

heart.

She shrugs. “It’s okay. I thought I might go to the party tonight after all. I need to get out.”

My heart drops into my stomach. “Really?”

Sage laughs. “No, not really. I just wanted to see the look on your face.” She throws herself onto my bed. “Tell me everything.”

OceanofPDF.com

ROOMMATE CHAT

WYSTERIA

Sage and I talk and talk and talk. I do tell her everything.

About Christopher.

Austin.

What I saw his dad do to my parents.

Training for the Supernatural Task Force before I was taken.

I tell her about being a prisoner in another realm.

I even tell her I'm the fountain of youth.

She takes the over-abundance of information surprisingly well.

Until recently, I believed myself an only child. Now I have Christopher, but I always wanted a sister.

Sage has taken the role.

It only took eighteen years, but she's worth the wait.

I can't help but think of those cackling senior girls that put us together.

Maybe they are smarter than I gave them credit for.

Sage shares more about her life and her parents. Even though she was born in the realm of Polonias, she was mostly raised in Sharra.

The Vampire Queen is her aunt.

Her grandfather is the legendary dragon, Abernathy.

I'm in awe of her as she talks about attending the Seven Magics Academy and what it was like to live, breathe, and be magic twenty-four-seven during the first eighteen years of her life.

If I heard about her without knowing her, I would've believed her life was perfect. Yet, it wasn't. She was racked with weaknesses and struggles the same as me.

“The problem is,” Sage went on, interrupting my thoughts.

“With my ancestry comes a lot of expectation. If I make a mistake, it’s like the end of the world to my parents. They are beyond suffocating.” She shrugs. “So, of course, I chose to rebel and do everything I can to help them see I’m not and never will be their perfect daughter because perfection is a myth, you know?”

“Do they know you’re here?” We’re sitting cross-legged on my bed and have been for so long, my legs are asleep, but I can’t move, too captivated with Sage’s life.

It’s so different than mine.

While I was sitting in my tower, teaching myself to play piano, she learned spells, tried magically infused drugs, and drank alcohol laced with enchantments.

And guys, galore!

Some of her stories make my toes curl.

Like the time she and a gargoyle went into the orchard to hook up. While they were there, trolls appeared. They were trying to sneak up on the castle, determined to invade Sharra, and take it for themselves.

Sage and the guy ran back to the school ahead of the trolls to wake the headmistress, but she, Sage’s parents, and Snow already knew the trolls were coming. Sage got into a lot of trouble for that one.

In Sharra, being outside after curfew is grounds for severe punishment.

“Yeah, they know. We came to a compromise,” Sage says, making a face.

I nod, taking her hand. “You’re right. Perfection is a myth.” My feet are tingling, but I don’t worry about them.

Sage’s life is better than any show I watched as a kid.

When I was young, my parents and I were a team.

Team Slayer, we called ourselves.

Of course, I made the name up when I was five. But it stuck.

When my parents were around, we did everything together.

The worst thing I ever did was sneak out. One time. That offense cost my parents their lives and seven years of mine. I don't share that information or that I feel responsible for them dying. Because it seems like Sage has a lot to get off her chest, and I can tell she needs to vent.

"In the end, all I did was disappoint Cindy and Gabe." She flops back on the bed and covers her face with a pillow.

I'm surprised by her mother's name. I don't know why. I think she told me their names when we first met, but they sink in this time. "It was your mom who put the cloaking spell on me to keep me safe," I say cautiously.

I met the witch, and she seemed really nice.

Now that I think about it, I can totally see her mother in my friend's face.

Sage is a little rougher around the edges while Cindy is the epitome of flawless, but the bone structure, hair color, and look of her and Sage are the same.

Sage removes the pillow and shrugs like I just told her it's raining outside. "I wouldn't be surprised. According to Cindy - Mom, she had a crush on Christopher in high school before falling for my dad. Apparently, your brother betrayed Snow White and chose the wicked vampire queen. For his loyalty, instead of providing him with the power he craved, Sharra tried to kill him."

"Are you serious?" I don't want to believe it. Sage knows more about Chris than I do. Not that it's hard.

I really don't know anything about him, except he's a vampire and he wants to keep me safe.

"Damn straight." She throws her legs over the side of the bed and sits.

"Tell me everything you know about him." I readjust, unable to

ignore the pins and needles any longer.

She tells me how Christopher used to be a Hunter for the previous Vampire Queen. That her name was Sharra, same as the realm, and that she was horrible. Like, desperate to rule all the realms, wicked.

Christopher was on orders from the queen to bring Snow to her. He did. The old Vampire Queen and Snow fought, and Snow won.

After the fight, Snow couldn't let Christopher die and revived him before banning him from the realm.

Years later, when Snow and Dorian's daughter Jasmine became a teen, Christopher helped her defeat Sharra again and the Darkness.

That I knew about. The Darkness was a big deal and something we were taught in school. I was also taught about how Snow White became the supernatural ambassador between realms, including the human one, and that she helped establish laws we still live by today, including the Supernatural Task Force.

But my brother's connection to everything? This is big news. He has a past. One that's fascinating and somewhat shady.

Is it possible he's the vampire draining and killing people? I hope not.

IT'S MIDNIGHT, and Sage is lying next to me on my bed.

Austin's called two more times, but I keep ignoring him. Not because I don't want to talk to him, I do, but the conversation between Sage and me is a crucial moment in our friendship. Not only that, but listening to Sage brings up feeling about Austin's father. About how my parents died.

There is so much about the last seven years of Austin's life I don't know about. I open up and share some of my anxieties with Sage.

What kind of person is he really? Sure, he took care of me one night and didn't try anything.

But the word is, he gets around. Those things have me nervous.

What if I don't know him at all?

I completely trusted Redyrin. I believed her when she told me she was my mother. I believed her when she said I was safer in my towering prison. And look where that got me? I'd even abandoned my best friend, Leva.

I felt horrible about that.

"Why are you blaming Austin for something his father did?" Sage blurts, crossing her arms in frustration.

It's a solid question. I know I shouldn't.

Austin didn't take my parents from me.

My mom and dad actually liked Austin. My mom teased me about him all the time. But I'm scared he'll hurt me the way his father did.

"Wysteria?" Sage touches my arm.

"I don't blame Austin. I don't." I shake my head, realizing I mean it. "But when I see him, or I'm near him, I remember what his father did to my parents. And if his father could do such things, then - " I don't finish the sentence.

I am a product of my parents.

What if Austin is too?

Even as I think such things, my body objects, my heart aching like I've put my own stake through it.

"You think Austin is evil too." Sage takes a deep breath and shakes her head. "I get that. I do." She sniffs. "But, you should give Austin a chance, especially if you feel so strongly about him." She rolls on her side, faces me. Her eyes are the color of dark chocolate, and they're staring at me intently.

I want to let it all go. Just wish it all away. But I can't. I'm not made that way. "I-I don't know if that's possible. Alcohol helps." I take a deep breath, feeling ashamed for stating the fact so bluntly. Although after the last time, I don't want to drink again.

Sage busts out, laughing. "Yeah, it does. If only it didn't have those

nasty morning-after side effects."

"We should come up with something. A spell. We'd be world heroes." I laugh with her, grateful our conversation shifted away from Austin.

Sage leans over and kisses my cheek. "Thanks for the chat." She climbs off my bed and falls onto hers. "I'm sleeping straight through tomorrow. Wake me for class on Monday."

"Night, Sage," I say, but there's still something on my mind. Debating for several minutes, I finally say, "Maybe you should give your parents a chance too."

Sage doesn't answer, and her breathing evens out, and I know she's asleep. It doesn't come as quickly for me. I can't help thinking about Austin and my apprehensions.

Without debating the consequences, I pick up my new phone.

Type out this text: Sorry I didn't pick up when you called. Roommate and I were talking. Thanks for the phone. You're very thoughtful and beyond generous. I owe you.

I stare at the screen for several minutes, waiting for him to respond.

He doesn't, and I roll on my side, pull my comforter up to my neck, and close my eyes.

I've been asleep either thirty seconds or three hours when my new phone pings.

Austin's response reads: You're welcome.

OceanofPDF.com

IT'S YOU

WYSTERIA

Thanks to Austin and my new phone, I intended to call Christopher the next day. He's been around. Austin told me as much. But I haven't seen him and I'm nervous about speaking with him.

My brother is so much more than my sibling and my protector.

And I'm not sure how to talk to him or what to say.

So, I keep putting it off, and it's been a week.

Not only that, but I'm nervous about meeting the other half of my piano duet.

Professor Jenkins told me to meet my partner in Piano Room 3. I've been to that room several times already. Professor Jenkins teaches his private lessons in that room, so I'm familiar, but I'm also feeling queasy.

I have no idea who my partner is. What if she's horrible and doesn't like to practice? What if she's hard to work with and we don't get along?

I enter the Fine Arts building, walk downstairs, and open the heavy door leading to the practice rooms. I can't help the intense sigh of relief that enters and exits my lungs.

I imagine this is what religious people get from church.

Music is calming. Fortifying.

And I offer a silent prayer: Please let this duet work out.

There's still five minutes until our meeting time, so I walk slowly, enjoying the muffled sounds of song filling the hallway.

As I get closer to the designated room, a strain of music rises above the others. It's heartbreaking, full of longing, sadness, and hope.

I stop and listen, unable to move.

It's beyond beautiful. I have to see who's playing. My heart demands it.

I run to the door and peer through the small rectangular window.

My body registers his identity before my mind does, and my mouth falls open.

New sets of butterflies have hatched inside my stomach, fluttering around wildly.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think he played the piano or even liked classical music.

But he's always liked poetry, I think, watching him through the small window in the door.

The music stops, and he looks up like he hears me.

He probably did. He is a vampire.

Surprise creases his brow, and he gives me a thigh-shaking smile.

"It's you," I say, unable to stop the grin that blooms across my face.

He gets up from the piano and approaches me. It looks like he hasn't shaved, leaving his face scruffy.

Sexy, I think.

He's wearing faded jeans and a black button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled to his biceps.

I drink him in. The man takes my breath away.

"It's me," he says, opening the door and letting me in.

I'm suddenly beyond nervous at his nearness and lick my lips.

He picks up one of my hands and caresses my palm.

The butterflies in my stomach are frantic, and my heart is racing, racing, racing. So fast, I think it might burst through my chest. "I didn't know you played." The words stumble out of my mouth like drunken old men.

“This must mean you’re my duet partner?” His caressing fingers have moved up to my inner wrist, and my heart stops. Slams to a standstill.

“The duet?” I ask, clearing my throat. Never in a million years would I have guessed Austin could be my partner.

He chuckles. “You are here so we can practice our duet together?” His eyes roam my face like he’s searching for the girl who used to take care of him after his dad would beat him.

I’m here even though I’ve changed since then.

I was eleven. Short. Golden curls. Chunky. Full of wonder and ideas. Always quick to laugh. Always quick to share. I’m no longer that girl. My face and body have become lean. My hair is extra-long, and I don’t laugh nearly so often as I used to.

“It’s good to see you. How’s your phone working out?” Austin asks, his gaze landing on my lips.

That’s when I remember his parents are dead too. At that, my heart softens.

His dad may have been a murdering jerk, but Austin can’t be.

“Good. Great. I really appreciate it.” I look down at our hands. “I - I’m sorry,” I say, meeting his eyes then.

He steps closer, pulling my body to his. I press my face against his chest, breathing in the scent of fresh laundry and vanilla. He’s tangible, real. And I don’t ever want to let him go.

“Sorry, I was a jerk with those girls before. Sometimes I let my damn pride get in the way.”

“Are you still dating them?” My face warms at the question. Why wouldn’t he be? It’s not like I’ve given him any reason not to.

“A few times,” he says. “But - ”

The revelation is a surprise. I shouldn’t be upset, but anger springs to the surface. Or maybe it’s jealousy.

“Why would you do that?” I push away, part of me thinking I

should just leave and tell the Professor, never mind.

My thinking is nuts, I know that.

We are barely more than kissing buddies.

“Hey,” Austin says, coming toward me. “I did it because I was scared, too.” He pauses. “I’m in love with you, and that’s effing nuts.” He runs his hands through his hair, turning away. “I mean, before a few weeks ago, we hadn’t seen each other in years.”

He bends down, trying to see my face. “But it’s the truth, and I didn’t want to believe it. The worst part about it is I knew you would find out I’m a vampire, and I didn’t know what you’d think of me. But, Wys, I’ve missed you and want to be with you all the time.”

I shiver. I can’t help it. Austin is saying things I only ever dreamed of hearing. Bearing his soul, speaking truths I haven’t told anyone, not even myself.

“I-I’ve missed you too, Austin.” I want to tell him I love him too, but the words won’t form on my lips.

The door thumps open, and Professor Jenkins walks in. He clears his throat, scrunching his salt and pepper brows. Then he clears his throat again. “I see you two have met. Excellent. Excellent. Sorry, I’m late.”

He pulls some music from his briefcase and hands pages to each of us. “Have a seat, and let’s go over the piece I’d like you both to play.”

Austin winks and sits at the piano he was playing moments before.

I take the one across from him.

The piece of music is kind of a letdown. Sonata in F Major, K. 533/494: III. Rondo. Allegretto. Written by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Arranged for two pianos by Grieg.

“Let’s take a look at the first page. You’ll see the title and arrangement. I assume you’re both familiar with it?” Professor Jenkins asks.

“Yes,” Austin says.

Professor Jenkins glances at me.

“I am.”

“Excellent. Let’s run through it once.”

Austin shrugs a shoulder and grins. His face is easy to read. It’s saying, I’m game if you are.

I can’t help but meet his grin with one of my own.

Game on, I think.

Austin and I play through the piece for Professor Jenkins several times. We sound fantastic together.

Still, the Professor gives us pointers, advising us on the more difficult sections.

In the first run-through, Austin plays piano one, and I play piano two.

Then we swap.

Piano one is my favorite. The music is so fast my fingers almost have to float above the keys.

But Professor Jenkins ends up giving Austin piano one.

I’m bummed, but I keep telling myself it doesn’t matter.

Playing with Austin at the Winter Gala is almost a guarantee I’ll receive another year of scholarships. At least that’s what Professor Jenkins told me. I focus on that, not my pride.

“Alright, you two. That’s a good start.” Professor Jenkins nods at each of us and he stands.

“Get in plenty of practice. Let’s meet back here. Same time. Same place. Next week. I expect to hear great progress from both of you.” He grabs his briefcase, and walks to the door. “I think the two of you make a great duo.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Austin and I say together as he leaves.

Once the door clicks closed, I turn to Austin. He’s watching me while he plays, and music fills the room. It’s the same piece I heard

him play earlier.

“I wrote this for - ” He pauses, clears his throat, and looks down at his hands.

I stand beside him, waiting for him to go on.

Now that he’s bared his soul, we can really talk.

“Who?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer but keeps playing.

I listen, loving the way the top and bottom notes blend together so beautifully, almost like magic.

“So, seven years?” he says but continues to play. “What have you been up to? Besides becoming an amazing pianist.” His brilliant blue eyes find mine. “Never would’ve guessed.” His eyes shift back to the piano keys. “I thought you wanted to be a doctor.”

I can’t help the laugh that leaves my throat. Nor can I help my need to be closer to him.

“Have a seat.” He scoots over on the bench so I can sit beside him.

I slide in, placing my hands in my lap. My heart is my throat. So many questions, thoughts, worries, and desires. They fill me up so I can barely think.

He glances at my lap and smirks. “You’ve got a doctor’s hands.”

I lace my fingers together, letting his words sink in. “I wanted to be a doctor before,” I say, not sure how much to share about my time in my tower. “But while I was in that other realm, I had no memory of my life, this life.” That’s the saddest part. So much time lost.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That must be difficult. Like you’re almost two different people.” He stops playing and turns to me. “What dreams did you have while you were there?”

His question is unexpected, and my answer will be a letdown. “I used to dream about finding someone and falling in love,” I say, embarrassed. Most of the books I read in the tower were about being whisked away from a mundane life and toward love.

“That sounds so unlike you,” he says.

Now that I have my memories of before my time with Redyrin, I know he’s right.

Mom and Dad taught me to be a strong, independent woman.

They trained me to be like them, promising I could do anything.

Gender had nothing to do with my dreams.

“All I knew was what Redyrin shared with me,” I say. “And that wasn’t much.”

“Now that you’re back?” he goes on, playing Chopsticks.

I join in, almost without thinking. “I guess I want to be like my parents and work for the Supernatural Task Force.”

He stops, his fingers pressing down the keys. “Really?”

“I mean, yeah. Since I’ve been back, that path has kind of called to me.” I stop playing too. “But the piano saved my life. I won’t ever give it up.”

He nods as though he understands. “I get that.”

“Is music your major?” It feels so weird to be having a regular conversation. Me the fountain of youth and him an unsanctioned vampire.

“No, my father always wanted me to get a degree in international law. Music is my minor, though. I can’t give it up.” It looks like he wants to say more. Instead, he looks away.

Thinking about his father makes me want to vomit. I can’t imagine him as anything more than what I saw the night he killed my parents. My hands begin to shake. It’s hard to breathe.

“Cool.” I swallow and blink several times. The room is tilting. Pain over the loss of my parents serrates my heart, and I want to scream.

It’s happening again. I haven’t had an attack like this in a couple of years, but I can feel it coming on.

In my tower, this used to happen a lot.

First, the overly fast heartbeat, my breathing coming in and out like I've just run ten miles, a tightness, the sound of water whooshing over my head.

It's a panic attack - a bad one.

I jump to my feet, not wanting to lose it in front of Austin.

Redyrin always told me I was weak.

Austin grabs my hand. "Wait. What's happening?"

I don't answer. I can't. My teeth are like a concrete wall, holding back all the agony inside my body.

If I open my mouth, everything - all the pain, the hate, the anger - will spill out.

I pull away from him.

In the past, if I were feeling this kind of agony, I would run to a piano room, not away from it. Or I would talk to Leva. She isn't around, but I'm desperate to speak to her.

I ram through the doors. Try to be polite and wave as I leave, but I'm not sure I succeeded. If I don't get away, I'm going to pass out, and I can't do that in front of Austin. I've done plenty to embarrass myself in front of him already.

As I climb the steps, it occurs to me, I forgot my blasted music.

OceanofPDF.com

LITTLE PIECES

WYSTERIA

I remove my cell phone from my back pocket and dial another number I know by heart.

“Who the hell is this?” Christopher asks as soon as he answers.

“Chris, it’s Wysteria. I need you to find Leva.” The words come out breathy.

“Wysteria? What’s wrong?” His anger turns to concern.

“I’m struggling. Having a panic attack. Leva knows what to do.” I sink down on a bench and place my head between my knees. Spots are floating across my vision. “Please. I. Really. Need. To - ” My breathing is coming in gasps. I can’t seem to get enough air.

It’s the worst panic attack I’ve ever had.

All it took was for Austin to mention his father. Talk about him like he’s anything but a monster.

It’s ripping my guts out. Tearing my heart into little pieces.

I can’t wrap my head around Austin’s father buying him a piano or doing anything nice. The man murdered my parents! A killer is all he’ll ever be to me.

More spots. I’m going to faint.

“Where are you, Wysteria? I’m coming.” Christopher is frantic. I hear it in his voice.

“The. Music. Building.” Darkness surrounds the edges of my vision, and I fall to my knees.

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

Hearing his voice calms me a little. I try to take a deep breath. “Panic attack,” I say and hope he doesn’t think I’m weak.

“Another big breath. Go on.” I hear the relief in his voice. “No one is hurting you. Talk to me.”

I suck in a breath, allowing clean air to fill my lungs as I roll onto my back and stare up at the cloudless sky. “Not physically anyway,” I say, but emotionally I’m beyond wounded. “Why aren’t you here yet?” He’s fast when he uses his vampire speed, but it seems to be taking him forever.

“I’m not in town, but I’m coming. Keep talking. What set you off?”

I take another cleansing breath and dive in. “My music professor asked me to play a duet for the Winter Gala. Doing so guarantees me another year of scholarships. I agreed right away because that’s exactly what I wanted. Then, today I met my duet partner.” I pause. My heart is racing, even at the thought of saying his name.

“And how did it go?” Christopher encourages.

“At first. Okay,” I say honestly. “But then it got messy. Really messy. And I’m hurting. So, so bad.” I sit, pulling my knees to my chest. I try to be as small as possible because the smaller I am, the less it’ll hurt.

“Physically?” He sounds panicked again.

“Emotionally,” I growl, frustrated. Leva would understand. Even when she didn’t talk to me, she was still always there and supportive. “I need Leva.”

“She knows. She’s coming with me. What hurt you emotionally?”

So he’s in Sharra. Interesting. Is cell reception really possible across realms?

Relief washes over me, though. He’s bringing Leva. “It’s Austin,” I say softly, trying not to let the words touch my body, inflict any more damage. “He’s supposed to play the duet with me.”

I hear him mutter something under his breath before he clears his throat. “I thought the two of you were friends?”

“We were. We are,” I say into the phone. “I-I keep going back and

forth. It's easy to talk to him, to be around him, until I remember who his father is. Then I lose it."

"I see. What specifically set you off?"

At the memory of Austin talking about his dad, like discussing the weather, causes my heart to buckle. "He mentioned his dad."

"What did he say?"

I stand, no longer able to sit still. "He said his dad wanted him to major in business." Tears well up. They won't stop, and my eyes become blurry, the yellowing landscape glassy. The emotion and panic is ticking me off. I hate that I feel like this.

"Why did that upset you?" He's confused. I can hear it.

I grind my teeth together. I don't want to say the words. But I've learned from experience he'll spin the questions until I tell him exactly what's bothering me. "Because." My voice cracks, and I stop.

"Because," he coaxes.

"Austin's father was a murderer. But before that, he was a drunken jerk. I'll never see him any other way," I shout the last part into the phone. A couple holding hands moves off the sidewalk, giving me some much-needed space.

I feel myself getting worse again with each rise and fall of my chest. A frantic, uncontrollable agony is mounting. I don't know how to reel it in. The anguish spreads like wildfire through my body. It needs to stop, disappear.

"I get that, Wysteria. I do. And you have every right to feel the way you do."

His words do little to comfort me. "I-it hurts so much." I fall again to my knees.

The phone tumbles from my hands, and I don't care. I'm being eaten alive inside. The grief gets bigger and bigger, so overpowering, I barely notice I'm being jostled around.

Words are spoken, but I can't understand what's said. Pain fills my

pores and crevices until I'm numb and desperate for relief. Instead, it grows stronger. My world crashes, my heart shatters until I am nothing.

OceanofPDF.com

MAKE IT RIGHT

AUSTIN

I debate too long about going after Wysteria, but really there's no question.

Something's wrong, and I need to find out what. Whatever I said or did to cause the devastation in her features, she went white as a sheet, and I want to fix it.

When I find her, she's on the ground.

People are gathering around, and I push past them.

One emotion burns through my body - fear.

I can't lose her again. I won't.

"Wysteria. Talk to me. What's wrong?" I fall to my knees beside her and lift her head into my lap.

"I can't. I can't. It hurts too much." Her words come out soft.

I have to lean down to catch what she's saying.

"What hurts? Where?"

"My heart. It's - I'm broken."

"No. No, you're going to be fine. I'm here." Panic sets in, and tears fill my eyes. She's been through so much. I know what it means to lose your parents, but to be imprisoned? She didn't deserve that. She only deserves happiness and love.

There's a noise coming from her phone, and I pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hello? Who is this? Put Wysteria back on the damn phone," a man commands.

"Uh, this is Austin. Morrison. Who is this?"

There's a massive sigh of relief on the other end of the phone. "This is Christopher. Take her somewhere safe. I'll be there as soon as

I can."

I hang up and tuck Wysteria's phone in my pocket. Then pick her up and spin in a circle, deciding what to do next.

"Need some help, man?" a guy asks.

I peruse the group, knowing it's better if I don't use my vampire speed.

"Nah, I'm good." I start walking to my Jeep. "I'm taking her home," I say to no one in particular.

I force myself not to drive like the rules of the road don't apply to me, but it's hard. Since becoming a vampire, I see everything all at once, like life is moving in slow motion.

At my apartment building, I notice Evan's car is gone and am grateful. He and I haven't talked a lot since the night I brought Wysteria back to my place. Not that he hasn't tried. But every time he opens his mouth, it's all I can do not to punch him in his teeth.

With Wysteria in my arms, I head up the stairs and force my door open. I'll have to replace the lock, but I don't care.

Inside, I take her to my room and lay her on the bed.

Before I get the chance to cover her with a blanket, I hear someone come through my front door.

"Is she alright?" Christopher asks, concern pinching his features. Even though we're the same height, it feels like he towers over me, menacing.

"I think so."

"I'll be the judge of that." A pixilette flutters off the vampire's shoulder. Her hands raised. Magic dances along her fingers as she flies over to Wysteria. "My dearest," she says in her little voice, pressing her palm against Wysteria's forehead. She hovers there a moment while Christopher and I watch. Finally, she flies back over to Chris. "She's fine. Her heart is back to normal, and she's breathing regularly." She faces me, her hands now on her hips. "So, you're

Austin?"

She looks ready to fight.

"That's right, and you are?"

"I'm Leva, boy! Don't you know anything?" She stomps her foot like I've offended her. "I thought you said he was smart," she says to Christopher.

The vampire chuckles, his face relaxing. "He's smarter than most." Christopher turns to me, his eyes telling me I better make things right with the pixilette.

"Right. Sorry," I say, feeling sheepish. "I should've known that. "It's nice to meet you."

"We'll be in the living room," Christopher says to her before heading out of the room.

I follow him out. It's been a while since we spoke, and I still haven't told him Wysteria knows what I am or about how Doug and Gary and possibly Snow White at this point, know as well.

"What the hell happened?" Christopher turns on me, his fangs flashing. "I told you to take care of her. Watch out for her. Instead, you have her frazzled."

"I swear, I don't know why. We were playing a song and talking. It was nice. Then something happened." I'm pacing and talking, unsure what I did, but desperate to know the truth.

He shakes his head. "It's about your father," Christopher says, rubbing a hand over his face.

"What about him?" I stop, shoving my hands in my front pockets.

Christopher walks over to my couch and sits. "It's time you know what Wysteria knows," he says, patting the spot beside him.

I'm not sure I want to know but sit down. "What?"

"Wysteria saw your dad the night her parents were killed. He was holding a slayer gun and her mother's purse. After your father and another man left the house, Wysteria ran inside and found her parents

dead, lying in pools of their own blood."

In all the world, I never expected to hear what I did. "No," I say as a whole new level of understanding washes over me. "My dad was chief of police. He and Wysteria's parents were friends." I shake my head, trying to wrap my thoughts and feelings around what Christopher's just told me. "I can't believe he would do something like that."

"Well," Christopher pauses and massages the back of his neck. "I resisted believing it too, but Wysteria has never been a liar. So I've done some digging." He sits back, resting an arm on the back of my couch. "What do you know about your father's heritage?"

"He had elven blood. Mom was human." I shrug, turning so I can watch his face. Evan said he and my uncle were elven royalty, but I really didn't buy it. "Why?" Besides, I want to see what Christopher has discovered.

"Your uncle and your dad were second and third in line for the elven crown, but their oldest brother, the king, banished them from the realm." He stops, studying me intently. "But you knew that already." He's surprised. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I heard my dad say something about it one time when he was drunk. After he died, Evan told me what you just did, but honestly, I didn't really believe it." I clasp my hands together nervously. "I still struggle to think it's real. That in another realm, I would be part of the royal family."

"You are part of the royal family," Christopher corrects, his voice stern.

I nod solemnly. "Not that it means anything though. I'm here in the human realm. The king of the elves probably doesn't know I exist. Hell, I feel the opposite of noble. It's difficult to pay my own bills."

Christopher pats me on the back. "You're a good guy. Your uncle and cousin - " He doesn't finish the sentence. "Never leave Wysteria alone with either of them. I don't trust them. From all I've discovered

about them, they're into some shady magical shit, and I don't want Wysteria near that."

"I agree," I say, as a wall of sadness rolls over me. My family is twisted, and I feel utterly alone.

"Not only that, but I think your uncle is getting ready to make a play for the crown. I've heard whisperings that he is planning something but haven't been able to find out what." He drags a hand down his face. "You should watch out for them too. If your uncle is after the throne, then you're a threat." Christopher stands abruptly like he's going to leave, but I still have stuff to tell him.

"She knows I'm a vampire," I say, standing too, mentally setting aside what he said about my uncle. "It wasn't planned, but it happened."

"It's fine," he says, distracted. "She was bound to find out, especially the more the two of you spent time together. What did she say?"

"She seems okay with it. I mean, we haven't really talked about it, but as far as I can tell, my vampirism doesn't bother her."

He places a hand on my shoulder. It's fatherly, and I'm moved by the simple act. "I need you to keep her safe. There's a lead I'm following up and can't stay, so I'm counting on you."

"I will," I say, and then blurt. "I love her."

He smiles and lets out a deep chuckle. "I know. How does she feel about you?"

I hang my head. "I'm not sure. It wasn't too long after I shared with her my feelings that all this happened."

Christopher puts his other hand on my other shoulder and looks into my eyes. "I guess you'd better find out then." He winks and goes to the door. "Tell her - "

"Wait," I say, holding up a hand.

"What else?" His eyes narrow.

Christopher will be disappointed, but there was no way to help it.

I tell him about Gary and Doug and how I revealed my secret inadvertently to help Wysteria.

He isn't happy.

"I'll talk to Snow White."

That has me nervous. The laws are clear. Turning someone into a vampire without prior clearance is basically a death sentence. "Okay," I whisper.

Christopher smiles wryly. "Everything will be fine." He pulls something from his pocket. It's a bracelet. A small wooden bear is attached. The charm looks like it's aged and been through a lot. "Give this to Wysteria. Tell her it's from me and to wear it always."

"I will," I say, taking it from him.

His hazel eyes soften. "And tell her I'll be back and that I asked you to look after her."

That makes me panic. "She'll ask why and how you know me. Wys is smarter than most."

He laughs again. "Tell Wysteria the truth." Then he lowers his voice. "But ask her to keep it between us."

"Got it," I say, but he's already gone.

OceanofPDF.com

ALWAYS NEW

WYSTERIA

The smell of buttered toast infiltrates my oblivion.

I roll over, groggy.

Rub my eyes.

Clear my throat. It's parched like I haven't had water in a very long time.

My eyes blink open, and reality sets in. I'm not in my room. This blanket covering me isn't mine. This bed isn't mine, and I lift the light blue comforter.

My shirt is twisted around my waist.

"Where am I?" Fear sends my heart racing, and I sit up, searching the room.

The bedroom is small.

Only a double bed, a desk, and a chest of drawers.

There's a bathroom to the left of a doorway, which is wide open. Something about the room is familiar.

A second later, it dawns on me. This is Austin's bedroom. I've been here once before, briefly before he escorted me out.

How did I get here? Last I remember, I was talking to Christopher on the phone while having a panic attack.

The attack was one of the worst I've experienced.

As I search the room, I think Austin must've found me and taken care of me.

"Where is he?" I throw my feet over the edge of the bed but pause, unsure what to do next.

Alert Austin, I'm awake? Say nothing? Hide my face in shame over

whatever I may have done? Sneak out the front?

Before I can decide, Austin turns the corner carrying a plate and a glass of something. As soon as he sees me, his face lights up.

“You’re awake.” He’s in faded jeans and a white tee. His hair is perfectly messy. His eyes are dancing with mischief. “Are you hungry?”

I am, in fact, starved.

But I can’t tell Austin that. I seem to have lost the capacity to speak.

“There’s blueberries. I remember when we were kids, you loved blueberries.” He sits beside me, flashing the plate's contents, consisting of blueberries, cantaloupe, and toast. His features soften. “Feeling better?”

“I-uh, how long have I been here?” My words catch in my scratchy throat.

He hands me orange juice, and I take a drink. It tastes so good I can’t help but drink it all while watching his face. When the glass is empty, he offers me the plate, and I take it. Buttered toast is my favorite food on the planet. There’s something about the smell of toast and sweet cream butter combined. The taste when the crispiness of the bread and melted butter hit my tongue. But my stomach is sick, and fettered, and twisted up in so many knots I doubt I’ll ever be able to unravel them all.

“At least take a bite,” he pleads kindly, lifting a berry to my lips.

I open my mouth, and he plops it inside. The juice explodes between my teeth when I bite down. “Mmm.” I feel myself smile.

He picks up another, and we repeat the process until they’re gone.

“Toast?” he asks, picking it up, and touching the edge to my bottom lip.

I search his features, curious about why he’s playing nursemaid. Feeding me, even though I'm enjoying the act immensely. I sink my

teeth into the buttery warmth. It's so good. I take the toast from him and have another bite.

"How long?" I ask again when I finish chewing.

"Through the night. You missed English this morning, and Witchy Spears was none too happy. But I sent her an email, calming her down. Hope that wasn't too forward of me."

"No, I appreciate it. Thank you." I take another bite.

"You're welcome." He shrugs, seemingly calm.

"Sage!" I whisper-shout, remembering my roommate. She's probably worried.

"Don't worry, I texted her on your phone. She knows where you are." He smiles languidly.

I can't help my sigh of relief. "Did she seem okay?"

Austin chuckles lightly. "You two have developed a bond, I take it."

"Definitely. Sage is like a sister to me." I nibble another bite of toast. The bread is multigrain - my favorite kind.

"And what am I? Chopped tuna salad?"

I blink several times at the sound of the tinkling voice, unable to believe what I'm seeing, which is Leva flying toward me. "Leva?" I set down my toast and brush the crumbs from my hands. "Is it really you?" Tears well up in my eyes as I hold out my hand.

She lands, her emerald green hair changing to peach. Tears drop onto her cheeks like tiny crystals. "You had another panic attack, didn't you?"

I glance at Austin. "Yes," I say to them both.

"I've never been so scared," he says softly.

"I'm sorry," I say to him, appreciating his nearness and then look at Leva. "I'm especially sorry for saying I didn't want you here. Can you ever forgive me?"

She drops her hands from her hips and flies up, touching her hands

to my nose, so I go cross-eyed. She giggles. “All is forgiven,” she says.

“Thank you.”

She flies back, and I close my eyes, allowing them to readjust. When I open them, Leva is hovering in front of Austin, her hair changing to black, the color of his shirt. “How about you formally introduce me to this guy.”

“Of course. Austin, this is my best friend, Leva.”

“Hello.” He does a little wave like he’s nervous. It’s cute.

My pulse flutters. With him, it’s always new. I want him to hold me, kiss me, love me, but not with Leva here.

My best friend looks at me. “I need some rest. I’ll meet you back at your room.”

I feel my eyebrows rise. “You know where I’m staying?”

“Christopher showed me.” She crosses her arms as her hair and clothes become white as the apartment’s walls.

“How is my brother?” I’d been talking to him on the phone. He was who I expected to wake up to.

“He’s fine. Good. Working,” she says but doesn’t elaborate. “I’ll see you later,” she says and flies out of the room.

“Will she need me to open the door for her?” Austin asks, getting ready to stand.

I press a hand on his knee. “No,” I say, knowing with her magic, she’s never had a problem.

“Cool.” He covers my hand with one of his. Then sets the plate on the floor beside him. “Alone at last,” he says, his gorgeous eyes taking me in.

“Yep,” is all I can get out. He flusters me in a good way. Also, we’re sitting on his bed.

“Christopher told me it was my father who killed your parents,” he says.

I suck in a breath, surprised he’s bringing it up. “I saw him,” I

admit through clenched teeth, pulling my hand away, wondering how the knowledge will change things between us.

Austin takes my hand back and presses it over his heart. “I believe you,” he says. “And I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” He shakes his head. “I always knew my dad was a jack ass. Apparently, he was so much worse.”

“You didn’t do anything.” As I watch his emotions shred his features, there’s no doubt he didn’t know what his father did. Not only that, but he isn’t like him in any way.

“Thank you for saying that,” he says. “But my family tree is a mess. There’s something else.”

“What?” I know I should be paying attention, but all I can think about is his lips on mine, and I throw a leg over his lap, straddling him.

OceanofPDF.com

TASTE EVERY INCH

WYSTERIA

He's surprised but doesn't stop me. In fact, he grabs my thighs and adjusts me, so I'm right against him. At the closeness, everything else is forgotten.

"Kiss me," he says, his eyes on my lips.

"Are you compelling me?" I ask, teasing.

"No," he says and then smiles, biting his bottom lip. "Do I need to?"

In answer to his question, I lean in, pressing my lips to his, wrapping my arms around his neck.

He groans, pressing my mouth open and diving in with his tongue.

I let out a sound, like a kitten, and that seems to turn him on. His hands find their way under my shirt, his fingers caressing my skin, causing it to tighten. "Wysteria," he says against my mouth.

In answer, I pull back, locking eyes with him - my hands on his face. "I love you too," I say. At that moment, I mean it too. With everything I am.

His eyes are hooded, and I can feel what he wants. I want him too, but I am unfamiliar with how going about getting there works. "Austin, I - how?"

"Can I try something?" he asks, suckling my bottom lip, then trailing kissing down my neck.

I think I know what he wants, and I'm game. "You want to taste me?" I ask, my breath shuddering.

He groans again. "In more ways than one." He kisses my neck. Licks it.

I'm curious about whether it's even possible for his fangs to

penetrate my skin. “Bite me,” I whisper, encouraging.

He doesn’t hesitate. I feel his fangs pierce into my skin. At first, I’m surprised. I didn’t think it was possible. There’s even pain, but only for a second, and then it feels so good.

There’s a tug, and I know he’s sucking my blood. It should be weird, but I’m in a lusty haze and feel better than I’ve ever felt. “Don’t stop,” I say, winding my hands through his hair, holding him there as I move against him.

His arms tighten around me so I can barely breathe, not that I want to. And I throw my head back as wild abandon pushes through my veins, through my pounding heart, and along my skin.

Too soon, he stops, licking my skin, and then pulls back.

It’s then I notice my skin is glowing indigo. There’s something on the side of his mouth, and I wipe it, showing him.

“Wysteria,” he says, and it’s like he’s been drugged. He kisses my finger, suckling at the blood. “You taste so good, better than - ” His voice trails off. He opens his eyes, but only part of the way. “I will never get enough of you.”

“I’m yours. All of me until the end of time,” I say, kissing him.

“I want to taste every inch of you,” he whispers against my lips. Then kisses me hard and passionate. His fingers move to my shirt, and we part briefly as he lifts it over my head.

I fumble with the buttons of his shirt, but finally, get them all undone. As I remove it, I stop kissing him. I want to see him. He’s so hot. Abs for days. Warm, tan skin. Muscles. I trace my fingers along his collarbones, and he shivers. His hands are on my waist as he watches me.

“Wysteria,” he says, then leans in, kissing the spot where my heart is beating.

“Yes?” I don’t want to stop, but he seems to be slowing down.

“I want everything you’re offering.” He pauses. “Blue blood and

glowing skin and everything else."

"But?" Is he turning me down? Am I not good enough? Heat rushes up to my cheeks.

"Let's go on a date," he says and smiles softly. "We've already told each other we love each other, but we haven't even had an official first date."

Relief washes over me. I laugh - a real, genuine laugh. Like I haven't laughed in seven years. "I'd like that."

"Cool." He stands, helping me to my feet.

My thighs are shaky with need. I can't help but wonder if all the talk about Austin making the rounds with a bunch of girls is a lie. A rumor. He's so beyond sweet, even as a vampire.

"I'll take you back to your dorm room, but first I need a shower," he says and walks into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

I fall back onto his bed, thinking I want to join him, but resist. If he can, then so can I.

I'M GIDDY LIKE A SCHOOLGIRL, and I can't hold still. Sage is working on my hair. She's burned her finger on the iron twice.

After the third time, she bonks me on the head with it. "I swear I'm going to shove this up to your nose if you don't freaking hold still." She sticks the curling iron in my face and scowls.

"Ouch. Fine. No need for violence."

Leva said she could do my hair with magic. That using magic is much easier. She and Sage get into a squabble until I diffuse the situation, asking Leva to do my make up. She left, saying she needed to get a few things and hasn't returned, but I don't worry. It's only been an hour.

"You haven't seen me violent." Sage is glaring, but the fact that her lips are twitching with near-laughter negates all the pretend anger in her eyes.

“Okay. Okay.” I hold my hands up in surrender.

“Good.” She grabs another chunk of hair and twirls it in the iron. “What are you going to wear?”

I shrug. “Jeans, my purple tee, and black ballet flats.”

She yanks on my hair. “Boring. Awful. And grotesque. No.”

I want to be offended, but I can’t. I’m too excited. And nervous. And terrified. And thrilled. And shocked. And full of trepidation. My internal thoughts are quick, like my mind is playing at fast-forward. Before I got to my room, I went into the bathroom and checked out where Austin bit me in the mirror. There isn’t a trace of what he did, of what I let him do to me.

“I’ve got the perfect outfit in mind. Trust your roomie,” Sage says, interrupting my thoughts.

I glance at her. “Not too wild, though.”

“Psssshhhh. Don’t question me. I know what I’m doing.” Sage picks up her comb and tousles my curls. Sets it down and picks up her purse. “I’m going to run to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.” At the door, she stops. “Don’t mess with your hair.”

“I won’t.”

I pick up my Sudoku but can’t focus. Every time I try, all I see is Austin’s face, and I feel the way his lips caressed mine, our bodies pressed together, the way he drank from me. The butterflies in my belly stop fluttering and sway languidly, moving to Nina Simone.

Sage comes back in with animated energy. Sniffling, she sets her purse on her bed. “Alright, let’s get you an outfit.” She goes to her closet. “Do you want your outfit to say, ‘I’m sweet and innocent?’ “She pulls a white sundress from her cabinet.

I shake my head.

“This is disgusting. I don’t even know where it came from.” She tosses the dress on the floor. “What about, ‘I want you?’” She pulls out a black halter dress. It V’s down to the waist and would barely cover

my butt.

“How about something in between? Something that says, ‘I like you, a lot, but this is our first date.’” I move to stand beside her. “Got anything in your closet that says that?”

OceanofPDF.com

WYSTERIA

She huffs but dives back in. “Probably.” Clothes fly everywhere as she searches. Skirts. Shirts. Leggings. Dresses.

“Sage. Seriously. I can wear my jeans. You don’t need to go to all this trouble. It’s dinner.” I think. I really don’t know what he has planned for our first date.

I sink onto her bed, knocking her purse to the floor. The contents spill out. A tampon. Some folded cash. Change. Her student ID. Lip-gloss. And a small baggie more than half-filled with sparkling white powder. I pick it up as Sage is turning around, a victorious look on her face. Until she sees what I’m holding.

Her face falls, and she drops the clothes.

“What is this?” I’m sure I know. My parents told me all about drugs, including the magical kind.

She grabs it out of my hand. “How dare you go through my things?”

“I didn’t. I swear. Your purse fell off the bed.” Sage is on her knees, picking up the stuff that’s spilled everywhere. I kneel next to her and place a hand over her clenched fist. The one holding the white powder. “Want to talk about it? No judgments.”

She glances up. Her eyes are watery. She sniffles.

And I cringe.

“There’s nothing to talk about. I like it. I like the way it makes me feel.” She stands, opens her hand. “Want a hit?”

I shake my head and move over to my bed. “No, thanks.”

She shrugs, tucking her purse under her bed. “You won’t say anything?”

Warning bells ring in my head. Should I say something? What if the campus police find out she has it in our dorm room? Or worse, the Supernatural Task Force? Will I get in trouble too? How much is she using? Could she die?

Even as the questions pummel my mind, I know I won't say anything. "No, of course not. I only want to make sure you're okay. You know you can tell me anything."

Sage sits next to me. "I use it to help me feel more confident, less like an ugly nobody." She sniffles. "And college is hard. It takes more than coffee to keep me up and alert."

"I don't think drugs are the answer," I say softly.

"Don't be a goody-goody, Wys. Everyone does it. Drugs are part of the college experience." She crosses her arms, glaring.

I disagree, and maybe she's right. I am a goody-goody, but I'm okay with that. "It'll stay between you and me." I reach out and grab her hand. "But please be careful. And you most definitely are not ugly."

She smiles. "I will. Thanks." Her words aren't convincing. I think of the last two parties and what those vampires did to her. She got them back, but it was only temporary since I healed them. But what happened is still eating at her. She needs to talk to someone.

Leva returns then. She has lavender and uses it to make me some eyeshadow. So I pretend like I'm okay with what Sage is doing even though I'm not.

Sage stuffs the baggie in her front jeans pocket and picks up the clothes she dropped. When my makeup is done, she hands me some clothes. "Put these on. Austin is going to be here soon. Do you have a black bra?"

I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"She doesn't need a black bra," Leva says in a huff.

"So, no," Sage says, ignoring the pixilette and moving back to her

closet. She pulls a spaghetti strap tank with a shelf bra out and tosses it at me. “Wear this.”

I slide out of my sweatpants and shirt. Turn away from Sage and take off my bra. Then I reach back. “Tank, please.”

“Are you sure about this?” Leva asks, giving me a look that says she disapproves of my clothing choice.

“Definitely,” I say, smiling at her. She’s seen me naked hundreds of times, and I’m not embarrassed.

Leva crosses her arms as Sage puts the shirt in my hand. I slide it over my head.

“Skirt.”

She hands it over, and I shimmy it on. It’s black, super tight, and hugs my body in all the right places.

“Top.”

It’s a see-through lavender blouse. Very feminine and pretty. I glance at myself in the oval full-length mirror Sage bought the other day.

“This is beautiful.” I turn back and forth, admiring my reflection.

“Of course, it is.” Sage looks at Leva, triumphant. “You did an excellent job on her makeup.

Leva, who’s been kind of a pill around Sage, softens. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” Sage digs through her dozens of shoeboxes and brings back a pair of black heels. They are high and look incredibly hazardous. “Put these on. They say *sophisticated,* but with subtlety.”

I slide them on.

“Beautiful, Wysteria. You’ve got great legs.”

“Thanks, Sage.” I sit on my bed and start applying lotion to my calves, knees, and thighs.

“Yeah, nothing like dry knees to ruin a good outfit.” Sage sits next to me.

“I’m handling it.”

“Let me,” Leva says and sends some of her pixilette magic at my legs. Instantly, they are as smooth as silk. Or smoother. I’ve never had a problem with my skin.

Sage lays back. “What about the V situation? How do you intend to handle that as well?”

“What V situation?” Leva is suddenly concerned.

“Nothing,” I say nervously.

“Oh, it’s something. Wysteria has never had sex before. Tonight might be the night.” She wiggles her eyebrows as Leva hovers above the two of us.

At Sage’s words, Leva’s skin turns bright pink. “Wys isn’t ready for that,” she says, pursing her lips.

“Well,” I say, thinking about earlier.

“Wys!” Leva is in shock. “Give it a few dates, at least.”

“I’m going to take it slow,” I say for Leva’s benefit, but I can’t help the need in my lower belly as I remember him kissing me and touching me and, I mean, I am in love with him. At least I think so.

“What are you thinking?” Sage turns on her side and leans on an arm.

I cover my eyes. “Kissing Austin,” I admit.

“What was it like?”

“Oh, good question.” Leva sits on Sage’s arm, looking beyond interested.

I’m surprised Sage doesn’t think my kiss is trivial. Silly. She’s kissed lots of guys and done a lot more. “It was the best moment in my life,” I tell her truthfully.

Leva gasps. “You like him that much?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“That good, huh?” Sage is scrutinizing my face.

I wonder what her first kiss was like.

“I’ve never kissed someone when I was sober,” Sage admits, her eyes dropping to my comforter.

Leva doesn’t say anything but seems to be thinking about something.

I fall back beside Sage. “Really?”

She sighs, rolling away. “Never mind. Sorry. I’m always talking about situations that are awkward for other people.”

“Hey, I don’t mind. I’m the queen of awkward. I spent seven years in prison, remember?” Sage doesn’t respond, and I want to reach out and hug her. Tell her how grateful I am for her. Tell her I consider her the sister I always wished I had. But I don’t. “We need to find you a sober boyfriend,” I say lightly, placing a hand on her shoulder. She shrugs my hand away.

Leva flies into the air, hovering near the window. She’s upset. I can tell, but first, I need to deal with Sage. “I didn’t mean - ”

“I don’t need any favors.” Sage pushes off my bed and pulls on her combat boots. Without looking back, she grabs her purse and says, “Have fun on your date.” Then she’s gone, the door slamming behind her.

I sigh, wishing I knew what to do for her. And maybe that’s the problem. I don’t need to do anything except be her friend. Love her.

That goes for Leva too. She’s sulking, and I go over to the window to stand beside her. “Leva, what’s wrong?” It’s dark outside. Cars drive by, and college students are laughing and joking.

“Everything is changing so fast,” she says so softly I barely hear her. “Soon enough, you won’t want me around anymore.”

“Leva, that’s not true. I’ll always need you.” I hold out my hand, and she steps onto the tip of my middle finger.

“Promise?” she asks, her hair and dress changing to the color of midnight with twinkling stars illuminating around her.

“Yes, I promise,” I say.

OceanofPDF.com

HE'S FAMILY

WYSTERIA

Are you going to eat that?" Austin points at the gruesome brown shells filled with a rubbery jelly-looking substance sitting on a plate in front of me.

My nose scrunches. "Most definitely not." I poke one of the shells with my fork. "This is escargot?" I mean, sure, I'm all about trying new things, but not this.

"Yes. Snails." He covers his mouth with the back of his hand.

And I glare. "That's disgusting." I lean in so that I can whisper. "They even smell bad."

He doesn't hide his laughter this time. "I know. I can smell them from here."

"Well, why did you let me order them?"

He shrugs. "I thought you knew what you were doing." He moves to get one of the waiter's attention. The guy notices and comes over. He's wearing black pants, a white shirt, a red bow tie, and a red vest.

"Yes, sir?"

Austin picks up the plate of snails and hands them to the waiter. "Please take these away. The lady," he indicates me, "has changed her mind."

The waiter nods. "No problem, Mr. Morrison." He takes the plate and turns to me. "Would you care for anything else?"

"No, thank you. I'm good." I can't help fiddling with the napkin in my lap, folding and unfolding it.

"Very well." He walks away.

"You sure you don't want anything else?" Austin places an outstretched hand on the table and wiggles his fingers. He's asking if

he can hold my hand, and I happily comply. His fingers entwine with mine, making my skin prickle, my whole body vibrate. It's as though nothing else exists but his hand and mine.

"You look beautiful," he says, caressing my hand.

"Thanks," I say, my mind and body still focusing on his touch. "So do you." I make eye contact and smile at the intensity in his eyes.

"What do you think of this place?" he asks, looking around.

"It's nice," I say, clearing my throat. *A little too nice*, I think but don't say aloud.

The restaurant is super fancy.

Thick white linen tablecloths cover each rounded table, adorned with red Delphiniums arranged into centerpieces. The silver tableware is real, and the plates are heavy with hand-painted gold filigree around the edges. Not only that, but the napkins are thicker than my bath towels.

The best part about the fancy place is the ten-piece orchestra playing *Pachelbel Canon in D*. At the thought, I focus on the music, letting my eyes close. The bass begins, then the violins and violas along with the cello - a beautiful round of notes. I can't help but close my eyes and listen. Even though this piece of music is considered mainstream classical, it's always been one of my favorites. I focus on each note. The violins play staccato on the E string while the viola and second violins continue the recurring round.

The gut-wrenching pain at the loss of my parents calms slightly at the music. I take a deep breath. Austin squeezes my hand, and I open my eyes.

"Everything okay?" His brows are pinched together. Worry presses his lips into a frown.

"Yes, just listening. No matter how many times I hear this song, I still love it."

He wipes his mouth. "I like it too."

A different waiter brings our main course. He seems familiar. “Here you are.” He sets a plate in front of me.

Austin moves his appetizer of minestrone soup. The waiter places a plate in front of him.

“Would you like some fresh Parmesan on your Chicken Marsala?” he asks me politely.

“Sure.”

He begins grating. “Tell me when.”

“That’s good,” I say after a few spins of the grater.

“And for you, sir?”

“No, thanks, Evan.” Austin smirks. “You’re really laying it on thick, cuz.”

Evan’s eyes go wide. “Just putting on a good show.” He slaps Austin on the back before looking at me. “I can’t believe you’re little Wysteria Hart. Pudgy Wudgy. You used to be chunky around the middle. Not anymore, though. You’re stunning.”

I look down at my plate. Heat is rising up my neck and covering my cheeks. A lot of kids called me Pudgy Wudgy. One memory of my time at Gothel elementary I don’t care to think about. And now I remember Evan and that I never liked him. But for Austin’s sake, I try to be nice. “Thanks, I guess.” I pick up my fork and spin it in my noodles.

“That’ll be all, Evan.” I hear the controlled anger in Austin’s voice.

“Come on. I want - ” Evan begins.

“Get out of here and leave us alone,” Austin snarls, keeping his voice low. “Or I’m going to tell Uncle you’re sucking at your job.”

I glance up in time to see Evan grind his teeth.

“Fine.” He walks away. “But I see what’s going on.”

I watch and wonder about him. He’s a couple of years older than me and always got Austin into trouble. The only reason he didn’t end up in juvenile detention is because of Austin’s dad. It paid to be

related to the chief of police. Not to mention his involvement with the Supernatural Task Force. Evan's dad wasn't part of it, but Austin's dad was the liaison.

Even though I knew Austin had elven blood in his veins, I didn't know much more. Austin never really liked to talk about it.

I shake my head at that thinking. I don't want to go there. Not right now. Instead, I look at Austin, admiring him. He's wearing dark jeans, a gray shirt unbuttoned at the neck, and a navy-blue jacket. He looks exquisite, not as dressed up like everyone else, but gorgeous. Everyone seems to know him, and I wonder if he brings all of his dates here. I push the thought away. I heard his anger when he spoke to Evan. Austin's protecting me. I can't help but like the way it warms my insides, makes me feel cared for. I'm going to focus on that.

"Sorry about my cousin," Austin says, playing with my hand still lying on the table. "Do you remember him?"

"Kind of," I say because I don't want to have to lie about how I feel about the guy.

"He's family," he says matter-of-factly like that's supposed to explain why he knows the guy or associates with him.

"Yeah," I say, pulling my hand away.

The way his cousin acted, so flippant about the awful nickname, I don't buy it. I'm not sure I'm ready to be back in Austin's world, even as much as I want to be with him. Maybe this isn't a good idea.

"I mean, he's pretty much always an ass. Most of the time, I choose to ignore it." He cuts into his medium-rare steak before sticking it in his mouth and chewing. "But, I'm sorry. He's like a brother to me, and sometimes I forget what he's like until I see him through someone else's eyes."

"It's okay." I think of Sage and her issues. We've only known each other for a few weeks, and I consider her family. But if my aunt and uncle met her, they'd probably have me switch rooms.

"You going to try your chicken?" He points at my plate with his

knife.

OceanofPDF.com

REEL FEELINGS

WYSTERIA

"Yep." I cut into the chicken, then add some sauce and noodles before sticking the bite in my mouth. After chewing a few times, I smile. "It's good."

"I know, right? Uncle Linroe runs the best restaurant in Gothel Springs."

I nod. Swallow, and focus on my plate. Talk of his family is making me uncomfortable.

"Did I hear my name being spoken in vain?" A man with dark eyes and dark hair with silver dusting his sideburns saunters over to our table. He's an older version of Evan with a paunch. His forehead is broad, and his face is stern. For the first time, I can see that he has elf blood in him.

Austin stands, clapping his uncle on the back. The man does the same to Austin. I try to smile but don't quite make it. My heart starts to race. Something about this man doesn't sit right with me.

Finally, they stop embracing, and his uncle turns to me.

My breath catches in my throat. I'm not sure why.

He sticks out his hand. "You must be Wysteria Hart. I'm Linroe Morrison. Nice to meet you." He has an easy smile and a deep timbre to his voice. Likable like his brother, but to me, it feels false.

I rise and take his outstretched hand. It's warm. "Nice to meet you too."

His smile widens, and he grips my hand tighter, but only for a moment before releasing me. "I'll let the two of you get back to your dinner."

"Thanks," Austin says. "The food is delicious, as always."

Austin's uncle turns his gaze on me, and I see a flicker of coldness in his eyes. "You didn't like the escargot?"

I glance at Austin for help. It wasn't that I didn't like it; I didn't even try it. My stomach roiled at the thought.

Thankfully, Austin steps in. "When she ordered it, she didn't know what it was. I should've told her. It's my fault."

His uncle raises a dismissive hand. "Nonsense, boy. Think nothing of it." He gives me a final glance before walking away.

I feel my head tilt in confusion, and I sit.

Austin does the same, tucking his napkin back on his lap. The man has manners. It's sexy.

"I didn't mean to upset him," I say, wishing my pulse would slow down.

"Don't worry. My uncle is a little on the odd side." He shrugs and goes back to his food.

I try to do the same, but it tastes like powder in my mouth.

"Why did you start playing the piano?" Austin asks, as though everything is normal.

I want our conversation to be normal. I do. He asked a basic question, and I want to answer, but another panic attack is coming on. I feel it, sense it. My hands are shaking, and my bottom lip trembles. I stand, knocking my chair over. "I-I - oh my gosh, I have to go." I throw my napkin on the table and stand, pushing back the chair.

"Wysteria?" Shock contorts his face, and he stands too. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here." My legs are shaky, but I can't do this. Why did I think I could? I push past waiters and patrons. Brush past Austin's uncle and stumble out the front door. The night air is frigid, and shivers run up and down my back. I bend over, putting my hands on my knees, and inhale deep breaths, like a fish out of water.

That's what I am.

I don't know how I thought dating Austin, or kissing Austin, or doing anything else with Austin was a good idea. It isn't. Even as I think such things, I want to kick myself.

He isn't his damn father. I know this.

Austin is suddenly beside me. "Wysteria?" He says my name with concern, running a hand along my back.

I scan his face, seeing the uneasiness and worry. He reminds me of his uncle.

When his eyes find mine, his lips lift into a tense smile. "What's going on?"

I want to relax, but I'm not. I'm seriously ruffled. "A lot is going on in here," I say, putting a hand to my heart. "I just can't." I walk away but immediately turn back, running into his outstretched arms.

"Did I do something?" he asks his breath in my hair.

"Yes! No." I sag against him. "You don't understand."

He kisses the top of my head. "Tell me then." His hands are gently massaging my back, sending bolts of desire through my body.

I press my head against his chest and breathe in his aftershave, clean laundry, and a little garlic.

"Wysteria?"

"Ugh, it's nothing." I don't want to dredge up the past again. I don't want him to feel bad. "It's happening again, like the other day."

"A panic attack?"

I nod my head. "It sounds stupid, but I need to lie down."

"Come on, then. Let me take you home."

"'Kay."

He drives me to Irvine Hall without saying a word. I'm not sure if it's because he's concentrating or if his mind is elsewhere, but I can't help admiring his profile, the way he holds himself, his strong jaw,

and long lashes. The quiet of the ride has me feeling calmer. The panic is mostly gone, just a slight rumble.

“What are you looking at?” he asks, surprising me.

“You,” I respond simply, unashamed that I’ve been caught.

A big grin fills his handsome face. “You love me?”

My breath hitches. “I think so,” I admit quietly, surprised that his words ring so true in my heart.

His shoulders drop. “And I love you.” After he puts the Jeep in park, he runs around to my side and opens my door. “Take my hand.”

I do, enjoying the heat of his fingers against my skin. When my feet touch the ground, he kisses me, quick but tender.

I lean into him, kiss him back with fervor, and enjoying my giddy feelings while pushing down the anxiousness.

“Hopefully, we’ll get this dating thing right,” Austin says playfully when we release each other.

“You’ll be patient?” Now, I know the panic attack started because of his cousin and uncle, not because of him.

“Damn right. We have time,” he says, tapping the tip of my nose with his finger. He kisses me again, this time for longer, and I wrap my arms around his waist.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Wys. Should we meet in the practice room at five? Professor Jenkins gave us a standing reservation.”

I quickly do a mental scan through my day. “I’d like that.”

“Then afterward, we can try dinner again?”

“Definitely. But this time, maybe someplace less fancy?” I don't say what I mean, which is I want to go someplace that doesn't have his uncle or cousin around.

His smile brightens his whole face. “Anything for you.” He walks away, then turns back.

I try to think of something witty to say. When we were younger, I called him Brace Face and Frizz Head. Neither of those names work

now. Words like “hottie” and “gorgeous” enter my mind.

Before I come up with anything, he winks. “By the way, I have your music. I’ll bring it.”

“That’d be great,” I say, crossing my arms. I don’t want him to go. I want more time in his arms, and I want him to drink from me again. The first time was very erotic. I try asking him with my eyes, too embarrassed to say what I want with my mouth.

Apparently, he isn’t a mind reader, and he gets in his Jeep and drives away.

OceanofPDF.com

COUSIN IS FISHING

AUSTIN

"Wysteria seems nice," Evan says, closing his apartment door as I walk up the steps. He zips his jacket, pulls out a pack of cigarettes, flicks the lighter, and ignites one.

Since we have elven blood and our lives are naturally extended, he doesn't believe rules apply. That thinking gets him into trouble all the time. Drugs. Smoking. Drinking. Gambling. To him, the danger is part of living.

I didn't like that stuff before I became a vampire. Okay, expect occasionally I would have a beer or two. Maybe drink shots and get slightly wild.

Now, though, none of that stuff affects me.

Currently, my problem is Wysteria's blood. She let me drink from her, and it was - life-altering. Even now, as I think about it, my knees go weak.

Her blood is like nothing I've tasted.

Not only that, but it's made me feel different. Stronger. Faster. My vision is more precise. And it's not just the physical stuff.

I can sense emotion, like with Evan. He's acting calm and relaxed, but he's on edge. It's like Wysteria's blood took all of my vampire powers and enhanced them one hundred times.

What's worse, her blood has me craving more.

What if I go too far? What if I can't stop myself? And worst of all? What if someone else finds out about the fact that I can penetrate her skin and drink her blood? Vampires everywhere will come for her.

"She is," I say, a second later, tucking my hands into my pockets. The air is freezing, the sky clear, and millions of stars shine overhead.

Even the Milky Way is visible. I don't want to talk to him about Wysteria.

Evan inhales and exhales, walks over to the old balcony, where I'm standing, and leans his elbows on the wooden railing.

"She seems like a lot of drama too," he says. "What's her deal? Have you found out why she was taken to another realm?" His questions are more than curiosity, and I wonder what he's getting at.

He isn't going to drop the subject of Wysteria. Maybe I should find out why.

"Definitely some drama, but she's been through a lot. I can handle it." I avoid answering the question about the other realm. Because I do know, but it's none of his business.

"And the other stuff?" Evan prods. He never was good at playing cards. Way too easy to read. This time isn't any different.

I lean next to him, stealing the cigarette from his hand and taking a drag. Then shrug as I expel the smoke.

"No idea." I take another drag and hand the cigarette back. It's like ash in my throat. A waste of time, but Evan doesn't know I'm a vampire, and I need to keep it that way.

"There's talk around town that she's something special." Evan's eyes narrow, and he searches my face.

Suddenly, I'm on edge.

He knows about Wysteria.

If he were just my cousin, I wouldn't care, but after what Christopher told me. That something's up with Evan's dad, worry causes me to frown.

"What have you heard?"

He shakes his head and hands me back the cigarette. "Something about the fountain of youth?" He eyes me, looking for anything.

I turn away, out into the dazzling night. "She - " I close my eyes and remember all the times Wysteria was there for me growing up and

the awful or not-so-awful fact that I love her.

I never had a mother, and with Wysteria around, I hardly missed her. At least not that much. Now that we're grown, it's not about the way she took care of me. It's about the hurt I see on her face. The way she tries to hide it, block it away, and it's my father's fault. If I were her, it'd be hard to be around me too. I must remind her of the man that destroyed her life.

But how do I fix it? I feel this undeniable need to take care of her. When we're together, it's like she's the Earth, and I'm bound to her by gravity. Even if I wanted to break away, I can't. There's something inside me, holding me to her.

"Dude." Evan shoves his shoulder into mine.

I run a hand through my hair. Open my eyes and stare at the vivid stars. I can't let anything happen to Wysteria. If that means I have to stay away from her, then I will.

"Is she the fountain of youth or not?" Evan flicks the dead cigarette from my fingers.

I watch it fall to the pavement below. "She isn't," I say simply, hoping he can't sense that I'm lying. We have the gift of sight with our elven heritage, though I haven't ever used it. Hell, I don't even know what it means. My dad refused to let me attend the Seven Magics Academy. Same with Evan's dad.

Evan nods. "If you say so, cousin." He laughs.

We punch each other a few times. Idiotic cousin slash brother junk and basically how we've always communicated. I take it easy on him, knowing I could kill him if I hit him too hard. Elven blood or not, immortality doesn't mean he can't die, just that he won't from natural causes.

"What is she then? Her parents always kept their heritage a secret. Elven blood, and what else? That's the question." Evan lights another cigarette.

"You seem way too interested in Wysteria," I say, but try and play

it off as nonchalant. “Why do you care?”

He shrugs. “I don’t. I mean not really, except that she’s dating a member of my family, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Wow, he’s on a roll tonight. The lies are thick. “Thanks, man, but I can take care of myself.”

“She plays the piano, too. I didn’t see that coming,” he continues as though I didn’t say anything.

I take another drag from his awful cigarette. “It was a shock to me too. Wysteria is special in so many ways. When I’m around her, I feel better, more alive than I have in a long time.” I try to appeal to the small part of him that might still have some compassion. But I don’t say more than that. He wouldn’t understand anyway.

He snorts. “I thought that’s what playing the piano did for you?”

I nod. “Yeah, it helps. But with her, it’s different. I finally feel - ” I stare at my hands. “Whole.” I laugh. “It sounds stupid. Even I know that.”

Evan takes back his cigarette and sucks in. He’s staring at me like I’ve grown three heads. “Sure, bro. Whatever.”

I slam my hands on the banister and straighten up. “Yeah, whatever. Hey, did you ever solve that problem with those guys?” I hadn’t seen them around in a while, and I hoped so. They were thugs. I had no doubt they would keep their promises unless Evan paid them. I wanted to ask him what it was about, but I refrained then, and I do now.

“It’s all good, cuz.”

“If you say so?” I go to my door. “Want to come in and have a beer?”

“Why not?” He follows me inside my apartment.

OceanofPDF.com

PARTY FACE

WYSTERIA

The rest of the week goes by in a blur of classes, homework, piano practice, more homework, hanging out with Sage, and sometimes Leva. Repeat. By Friday night, I'm exhausted.

Leva was called back to Sharra a couple of days ago on an important matter. She said she's coming back, and I hope it's sooner rather than later.

At the moment, all I want to do is fall asleep, but I've promised Sage I'll go to a party. Be her wing woman, which basically means I've got her back and will keep her out of trouble. I'm nervous about it. If she drinks too much, I don't know that I'll be able to stop her antics. But she has her magical stake, and I have mine in my jacket. Beyond that, she's sworn off doing spells for a while, so I need to make sure she doesn't have a need to give vampires fangs on their man parts.

Austin is going to meet us there. I've told him I need to focus on Sage, and he understands. He says he'll keep an eye on her too, especially since we're still waiting on Doug and Gary to retaliate.

"Are you ready?" I ask, only a little impatient to see Austin. The almost panic attack I had on our date was a fluke caused by being around his family. As long as we stay away from them, I'm perfectly okay around Austin. Better than okay. I want him. But he's been keeping me at arm's length.

Sage has changed her outfit for the sixth time. I've never seen her so undecided.

"Shit. I don't know what's wrong." She kicks off a pair of boots and doesn't put them back in their box.

I walk over. "Sage, what are you looking for?" I pat her knee.

She throws her hands in the air. “That’s the problem. I’m not sure.”

I walk to her closet and look through it. There’s a pair of jeans with the tags still on them. I pull them off the hanger. “What about these?”

“Gross. I won’t wear - ” She stops and grabs them. “Okay, why not.”

She rips off the tags and her black leggings. Tosses them on the floor. Then pulls on the jeans. They fit like a second skin, tight all the way down to her ankles. The black shirt she’s wearing fits snugly too and doesn’t cover all of her stomach, exposing her pierced belly button and her hipbones. She twirls in front of the mirror.

“I like it.” She runs over to a shoebox, flings it open, and pulls out her ankle boots, the same ones she wore the first night we went to a party.

“You look hot,” I say and mean it. Her choppy blond hair is spiked everywhere. Her eyes are lined, and her lips are reddened.

I’m wearing dark jeans, a form-fitting blue sweater, and my black ballet flats. My hair is pulled up in a high ponytail and braided down my back. I’ve put on some mascara and lip-gloss and have the bracelet with the carved bear on my right wrist. Each time I look at it, my heart warms. Christopher isn’t around much, but at least I know he’s thinking of me.

Sage grabs her purse, and my stomach churns. Now that I know what’s in there, what she’s going to do, I feel an unnatural hatred for her effing black purse. I want to make her stop, tell her she doesn’t need to do what I know she’s going to do, but I don’t.

“I’ll be back in a few. Party face. Put it on.” She points the edge of the purse at me.

I nod and try to smile.

Then she’s gone, and I collapse on the edge of my bed. There’s a new ache in my veins. It’s my worry for Sage. But I’m not sure what to say, how to make her stop doing what I know she shouldn’t. It can’t be

good for her. I mean, any kind of drug, even the magical kind, can't be good for her. Plus, it's illegal.

A few minutes later, I hear her slide the card in the door and smile big. The door opens, and she puts her fists in the air. "Yay. Party face."

"Yay," I respond with pretend enthusiasm and stand.

"K. Here's the rules." She goes to the mirror and studies her reflection.

I join her and raise an eyebrow. "Rules?"

"No more than three drinks - the whole night. Lots of water. We stick by each other. No matter what. Deal?" She sticks up a hand like she wants me to high-five her.

I do. "Deal."

We head to the door. Sage looks me up and down. "Hey, you need a necklace."

"I don't have one," I answer, pulling the door open.

My mother always wore a silver locket. Inside was a picture of her and me and my dad. My aunt tried to recover it. Even talked to the police. But it was never found.

"Hang on," she says, walking over to her jewelry box. She opens it and lifts out a long silver chain with a bulbous heart on the end. She places it around my neck and lets it fall against my chest. "That's better."

"Thanks, Sage."

"Come on, Roomie. Let's go have some fun."

THE PARTY'S been going a while. I'm sitting on a large leather chair. Sage and I have followed our rules. I've had one shot. No more. Pleasant detachment meanders through my insides. Every time I see a drink, I want it. But I resist. Sipping water seems to help.

Sage is on her second. Right now, she's dancing with a cute guy.

He has thick brown hair. A nice body under his white shirt and navy cargo pants. On his feet are loafers. They tell me he's conceited but casual about it. He seems nice and into Sage, but I'm not a great judge of things guy related.

Austin hasn't come yet. I've texted multiple times, but he hasn't answered. And I wonder if he's going to. If maybe me asking him to be patient turned him off, and that's why he's been distant the last few days. Or it could be that I told him I loved him and then sort of backpedaled. I sigh. This loving and kissing and needing a guy is totally new to me. I can't help how I feel.

A laughing squeal forces my attention to a girl about to sit on the ratty green couch. It looks like the same one I saw at my first frat party. I wonder if they pass it from house to house, or if there was a giant sale on ugly green couches twenty years ago. As I'm watching, Doug appears and comes to sit on the arm of my chair. The guy reeks of too much cologne and not enough sense.

"Hello, Wysteria."

Slow anger builds in my stomach. I forgot my mother's jacket, which means I don't have my stake.

Stupid!

My anger shifts to Austin. He's supposed to be protecting me. At least that's what he told me. So, where is he?

"Hey yourself," I say, watching him watch Sage, a smirk on his boyish mouth, and I want to throw my knee into it. Make him bleed. I grit my teeth.

"Get the hell away from me," I seethe.

OceanofPDF.com

MY LITTLE SECRET

WYSTERIA

Doug looks at me, shocked. “Come on. Don’t be that way. I know you hooked up with Austin, and I know what he is.” He leans down and whispers in my ear. “He’s a vampire. I checked, and he’s unsanctioned, which means I have every right to kill him, especially since I’m sure he killed Gary. So, either you do whatever the hell I tell you to do, or I’ll turn that asshole to dust.”

My anger fizzles out and is replaced by fear. “Gary is dead?”

Doug searches my eyes. “Don’t act like you care, little bitch.” He takes a deep breath. “You smell like you’re in heat.”

“I made you a promise, and I always keep them,” I say, but make the mistake of looking right into his eyes.

“Get up,” he commands, using his compulsion and my inexperience against me.

My stomach turns with furious bile, but I find my body obeying. I’m out of the chair in an instant.

“Good girl.” He leans in, his teeth grazing my neck. “You really smell amazing.” He presses his lips to my rapidly beating vein.

“Get away from me,” I hiss, shoving against him with all my might and searching the room for Sage or Austin. I don’t see either of them.

“That isn’t how you talk to the man you love more than anything in the world, is it?” His brown eyes meet mine. “Especially when you’ll do whatever I say until the end of time. Now tell me you love me?”

I grind my teeth together as devastation fills my guts. Am I stuck doing his bidding forever because of his command?

“Tell me,” he shouts, grabbing me by the arm and shaking.

A couple of people look over at us, but only briefly until they laugh and move on with whatever they're doing. Someone sets off some magical fireworks, and the inside of the room fills with sparkling color.

"I love you," I say. But all I want to do is scrape the arrogant smile from his lips with my nails. Take his effing gold chain hanging from his neck and twist it until his head detaches. I want to -

"Here comes Austin. Repeat it. Tell me you love me, Wysteria."

"I love you." The words come out forced, but Austin hears them and flinches.

"Is this guy bothering you?" Austin grabs Doug by his collar and yanks him away.

"Hey, man. Watch the shirt. It cost six hundred bucks. That's probably more than you've ever seen all at once." Doug readjusts his ugly, too-fancy tee, glaring at Austin. "This isn't an Alpha Kai party, and I'm not a grunt tonight. You, on the other hand, will always be the poor son of a dirty cop." He grins. "Now, I'm going to take your girl and do things to her you only wish you could try."

Doug grabs me around the waist and whisks from the room. No one even looks twice. He's a registered vampire. Everyone knows that. Austin isn't. If he uses his speed, someone will report him, and then he could die.

I don't want that, but I still hope he at least tries to follow.

When Doug stops moving, I struggle to catch my breath. We're inside what appears to be an apartment, with a kitchen, living, and small dining room all in one area. In a lot of ways, it reminds me of Austin's place. "This is your apartment?" I verify.

"That's right." He grabs me by the arm and drags me down the hall and into a bedroom. It's dark and smells musty. "But not the one near Austin. This place is my little secret."

My heart sinks. How will Austin find me?

“Take off your clothes. I want easy access to your body,” he says, releasing me as he flips on the light and goes into the closet.

I can’t see what he’s doing, but I’m sure it isn’t anything good. With everything in me, I fight the compulsion. I can heal with a touch and reverse spells. Yet somehow, I can be compelled? It makes no sense. As I’m thinking such thoughts, I’m removing my shoes, my skirt, blouse, and the lovely heart necklace Sage gave me.

Doug didn’t specifically say to get naked, so I leave on my underwear and tank.

The room looks like a medieval dungeon. The carpet is gone, revealing concrete floors, and the walls are painted black. On the far wall hangs a thick wooden plank with restraints attached to it. Beneath, the floor is stained red. I’m guessing it is blood.

To the left is a small bed with only a metal frame and mattress. There’s blood all around it as well. Really, there’s blood everywhere, and I wince at thoughts of all he’s done in this room. Nothing good, I know that.

Doug closes the closet door and turns, his eyes raking over my body. In one hand is a small but deadly looking knife and in the other is a jar. He places it on a black desk leaning against the same wall as the closet. “Damn, but you’re fine. And so pure.” He inhales a deep breath. “I can smell the virginity on you, which surprises me since you’ve been so cozy with Austin.” A cruel smile lifts one side of his lips. “I may have to keep you alive longer than I promised.”

I want to run, but my feet won’t move. “Austin will find me. He won’t stop until he does. And then, he’ll kill you.” I lift my chin. “Unless I get the opportunity first.”

He’s suddenly got me around the neck and slams me against the wall, my head hitting the wood plank. Spots blind me a moment, and he uses the opportunity to place my arms in the manacles. “Let me go,” I whisper when my vision clears.

“Don’t speak and don’t move,” he says, slapping my face, pressing

the sharp end of the blade against my cheek, but it doesn't draw blood.

That's the thing. Normal, human things have never been able to hurt me.

Leaning in, he scrapes his teeth down the other side. "I want to taste you so bad." He growls and grinds his teeth before stepping back. Then he looks at me and smiles. "They won't miss a little," he says and goes over to the table, dragging it and the jar so that it's under my right hand.

He removes the lid and adjusts it. Presses my open hand flat against the plank, revealing my wrist, and drags the blade across my skin.

My eyes widen, and I gasp in pain. I'm shocked it was able to cut into my flesh.

Doug notices and laughs. "This isn't a regular blade. It's been spelled by one of the originals and bathed in the blood of four human innocents." He rolls his eyes. "But really, what human is innocent? They all have sins, and death is well deserved regardless." Then he snorts. "Okay, they didn't have to die, but drinking from them, straight from the vein, after taking the blood I needed, well, that was a pleasure. It's how all vampires should live." His eyes become hard. "Our kind should be ruling this realm and all others. We are superior in every way. Yet, the vampire queen, Snow White works with humans." He spits. "What a waste. Soon though, things will change. I can promise you that." He moves in, pressing his body against mine.

OceanofPDF.com

DIE, DOUG, DIE

WYSTERIA

I whimper as tears fall onto my cheeks. I'm going to die. Why wasn't I more careful? Why didn't I listen to Christopher, Leva, or Snow White? I try desperately to turn my head away, so I can't see my blue blood falling like rain into the jar.

On my other wrist is the bracelet with the wooden bear, and I'd much rather focus on that. Austin said, having it would help Christopher find me. That gives me little hope. My brother left, and even with vampire speed, I doubt he'll get here in time before I've been drained.

Doug is still talking. "After I depleted those idiotic and easy humans, I found some unicorn blood. It seems someone had the forethought to save it for a time such as this." He grabs my face in one hand.

I try to hold my breath against the stench coming off him.

He smells of death as he licks my mouth, then licks my blood from the blade he holds. "Damn." His pupils dilate and flash red for the briefest moment before he licks the edge again and shudders. "Your blood is incredible." He cleans the knife and tucks it away before turning his attention to the jar filling with my blood.

He rushes over to the closet without a sound and grabs more jars, placing them on the table. "I can't bite into you. They don't want my venom to mix with your blood, but now I understand all the fuss surrounding you. "Your blood really can bring down nations." He laughs gleefully. "When I got the call that they'd found the fountain of youth, I thought it was a joke. Then they explained it was you. Since then, I've been trying to get my hands on you. That night at the heaven or hell party would've been perfect, but Austin stepped in. At

the time, I didn't know he'd been turned. Someone broke supernatural laws for him. Tsk. Tsk. My employers know what he is now too. Things aren't going to end well for him, either."

I can't respond because of the compulsion, but if I can just touch him with my magic. Maybe I can heal all of the bad out of him.

Was such a thing possible? I never tried it.

When he moves to switch the jars, my fingers brush his hair, and they start to glow. I dig deep, searching for where he is broken and what needs restoration within him. My magic climbs into his mind, pushing open all the dark places, and there is a lot.

He was changed after a car crash.

I see him lying in the hospital bed. My brother standing over him as an elderly man speaks, his voice like acid.

"I don't care what your personal views of my government policies. Snow White sanctioned this, and you will comply," the man says.

Doug is seething. He hates the man who is his father. He doesn't want to live. But Christopher takes Doug's arm and bites. After that, things get hazy. When Doug opens his new vampire eyes, whatever goodness he still possessed is blackened out of him. The first thing he does is try and kill his dad. But the Supernatural Task Force is there and prepared. They capture him and bring him before Snow White. There is a brief conversation, and she gives him one more chance. That was six months ago. He hadn't tried to kill anyone, but he had been hurting people like Sage.

Doug steps back, gasping, and slaps me again. "Stop that," he commands.

With our connection broken, my magic pulls back. But I've seen enough. There is no good in him. Becoming a vampire boosted the worst in him. With his new abilities, he encouraged and nurtured the most depraved parts of himself until everything good in him was blinked into oblivion.

"You'll pay for that," he says, his hands roaming my body as he

kisses my neck and my chest.

Fresh tears leak down my cheeks. He grabs hold of my thighs, his gaze on me. But suddenly, he lets go. A look of disbelief crosses his face, and his smile vanishes as he sinks to the ground.

Standing before me is my roommate. Sage. I try to say her name, but I'm still under Doug's compulsion.

Her eyes are blank like she sees ghosts. In one hand is a bloody stake. "I killed him," she whispers and then bends over and retches.

I want to tell her that it isn't true. Doug will recover, and that's dangerous, but my lips won't move.

"He isn't dead yet." Austin unexpectedly enters the bedroom. His eyes are wild as he takes me in. "Hang on," he growls, then pulls a large, slightly curved blade from under his shirt and goes over to Doug.

My head is dropped forward, and I watch horrified as Austin takes Doug by the hair on his head, lifts him slightly, exposing his neck, and - .

"The head. That's right," Sage says, her eyes haunted but relieved.

I make a noise, desperate to tell Austin to stop. I don't want to witness Doug's death.

Without mercy, Austin slices the blade through Doug's neck. A few drops of Doug's blood strike my face. It's warm and sticky. My insides start to quake. And it's like I'm reliving my parents' deaths all over again.

"You really killed him," Sage says, dropping her stake. She notices when it clangs to the floor, and she quickly picks it up, tucking it in her back pocket.

As soon as Doug's head is separated from his body, the compulsion is gone. "Sage. Austin," I whisper, but it comes out more like a whine. Another panic attack is coming on, and it's going to be a doozy. I hate that I'm so weak.

“He deserved it,” Sage says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She comes over and works to loosen the restraints. My blood is still dripping into the jar freely. “Shit, how do I stop you from bleeding?” She presses her hand over my wound and closes her eyes a moment. “Omangus Orithe Wyterithe.” Though my blood has oozed between her fingers, I feel the cut on my wrist healing. Sage doesn’t let go until it's completely done. She opens her eyes and steps back, looking at her bloodied hand like it’s a foreign object.

Austin is still dealing with Doug’s body. It’s already beginning to decay, and I return my focus to Sage. “Thank you,” I say softly.

She wrenches her gaze from her hand and looks at me. “I don’t know how I did it.” Her hand starts to glow like there’s a lightbulb under her skin. It’s golden and gets brighter and brighter, and then it’s gone.

Not only that, but the blood covering her hand has disappeared too.

Sage’s mouth drops open. “Your magic is beyond scary,” she says and then smiles. “But, I feel great.” She tries to free me again.

“Good,” I say and try to smile, knowing it's probably an effect from my blood. I don’t feel great. I feel woozy and weak. There are nearly two quarts of my blood in those jars.

When Doug’s body is nothing but ash, Austin comes over to me. “I’ve got you,” he says softly and yanks off the restraint. My body falls into him, but he doesn’t stop until my other hand is free. Then he pulls me into a hug. “Let’s get you out of here.” He lifts me into his arms.

“What about her blood?” Sage asks.

OceanofPDF.com

A MEETING WITH THE DRAGON

WYSTERIA

Austin looks freaked, like he's unsure what to do. "Wys needs it. It isn't like my blood, or your blood will help her." He looks around the room. "Take the jars outside. Put them someplace safe. I'll put Wys into your car, and then I'm going to burn this place to the ground." Each word comes out slowly, decisively. "No one can know what happened here."

I cling to Austin, but now that I'm safe, I'm so tired. "You two are the best," I say and close my eyes, sinking into dark oblivion.

The smell of smoke fills my nose, telling me Austin did precisely as he said he would. I try to wake, but there's a part of me that's desperate to stay in the shadows. I feel sure nothing can hurt me here. Still, I weave in and out of consciousness, sometimes catching what's going on around me.

"Can you call your grandfather?" Austin asks.

"I - yes, but you don't understand what you're asking of me." Sage's voice is filled with anguish.

"She's worth it. Please. Abernathy is the only one who can help."

"Fine, but we need someplace private, away from people. The dragon has become more and more reclusive over the years."

"I'll drive."

"WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE?"

The voice filters through my consciousness so I feel it in my bones. At the same time, a sudden wind whips against my skin and brings with it the smell of sulfur.

"This is Wysteria. She is the fountain of youth, and she is my

friend," Sage says.

My heart warms at her words. She and I have come a long way since the day we became roommates.

"Granddaughter, it is lovely to see you again. I've missed our talks," the gruff voice says.

Sage doesn't say anything, but I hear a deep chuckle.

"Still stubborn, like your father, I see. Very well. What would you have me do?"

"Hello, Abernathy. My name is Austin. Thank you for coming," Austin says. My heart warms at the sound of his voice. He's frightened, I can hear it, but he's also beyond brave. "This is Wysteria's blood."

I hear the liquid sloshing in the jars as he moves them.

"Is there any way you can put it back inside her?" Austin continues. "She's weak, and I'm worried she'll die."

"This is why you woke me from my slumber?" Abernathy asks.

"Yes," Sage and Austin say at the same time.

"Will you help her or not?" Sage asks. She's huffy. Arrogant. The dragon is her grandfather. My behavior would be much different if he were mine.

"Of course. But Sage, my darling girl, you could've helped her. If only you hadn't shunned your family." Abernathy waits a moment. When Sage doesn't respond, he heaves a giant breath. "Very well. I'll need a few moments alone with your friend."

"Fine," Sage says.

"Leave the blood, Austin. Return in five minutes," Abernathy adds.

"I will. Thank you." I feel a slight breeze and know he and Sage are gone, leaving me alone with the dragon.

"Wake, Wysteria."

There is a slight pressure against my forehead. My eyes spring

open, and I'm staring into the face of an enormous and beautiful dragon. I gasp but don't move.

"You heard everything?"

"I-I think so," I say, my voice sounding hoarse. An image of Doug's severed head fills my mind. Followed by the memory of my parents lying on the living room floor in their blood. So much death. I hate it.

He blows out a breath, sending smoke into my face. "Your life hasn't been easy. I see that. Still, you have much left to do. Are you ready?"

The weight of his words settles on my shoulders. "What am I supposed to do?"

"The elven kingdom is in peril, and the king must be stopped," Abernathy begins.

"How do you know this?" I interrupt. "Didn't you just say you were asleep?"

He chuckles, sending tendrils of smoke into my face.

"I'm an original," Wysteria. "Created not long after the Unknowns. Without any effort on my part, I know everything." He curls his long tail around his paws. "Now then, you must destroy Redyrin and save the elven kingdom." His big golden eyes soften. "You have royal elven blood in your veins, and though it doesn't seem so, you must become the ruler of that realm."

My head is spinning. He knows so much about me. Not only that, but why would he think I should rule the elven realm? "I just want to live a normal life. Play the piano. Go to college. I'm not any kind of ruler." Austin seems more befitted for such a task. Or even Sage. Not me.

He lifts his head and moves back, sitting on his haunches. He's enormous and golden and beautiful. His lovely mane reminds me of a lion's while his eyes study me like he's seeing into my soul. "Ease and normalcy are not your destiny, Wysteria. Stop hiding and start fulfilling your purpose."

“Why would you think I should rule the elven realm?” That seems ridiculous. “My parents told me about my heritage. Never once did they mention royalty.”

“Perhaps they didn’t know, but your ancestor is the elven king, Devoran.” Abernathy smiles, revealing his pointy white teeth. “Which makes you related to the vampire queen, Snow White.” He licks his lips and watches me, waiting for the information to sink in.

“That can’t be.” I’m blown away. Is such a thing possible? Is the dragon speaking the truth? He has no reason to lie, I think, answering my own question.

“It’s true. Devoran fathered many children throughout his long life. You are from one of those lines.” Abernathy blows smoke out of his nose. “The elf on the throne now is there through deception. His family has no royal blood, but he killed the rightful king and stole his place. Over the years, he’s killed or banished anyone who might threaten him, but you, Wysteria Hart, are the rightful heir.”

“I - it’s just - ” I’m not sure what to say. “So, I’m not going to die?” I ask, changing the subject.

He chuckles as he shakes his head. One of his scales flies off of his head and lands at my feet. I pick it up. It’s hot to the touch, and I drop it.

“Definitely not," he says. "Your body is like any other. It will replenish. If you wish, I can take your blood for myself. In return, I will give you something.”

I lift an eyebrow. “But you said Sage could fix me. Was that a lie?"

"Not necessarily. There is a spell she could've used to help you regain your strength more quickly." He blinks. "Now, your blood." He eyes the jars.

I shrug, moving into a more comfortable position. "Sure. It’s yours.” Then stand and carefully carry both jars over to Abernathy.

When I’m close enough, he bends down, reminding me of a giant cat, and sniffs. Then speaks words I don’t understand. The blood in the

jars turns to jelly and lifts out of each container, traveling to the dragon's open mouth.

"Tastes like blue raspberry gummy worms," he says and makes a noise almost like purring as he smacks his lips.

"Uh, yum, I guess?" What can I say in response to that?

He leans down, so we're face to face. Then whispers more incomprehensible words. As he speaks, gray smoke swirls between us before it circles into me.

"What's happening?" I look down at myself, unsure what I expect to see.

"Don't be afraid. Just wait," the dragon says calmly.

The smoke continues to churn a few more moments, and then it's gone.

"See, that didn't hurt, did it?" he asks kindly.

OceanofPDF.com

CHOCOLATE MUFFIN

WYSTERIA

“What did you do?” I check myself and my clothes. Nothing seems different.

“Not only is your elven blood royal, but so is your unicorn blood. And with that blood, comes the gift to commune with your ancestors - dead and alive.”

I gasp, and my eyes get wide. “Like my parents?”

“If that is your wish, then yes. But with such a gift, you must remember that the dead may not want to communicate with you. So be patient.” He yawns, causing a wisp of smoke to exit his mouth.

“How do I speak with them?” I search inside myself for whatever Abernathy awakened or did that will allow such a thing to be possible.

“Think about the dead ancestor you wish to speak with. Hold them and all you know of them in your mind. If they are willing, they will come to you.” He scratches his mane with one of his paws. “Now, then. Tell me about my granddaughter. How is she doing in college?”

The abrupt change, along with what he’s said about the dead, has me spinning. “Sage is doing fine.” I pause. “College is a lot harder than either of us thought it would be, but she’s doing better than most, I think.”

“You’re a good friend, Wysteria Hart. I’m glad the two of you are roommates. You’re good for each other.” He lifts his head and stands. “It was lovely to make your acquittance. Goodbye.” His wings beat several times, and he lifts into the air.

I’m surprised he didn’t wait for Sage, but it makes sense anyway. She didn’t seem happy to see him.

I SIT UP WITH A START. The sun is beating through my bedroom window. For a split second, I think I'm late for class. Then I remember it's Saturday. The clock on the nightstand says nine sixteen.

Sage is asleep in her bed, her hands tucked under her face.

Peaceful, I think, noticing how soft her features are without all the stress and worry etched in them.

I lay back down as thoughts about last night come to mind. It was bonkers. Doug compelling me. Sage staking him. Austin killing him. Meeting a real live dragon. Just another supernatural day in the human realm, I think.

There's no corpse, of course. As soon as Doug died, his body turned to ash. The compulsion left my head. It was a relief, but I can't get over that Austin killed him like he worked for the Supernatural Task Force. And maybe he does. I'm really not sure of anything anymore. After that, he burned the building to the ground. I didn't see it, but that's what he said he was going to do, and I believe him.

When Sage and Austin returned, it was just me sitting in the open field. They asked what happened, and I gave them details. Not much was said after that. The three of us needed time to ourselves for different reasons.

I slide out of bed, pick up my shower bag, and quietly leave the dorm room, heading to the communal bathroom. Leaning against the sink, I stare at my reflection.

Two other girls enter the bathroom just then. Talking and laughing like it's the best day ever. I say hello, and they respond in kind, but I can't stop staring at my reflection. And that's when I notice something dried in my hair. Something red.

Blood, I think, and rush to an empty shower stall and turn on the water. I wash my hair twice, then once more for good measure, to make sure I get it all out.

"Wysteria! Wysteria!" Sage screams, her voice echoing inside the

bathroom.

I poke my head out. “What’s wrong?” My heart is racing at the fear in her voice.

She heaves a sigh of relief. “You scared the crap out of me. I woke, and you were gone. Why aren’t you still asleep?”

The two girls in the bathroom with me decide they’re finished and bolt. One glances at Sage, and I stifle a smile. Sage is scary. I’m glad she’s on my side.

“What are you looking at? Get out of here!” Sage flips her off.

The other girl lets out an offended huff before exiting.

“I’m almost done. Be there in a sec.” I let the water cascade over my body.

“Fine, but hurry. I’m hungry.”

She hasn’t said a word about her grandfather or what happened at Doug’s place since we got home yesterday. Not that I blame her.

“For cafeteria food? Or Perky’s?” I shout over the running water.

Sage rarely eats - ever. Especially not breakfast. When she does eat, it’s usually pastries from the coffee shop, Perky’s. I don’t think she’s ever eaten in the cafeteria.

She seems to understand my curiosity. “It’s not like I have anything against cafeteria food.” She crosses her arms and pops a hip.

“So, cafeteria then?”

“Why not?” She shrugs. “It could be fun.” She throws up her hands and shakes her head.

There’s something other than the fact that she stabbed Doug going on with her. It's like she's happy and I just didn't realize it because that emotion coming from her is rare. “This is about a guy,” I say, turning off the water, wrapping my hair in a towel, and putting on my bathrobe.

She laughs. “No, it isn’t. Why would you say that?” She studies me like I’m a science experiment in the biology lab.

I raise my eyebrows, determined not to let her ask if I'm okay again. Because I am. More or less. I'd much rather focus on her. "The guy you were dancing with last night? What's his name?"

She closes herself inside a toilet stall.

I walk over to a sink. Apply some face lotion before rubbing the towel through my hair. There's mascara residue under my eyes. I use cream and the end of a cotton swab to remove it. Apply some lip balm.

Sage comes out and washes her hands. I walk over and catch her eyes in the mirror's reflection. "Come on, Sage, tell me his name."

"Fine. His name is Romney. Before I had to get all kick-ass on Doug, he and I were having the best time."

"Sorry, I interrupted," I say, playing with my hair. "How did you find me?" I can't help that question.

"My heart necklace. I put a locator spell on it."

"I - That's brilliant." Then I shake my head. "You were afraid I was going to leave you again?"

She laughs though it isn't cheerful. "Something like that."

"And then you told Austin where I was."

"Exactly." She leans against the sink and watches me. "You really are okay, aren't you?"

I force myself not to sigh. "Great," I say and give her one of my own not cheerful smiles. "So, you gonna meet Romney in the cafeteria?"

She flicks me in the face with water. "Not if you don't get your butt dressed." She walks away and pushes open the bathroom door. I collect my stuff and trail behind her.

"Is he supernatural?" I whisper.

In our room, I dress, and grab my meal card.

Sage does the same, and we make our way over to the elevator.

She still hasn't answered me, but I get it. Even though the school is

full of supernatural students, it’s not really talked about. At least not that I’ve heard.

When we reach the cafeteria, we get in line. Get our food and then Sage finds us a free table, where we sit.

"Come on, Sage. Give me details. Is he sup—"

“Maybe,” she says, watching me slather a piece of toast with butter. The cafeteria is packed and noisy, but Sage and I are in our own little bubble.

“You don’t know, or you don't want to say?”

In answer, she breaks off a piece of her chocolate muffin and puts in in her mouth.

OceanofPDF.com

DESTINY WILL FIND ME

WYSTERIA

"If you know, tell me." I take a bite of my scrambled eggs.

“I'm not sure. We haven’t discussed our DNA yet.” She picks at the muffin, taking one of the chocolate chips and putting it in her mouth.

“See him yet?” I can’t help but be amused. This is a side of her I haven’t seen before. She’s usually so uninterested. But her knee is bouncing up and down. She’s nervous. Antsy.

Sage shakes her head. “No. Stop nagging me.”

I cover a smile behind my napkin. “I’m going to go get some bacon. Want anything?”

“No.”

I choke on a laugh.

The bacon is in the same area as the eggs, waffles, pancakes, and hash browns. The line is long, but I don’t mind waiting. It allows me to think about what happened last night. How I almost died. What Doug said about Austin. I need to talk to him.

“It’s Wysteria, right?” Someone taps me on the shoulder.

I turn and am face to face with the girl from the night I ran into Austin. She’s wearing a cheerleader uniform. I think that explains a lot. Or, maybe that's too judgmental.

“Yep.” The line is moving, and I go with it.

“Did he make you feel special?” Her eyes twinkle with maniacal glee like she knows all my secrets.

My face scorches with mortification, and I’m not even sure why. “No,” I whisper, keeping my eyes down.

She giggles. “I think he did,” she says. “And, I think you liked it.”

I look up, ignoring the rapid beating of my heart. It isn't that I'm afraid of her. Hardly. It's only that she's confirming the rumors about Austin making the rounds with other girls. "It's none of your business," I say, swallowing down some of my irritation.

"Okay," she says, shrugging. "But if you ever feel like talking, I'm available."

"Got it." I offer a silent plea she'll leave without getting whatever food she's after. She keeps her place behind me, and I want to scream. I finally reach the bacon, but it's gone. Not wanting to leave empty-handed, I put a waffle on my plate. Pour syrup over it and head back to the table.

Romney, the guy Sage is gaga about, is sitting with her. They seem to be deep in conversation. He's holding her hand, stroking it with his thumb.

Aww, I think, knowing I can't interrupt them. My toast is still sitting on the table, but I'm abandoning it. Sage and Romney need their privacy. I search the crowded cafeteria looking for someplace else to sit, but everything is full, and I don't know anyone. The cheerleaders are seated at the long table with a bunch of people. They keep glancing my way and whispering.

"Come on. You can sit with me." It's Austin, abruptly at my side. He's got a tray piled high with food in his hands.

Suddenly the world feels right. He heads over to another small table. Two guys are already sitting there. When they see Austin, they grab their trays and bolt. Austin sits and then waves me over.

As I'm sitting, he says, "Glad to see you all cleaned up."

"You too," I say, trying to avoid thinking about the way he sliced Doug's head off like it's an everyday occurrence for him.

"Thanks." He touches my hand. "You ready to talk about last night?"

I knew he would ask me this, so I'm prepared. "Doug said that whoever he's working for knows you're a vampire and wants to kill

you too."

"I'm not surprised." His face gets serious. "What else?"

"Abernathy told me I'm supposed to stop trying to be normal and start living up to my potential." I cut into my waffle, but don't take a bite.

"And what does he think you should be doing?" Austin looks at his food but doesn't eat it. Just scoots it around on his plate. Then picks up a bagel but doesn't move it to his mouth.

I can't help the harsh breath and determine right then and there that I won't tell him what Abernathy said about me being heir to the elven kingdom's throne or that I'm related to Snow White. That just seems so wrong. But I can tell him everything else. "He said something about saving a kingdom - " I pause, trying to remember all his words. "And that I must destroy Redyrin," I finish.

Austin's eyes widen. "So, not a whole lot," he says sarcastically and drops his uneaten food. "Did Abernathy tell you where to start?"

I shake my head, putting my hands in my lap. "Nope, but I have an idea."

"Oh?" He leans in. "I'm listening."

I tell him about the gift Abernathy gave me after consuming my blood. About how I can speak with my dead ancestors.

"You're kidding me?" Austin isn't convinced.

I shake my head. "It's true. At least I think so. I wanted to try and summon my parents and ask them what they think," I whisper.

"When will you do that?" His eyes bore into me.

I hope he isn't weirded out by this turn of events. Between my being the fountain of youth and now possibly being able to talk to the dead, I might be weirded out if the roles were reversed.

"Wys?" he prods.

I know I should say I'm going to try immediately, especially if I'm supposed to rule the elven kingdom and destroy Redyrin. The prospect

is scary, though, too. What if I try to talk with my parents and they don't respond? I'm not sure I'm ready for the rejection. "Soon," I say.

His features change. "Whatever you decide, it'll be okay. Plus, I wouldn't worry about what some old dragon said. He's been alive so long, he probably doesn't know what he's saying."

I want to believe him, but I don't think it matters one way or another. Sooner or later, my destiny will find me.

Instead of focusing on my problems and possible solutions, I turn my attention to the mess Austin is in. "Do you think someone will discover what you did to Doug?" I ask, looking down at my plate.

"They already know. I told Christopher. He's taking the news to Snow White, and she'll bring what I did before the council."

"What about you being an unsanctioned vampire?" I clear my throat.

"I have a feeling there will be consequences, but it doesn't matter. I wouldn't change what I did."

"Did you kill Gary the same way you killed Doug?" I ask, curious about whether I care or not.

He's surprised by the question. "No." Then he looks at me, his eyes intent. "That's a promise, Wys. I haven't killed anyone but Doug."

"Okay," I say and believe him.

He proceeds to kiss each of my fingertips.

I'm tingling everywhere and shyly meet his eyes. "Before last night, I got the feeling you were avoiding me. That I did something to make you mad."

Austin turns over my hand and places a kiss in the center, sending a wave a desire right through me and down to my toes. "No. I wasn't mad. At least not at you," he says seductively.

"Who are you mad at then?" I ask, but all I can think about is being in his arms. Now that I know he isn't mad, I need him - want him. Anything to forget about Doug and all that transpired.

OceanofPDF.com

“Myself,” he admits.

“Why?” I’m so confused.

He leans back in his chair. His face is unreadable. “What did the girl in line have to say?”

He’s changing the subject, but that’s okay. Whatever his reason, I can tell it’s serious. “N-Nothing,” I say, but I feel the heat rising into my face.

Austin crosses his arms. “That you’re blushing tells me that isn’t true.”

I look away, spinning the fork in the syrup still on my plate. There’s no way I’m telling him what she said. I’d sooner die a horrible death than repeat it.

He rests his chest against the table. I feel it give slightly under his weight. “Your silence speaks volumes, Wysteria.”

I glance at him through my lashes. His ice-blue eyes stake me through the heart. He licks his bottom lip and runs a hand through his hair. He’s beautiful. Sexy. My face gets hotter. It seems we’re both avoiding our problems, and I’m okay with that.

“Talk to me,” he whispers, playing with my hand.

I want to. I want to look him in the eyes and tell him. But not here. “Can we go somewhere? Want to practice our duet?” My “go-to” place.

He smiles. “It’s Saturday.”

“And?”

He shrugs. “All right. Let’s go.”

We stand together. Drop off our trash and head toward the exit.

I glance at the table where Sage and I were sitting. She isn't there, and neither is Romney. I pull out my phone to text her and see she's already texted me.

Her message says: I'm spending the day with Romney. Catch you later.

I text back: Be safe.

She responds: Don't worry. He likes sobriety. I may get my first real kiss.

That is a pleasant surprise. I reply: *Awesome. Can't wait to hear all about it.*

"What?" Austin asks, glancing over my shoulder.

"Sage. She's," I pause. "It's nothing. Roommate stuff." I won't betray her secret, not even to Austin.

He gives me a confused look.

"Trust me. It's just girl stuff."

"Alright." Austin smiles and wraps his arms around my waist from behind. I lean into him, enjoying the scent of him.

"Get a room," the girl who talked to me in the food line shouts.

I feel Austin's body tense.

"Let's get out of here," I say and wink, hoping he'll relax. It works because he takes my hand, and we walk out of the cafeteria together.

WE PRACTICE our duet for thirty minutes. I'm having a hard time concentrating. I thought as soon as we got in the music room, Austin would demand I tell him what the girl said. He didn't. Instead, we go to work. The duet is sounding great. Austin plays with such emotion. Sometimes I think my heart will break with the passion radiating from as he plays each note.

Austin looks at me. Smiles. "Had enough?"

I have, but I don't want to leave this room. When we're here, together, it's like nothing else matters. There's only the music and us.

“I guess,” I finally say.

“Come here.” He quirks a finger at me.

It’s the hottest damn thing I’ve ever seen. Walking is a challenge because my legs are suddenly shaky.

He pats the spot next to him on the piano bench. I sit, my heart dancing with anticipation.

“Play me something,” he says, his eyes on me.

“Okay.” I swallow and lift my hands to the keys. There’s a song I’ve been working on. It’s simple. The right-hand plays broken chords while the left keeps the beat. As I’m playing, thoughts of Austin kissing and biting me fills my mind, and my face warms. When the last note is finished, Austin places a hand over mine.

“That’s beautiful. You’re beautiful, Wysteria.”

“It’s still a work in progress,” I respond, enjoying a contented glow at his compliments.

“You’re blushing again. What were you thinking about while you were playing?” He takes my hand cups it in both of his. At that moment, I feel treasured. It’s unusual and has me tingling inside.

I take a deep breath. Time to spill. “I was thinking about you and me kissing and about what if felt like when you drank from me.” As I speak, my face gets hotter. I’m too embarrassed to look at him, but I’m so glad I said it. Got it out there.

“The kissing I like, but the other part?” Austin releases me and starts to play chords on the piano. Major and then minor.

I study him then. His features are filled with an odd sadness, his jaw clenches as he focuses on the keys.

“Biting me wasn’t a good thing?” I ask, curious about his reaction. I remember the way he looked after, as though he’d experienced something extraordinary. That had made me happy - glad my blood tasted so good to him.

Austin wipes a hand over his face. “Your blood is - ” He doesn’t

finish.

“What?” I’m confused and incredibly vulnerable. It’s uncomfortable letting so much of my guard down, but he did say he loved me. And I did say I loved him back. According to my mother, that means you can share everything with that person. She said she did with my dad.

I clear my throat. There’s no reason to backpedal. “My blood didn’t taste good?” I stumble over the words.

His features soften. “It tasted better than good. Your blood is filled with magic. It changed me.” He lowers his voice. “Wys, I don’t know if you know this, but your blood changes the very makeup of a creature. My vampirism is heightened. All of my abilities are stronger. Not only that, but your blood gave me another ability too.” He stops playing and wraps an arm around me., pulling me against his chest.

I’m shaken. Of course, I know I’m the fountain of youth. My brother told me. I also know my magic kept Redyrin looking young and beautiful, but to add powers? “What’s the ability?” I ask, speaking softly.

“I can sense a person’s emotions,” he says, brushing a wayward piece of hair from off my face.

I look at him, trying to read what he’s thinking. “You couldn’t do that before?”

“No.”

I swallow, wondering if he can sense how exposed I am. “What can you sense about me?”

“You’re feeling nervous, and - ” He tilts his head to one side, biting his bottom lip. “You want me.”

"Yeah, pretty much," I say, pushing him away playfully. Concentrate on my hands like they can provide comfort somehow. “But anyway, that’s bad?”

Austin straightens. “Kind of. Because your blood tastes divine. It’s

like drinking from you makes me whole." He looks away, and I watch a shudder run through him. "I'm afraid if I drink from you again, I might not stop."

He's worried he'll kill me. "I'm sorry," I say, feeling stupid, especially since I really want him to go all vampire on me right now.

"Why are you sorry?" Austin runs a hand through his hair. "I'm the one who should be sorry. And that's why I kept my distance. Because I'm not. I'm - " He looks at me, and I see the pain in his expression. "I don't know whether I can control myself around you. When I'm not with you, I'm always thinking about you. And when I am with you, it's all I can do not to kiss you and more."

OceanofPDF.com

I'M NOT AFRAID

WYSTERIA

"Oh." I stand and walk over to my piano, take my music, and pick up my bag. "I definitely don't want to cause you any pain." I shake my head. "As the fountain of youth, I'm supposed to be able to heal and provide hope. Not. Ugh." I shake my head again, frustrated, and start for the door. Before I reach it, I look back. "For what it's worth, I believe you can control yourself around me and I trust you more than I've ever trusted anyone," I whisper.

"Hey." Austin is immediately at my side. "Don't go."

My heart races at his nearness. He is a vampire. Would I be able to stake him if he tried to drink me dry? Would I even want to? My knees quake. Probably neither. "Why?"

"We still need to practice." He tucks his hands into his pockets.

"Maybe we should be done for today," I say nervously, my eyes searching his. I'm not afraid, but my instincts tell me I should be.

Austin wraps a hand around my neck, strokes it softly with his thumb, sending shivers through my body. It's like he's playing with fire, and he likes it. "I don't want you to go," he says huskily.

"Austin." I say his name softly as need rises in my heart.

His eyes are hooded as he grabs my thick braid and wraps it around his hand, gently pulling my head back, so I'm looking up at him, my throat exposed.

I gasp, thinking I should run or grab the stake from my backpack. At the same time, I don't care because I want to feel what I did the last time he drank from me. "Go ahead," I say.

Pain fills his features as he opens his mouth, flashing his fangs.

My heart is ratcheting at super speed, and I lick my lips. Whatever

happens, I'm glad it's with Austin. There's no one else but him. It doesn't matter that I haven't dated anyone else. Nor does it matter than he's the only man I've kissed. He is my everything.

Austin releases my hair, and I think he's going to walk away. Instead, he tugs me to him, resting his forehead on my shoulder. My face is near his neck now, and I smell his clean cologne with hints of cedarwood and amber. There's heat coming off his skin, and I press my head against his neck, nudging him, telling him with my body, I'm all in.

"I want you, Wys," he says, his voice gruff, and it sounds like he confessing his sins.

I drop my bag and music, letting them fall to the floor. My hands go under his shirt, desperate to be near him. "You have me," I say, kissing his neck, licking it, the way I want him to do to me. Then I open my mouth and bite, ever so gently, suckling and tasting his skin with my tongue, wondering if I can mark his skin. I'm the one playing with fire, not the other way around. But I don't care. I want to be burned. Scorched until I don't know where he ends and I begin.

Austin's grip tightens on my waist, and he groans softly, kissing my neck, pulling my collar out of the way, and scraping his fangs against my skin. "You're killing me, Wys."

"Not having you close is killing me." My hands are still under his shirt, and I tug at his pants, asking him to do what he and I both want.

He lets out a breath, the heat of it against my skin. His fangs pierce slowly, ever so slowly, and I moan as desire sinks low in my belly. That pushes him over the edge, and he sinks them all the way in, so they're buried.

I cry out, my nails digging into his back. "That's it," I say. When he begins to suck, I lose myself. It feels so good.

Too soon, he pulls back, flinging himself away from me, bumping into the piano. The lid falls, filling the room with a musical noise. He's breathing heavily and bends over, putting his hands on his knees. "I

can't."

The wound on my neck is still open, and I feel my blood trickling down between my breasts. I press my shirt against the holes. "Austin," I say, distressed that this is so hard for him.

He looks up, and his eyes get wide. "Damn." He comes back over and licks the wound, closing it. "See, I'm the one who should be sorry." His eyes are so full of pain.

"No," I say, taking his hands. "I wanted you to do that. I - it's my fault." I look at our hands together a moment. My blood is on my fingers, and it smears into his, like a blood oath. "Do you still love me?"

"More than anything," he says, taking my face in his hands and kissing me.

There's a tumult of emotions rattling through my insides, but the strongest is my need for him.

"Then kiss me," I say, meeting his gaze, begging that he'll do as I ask.

His hands cup my face, and his mouth covers mine.

I pour all my love into my kiss, hoping I'm enough for him.

He returns my need, lifting me, so I wrap my legs around his hips. When I flick my tongue inside his mouth, I find his fangs and stroke them briefly before diving in deep. Delicious tension fills my belly, and the ache takes my breath away.

His kisses are desperate, fierce, and hungry. I match his urgency, kiss for kiss. He's mine, and I never want to let him go.

He walks us backward to the piano bench where he sits. It's obvious he wants to take our kissing to the next level, but someone could walk in at any moment. So we kiss and kiss some more. His hands under my shirt. Stroking my skin until it's on fire.

Many, many minutes later, we slow, our kisses turning tender and needy. My lips are swollen as he suckles my bottom lip, and I sigh.

“That was - You are - ” I trail off, unsure how to express all I’m feeling at this moment.

Austin’s face is serious. “I’m a vampire,” he says, and I hear the mourning in his voice.

“I don’t care,” I say. “I love you.”

Even as I say the words, a memory of my parents planning a hunting trip to slay a group of vampires fills my mind. When they think I’m sleeping, they discuss how they’ll kill all of them. My parents didn’t have a high opinion of vampires, but they might change their minds if they knew Austin became one. At least I hope so. Either way, I can’t change how I feel about Austin.

He helps me to my feet. My legs are wobbly, and waves of yearning still shoot through my belly.

“Wysteria, you’re the most amazing person I’ve ever known.” His voice is filled with tender astonishment as his eyes linger on my mouth.

“And you love me too,” I say, hopeful.

“Yes,” he admits, but there’s still dejection.

“So, what’s wrong?” I lift his face so I can see his eyes.

“I don’t deserve you,” he says, resting his hands on my hips, his body telling me he wishes that wasn’t true.

“You deserve me as much as I deserve you.” I’m starting to feel frightened by the way he’s acting. We are meant to be together. He has to know that.

He nods, pulling me into a hug. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I have to study for a test,” I say, wondering what he’s getting at. “But that’s it.”

He grinds his teeth together and pushes me back so I can see his features shift from despondency into happiness. As though he’s decided I’m right for him after all. “Can I cook you dinner at my place?”

My face lights up. “What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at six.”

OceanofPDF.com

THE DEATH SQUAD

CHRISTOPHER

“Snow White, it’s an honor to see you again.” I bow before the queen of the vampires.

“We’ve known each other long enough. You don’t need to call me by my full name, Hunter.” She gives me a wry smile. “Snow is fine.” She’s sitting behind a massive ebony desk. The top is sleek and so shiny I can see her reflection in it.

“Very well.” I stand with my arms behind my back, studying the woman I marked so long ago. A lot has changed over the years. At one point, I believed myself in love with her. I think she felt the same for a time. Until her true love revealed himself. Then I betrayed her and broke her trust.

As repayment, one of the original vampires, Sharra, killed me. Snow could’ve left me to die, but she didn’t. She saved me. For that, I owe her everything, including my allegiance. But it wasn’t until her daughter, Jasmine, that I finally became the vampire I’m meant to be.

Though I am still working through issues. Like, even now, as I watch her, watching me, I can’t help thinking of her blood. The way I drank from her and the way she reciprocated. It was the same with her daughter. In a lot of ways, I have been nothing more than a means to an end.

Someday, I hope to change that. To find my own happily ever after. But that time isn’t now.

“Have you heard from Jasmine?” I ask, breaking the silence between us.

She flinches, and I immediately regret asking. “Not in a while, but I’m certain my daughter and her husband can take care of

themselves," she snaps, throwing down her pen, and rising, coming around the desk, so we are only a few feet apart.

"You're right, of course," I say, crossing my arms.

Her features relax. "It's difficult when children grow up and leave the nest." She walks over to one of the many bookshelves lining her grand office and pulls down a book, flipping through the pages. "Jasmine made a much better ambassador than I do, but c'est la vie." She rolls her shoulders back. "I've called you here to discuss Austin."

"What about him?" I'm immediately on my guard. I've come to care about the boy, especially since my sister loves him so much.

"You tasked him with keeping an eye on Wysteria, but you need to bring him in." She slides the book back in its place and faces me. "Immediately."

"In?" I ask, playing dumb, though I know exactly what she means.

"If I'm to keep him from the death squad, he needs to become part of the Supernatural Task Force." She eyes me shrewdly. "He must be trained and tested. I want to make sure this boy you've chosen to become a vampire is worthy of us."

"He is," I say, feeling protective. "But, he's also in love with my sister. He's proven himself just by protecting her."

"That is true, and she does need him as her guardian, but I cannot let him run around as he is. Unsanctioned. I've already heard from the elven king that he wants the boy killed. There are other voices as well, and even though I am the queen of all supernaturals, it's my job to listen to the words of the leaders of all the realms."

She's right, but I don't like it. I've sworn to protect my sister, but every time I'm near her, my old ways come crawling back. Thoughts of power and all I could achieve with my sister's blood. I can't be as close to her as I want. I need Austin to do for me what I'm too weak to accomplish.

"When you see as I do that, he is one of the best, you'll know why I changed him. Plus, I'll train him to become part of the Supernatural

Task Force upon Wysteria's graduation from college."

Snow shakes her head. "That is too long, Chris. You will bring him in as soon as you can. I will meet with him, and then determine what is to be done with him. If I deem him worthy, I will sanction him and bring him in as a secret member of the Task Force. You will train him, but it must be kept a secret, even from your sister. No one can know until his official inauguration. Is that an acceptable compromise?"

I'm confused. "Wouldn't it be better if those from the other realms know he's part of the Task Force?"

She shakes her head. "I do not trust some of the leaders, especially not the elven king. It will be enough for now that I've sanctioned him."

I nod. "Yes, your majesty. I will bring him to you right away."

Snow smiles. "Thank you, Christopher." She returns to her desk and sits, picking up her pen. "See you soon."

OceanofPDF.com

SOBER KISS

WYSTERIA

"So, Romney? How'd you guys meet?" I ask Sage, tucking my biology study guide back in my bag and climbing off my bed.

She doesn't answer right away. She's playing coy, flipping through a fashion magazine. She's lying on her bed, fully dressed, except for her shoes, and seems more relaxed than I've seen her ever.

I haven't told Sage about what happened in the piano room yesterday. The experience is too private, too fantastic, and I'm not quite ready to share. Austin and I practiced our duet, and he invited me over for dinner. That's all I said. She seems to think tonight is *the night*. I've told her more than once that isn't going to happen.

After removing my sweats, I pull on my slightly baggy jeans and a white shirt and braid my hair. Lip gloss on my lips. Ballet flats on my feet.

When she sees I'm dressing, she goes over to her jewelry box, then hands me her heart necklace, the one she let me wear the other night and the one that she put a tracking spell on. "Just in case."

"Thanks, Sage." I place it over my head, letting it fall and dangle against my shirt.

"No biggie." She plops back on her bed and returns to her magazine.

"Romney?" I remind her, rubbing on some deodorant.

"Uh." She peels back one of the pages and rubs it on her wrist. From past experience, I know she's trying a sample perfume, and I smell it in the air. It's nice.

"He's in my biology class," Sage finally says. "He's my lab partner. We talk. He seems to like that I'm kind of bonkers. And I like his

pretty hair." Sage slams her magazine shut and faces me. "End of story."

"Did you get your first sober kiss?"

She smiles and is about to tell me, I'm sure of it, but there's a knock on the door.

I know it's Austin. Just the thought of him makes my heart pound in a beautiful melody as my veins sing in harmony. The butterflies in my belly are back and pirouetting eagerly.

Sage opens the door. "Hey."

"How's it going, Sage." He steps into the room.

I walk toward him like he's gravity, and I'm the moon. I can't resist his pull, and I don't want to. I move into his atmosphere and bask in his radiance. He smiles at me. And I'm whole.

When I'm close, he reaches out his hand, and I take it. My hand in his. Our hands together. It's right. I know it. My parents must somehow know it too. Austin is kind, generous, and giving.

"What are you making her for dinner?" Sage asks, her hands clasped behind her back.

He looks at her and then at me. "I was thinking about peanut butter and jelly?" He raises his eyebrows in question.

Sage bursts into laughter. "Sounds about right." Then her face turns serious. "As long as you don't eat her," she adds.

If she only knew, I think, but don't comment. Just smile and enjoy the easy tension between them.

"Actually, I've got Chicken Cordon Bleu in the oven, a green salad in the refrigerator, some French bread, and chocolate soufflé for dessert." Austin looks at me when he says the word dessert, and a lusty zing shoots along my lower belly.

"Who made it, your mommy?" Sage is teasing him, and under any other circumstance, it would be funny. But not with Austin.

I inhale. Glance at him carefully. His mother died when he was a

baby. He doesn't remember her, and he's always been touchy about it. A few times, when I was over at Austin's house, his dad would fling around words about his mother, words like trash and junkie. I think his dad did it to make Austin angry. It worked.

Sage and her big freaking mouth!

I squeeze his hand. "Sounds fantastic," I say, moving closer.

Austin walks me to the door.

"You two have fun." Sage waves. She's none the wiser about the pain she's inflicted.

"See ya, Roomie," I say, but notice her wince as I close the door.

I know that even though we haven't talked about it, what Doug did to her, and then that she stabbed him with a stake before watching Austin kill him has her filled with anxiety. And I want to make her feel better, do something to ease her pain. But I'm not sure what that something is. At least there's a beginning happening between her and Romney. Hopefully, with Romney, she can have many good firsts. A relationship. Maybe even love - if Romney deserves it.

I glance at Austin as we ride down the elevator.

He's watching me. "She's sad, but she's going to be okay," he says.

"Thanks," I say, leaning against him.

"I love feeling your emotions. You're so open, so good. Are you sure you want to love a vampire like me?"

I kiss him gently on the mouth. Suckle his bottom lip. "You're the only *guy* I ever wanted to get involved with, Austin Morrison."

OceanofPDF.com

WHO CHANGED YOU

WYSTERIA

I HELP Austin clean up after dinner. “Even though you’re a vampire, you still haven’t lost your cooking skills,” I say, placing the remainder of the salad in the fridge. “Everything was delicious.”

“Thanks. I cooked for myself a long time. A guy can only eat so many bologna sandwiches before he has to take matters into his own hands.”

I force a laugh. We are suddenly moving toward territory I want to avoid. Talk about his home life, his dad. I know he can’t help what happened. I know it isn’t his fault, but I can’t talk about his dad like he’s some average guy. He isn’t.

Austin closes the fridge and grabs my hands. “What are you thinking about now?” He brushes some hair off my face, stroking my cheek with his thumbs.

“My mom used to cook strange meals.”

He smiles, a little sad. “Like what?”

I think a second. “Marinated meatballs in crisp taco shells was a weird one. Sushi with spaghetti, lima beans, and tofu.”

Austin’s face twists in disgust.

“You want me to go on?”

“Nah, I get it.” He gently pulls me into the living room. “Want to watch some TV?”

“Sure.” We sit on his couch.

He locates the TV remote and turns it on. Football highlights fill the screen. “Football?”

“If you want.” I sit back against the cushions.

He faces me, touches my lips with his forefinger. “What do you

like to watch?"

I'm momentarily distracted by the way my body is suddenly humming at his nearness. He touches me, and I'm like a light, on and ready to shine. My eyes focus on his lips. I want to kiss him, touch him. So many ideas fill my head.

He taps my nose playfully. "Earth to Wysteria. Come in, Wysteria."

I blush. "Not much, really." I tuck my hands in my lap. "I prefer to read."

He scoots closer. "What do you read?"

His proximity is making me want to forget all about TV and reading. "*The Great Gatsby. Anne of Green Gables. Lord of the Flies. The Count of Monte Cristo,*" I say, trying to keep my words easy.

Austin trails his finger across my eyebrows. Under my eyes. Along my nose. Across my lips. My jaw. "What about movies?"

"I can't remember the last movie I saw."

He straightens like I've smacked him. "That's really sad. There are some good ones."

My mind traveled back further, to when my parents were alive. When life was sweet. "My mom and I watched *Pride and Prejudice* together. She called it a mother-daughter date. We went to the movie and ate Junior Mints. After, we got burgers and fries and talked for hours."

That night is one of my favorite memories with my mother.

Austin cups my face in his hands. "Sounds like an amazing time," he says softly. "Want to watch one of my favorites?"

"Sure." I am determined to focus on the here and now.

He kneels in front of the cabinet under the TV and pulls open a drawer. There are dozens of movies standing at attention side by side. "*The Matrix or Black Panther*?" he asks, holding up the movie cases.

It is fun watching him. I push myself to the edge of the couch. "Either sounds good."

“If you want pure entertainment, there’s *Underworld or* - ” as he says the name of the movie, he flashes the case. “*Star Trek* is actually pretty good.”

I rest my elbows on my knees and my face in my hands, unable to help but smile. “Let’s watch *Black Panther*,” I say.

“You read my mind.” He grabs the movie and puts it in the DVD player. Then presses something, and the movie previews appear on the screen.

“You mind if I use your bathroom?”

“Go ahead. I even cleaned it because I knew you were coming.” He walks over and flicks on the light.

I can’t help but notice the closed doors to the left of the bathroom, and I wonder what’s behind them. Austin follows my eyes, and I know he knows what I’m thinking.

“You want to see the rest of my apartment?” He moves to the door on the left and opens it. There is a small, brown upright piano on the far wall, a window directly across from the entrance, and a closet to the left. Sheet music, music stands, and boxes of old music books are scattered all over the floor. “Piano room,” he says, nonchalant.

“I love it,” I say, and mean it. “You’re so lucky. I miss having a piano so close by. You can roll out of bed and practice, play until your heart is content.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I guess that’s pretty cool.” Then he closes the door and moves on to the door at the end of the small hall and opens it. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it’s just a standard room.

“Spare bedroom,” he says.

I peer in, looking around more closely than I need to. I don’t know why.

Austin’s features are furrowed. “What were you expecting? A vampire lair? A casket?” He nudges into my shoulder. “Not all of us are like Doug,” he adds softly.

“Oh, I know. I guess I was just expecting something that proves you’re a womanizing vampire?”

He crosses his arms. “Look, regarding those rumors, I know what people say about me. And to some degree, I guess I deserve it. I’ve dated. A lot, especially before I became a vampire. But I treat every woman with respect. I’ve never hurt anyone. At least not on purpose.” His face is soft, his eyes sincere.

“I believe you. I’m sorry, Austin.” I hug him tightly. The things people say about him, what Sage told me about him, they are rumors. Nothing more. College kids making stuff up. I know the real Austin. He’s shown me over and over again the last several weeks what kind of man he is.

He hugs me back. Tilts my head so I can see his face. Kisses me. His lips are gentle, filled with care.

“Mmm, you are a great kisser,” I whisper against his lips.

He smirks, his lips still on mine. “And you’re such an authority.”

“Hey, I have good taste.” My fingers have found their way under his t-shirt, stroking the tight skin over his ripped abs. My pinky fingers keep brushing against the band of his jeans. Goosebumps constrict his skin, and he breathes out slowly. “You smell good, too,” I say.

“Man smell or vampire smell?” he asks and shrugs.

“I don’t know, but I love it.” I stand on my tiptoes and kiss his chin, knowing full well I probably smell like garlic. I had more than one piece of garlic bread.

Austin smiles and kisses the top of my head. “Should we watch our movie?”

“Course. Except - ” I pause and look up at him. I want so much more. A movie doesn’t sound like the best usage of our time.

“What?” His eyes become hooded. He’s read my emotions and knows what I really want.

“Do you have any Junior Mints?” I ask, trying to throw him off.

Besides, they really are my favorite candy.

“If you’re sure that’s what you want.” He winks. Walks into the kitchen and opens a cupboard. I follow and see there is a box of the candy resting in plain view. He eyes me. “Do I have Junior Mints?” He shakes his head and snorts.

“Impressive.” The vampire has skills.

We return to the couch, and he puts an arm around my shoulders. I rest my head against his, comfortable. We fit. The movie is in full swing, and half of the Junior Mints are gone, but I’m not really focused on the film. I can’t stop thinking about Austin. I still don’t know much about what his life was like while I was gone.

He laughs suddenly, and I jump, surprised by the noise and his movement.

“Did I scare you?” he asks.

I nod sheepishly, sitting up. “Sorry, I was just thinking. Distracted.”

“Want to tell me about it?” He pauses the movie, his lips twitching slightly.

“How did you become a vampire? Why? Who changed you?” I ask the questions in quick succession.

He pulls back, turning so he’s facing me fully. “These questions are what’s on your mind?” He isn’t prepared. I can tell by his reaction.

“Yeah.” I pop a candy in my mouth, enjoying the soft mint and chocolate flavor.

“I thought the anxiety I felt from you had to do with the movie.” He turns, lifting a knee onto the couch between us.

“Nope. My mind has been on you. Will you tell me?” I rest my head against the back of the couch. “Or is it too personal?”

“I mean, I’ve never told anyone about what happened.” He looks slightly nervous and glances at something beyond me, out the window.

“If you’d rather not, I totally understand,” I say, even though I’m desperate to hear what happened.

“It was a little over a year ago. During the summer, I work on a ranch. On the day I nearly died, I was helping a cow get unstuck from a barbed-wire fence. I was so focused on her that I didn’t hear the bull until it was too late.” He lifts his shirt and points to the spot between his ribs. “It got me with one of its horns right here.”

I touch the place, feeling his warm skin, thankful beyond words that’s he’s alive. That he was saved, whether it was approved or not. “And then a vampire found you?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “It was Christopher who found me,” he says.

“What?” I’m shocked even though I shouldn’t be. My brother seemed to make his way to Gothel Springs often, even when I wasn’t around.

“He knew you and I were friends. I was about dead. There was no time to follow the law and get the proper paperwork in order, so he did it. Bit me. Then took me somewhere.” Austin lowers his voice. “He never told me where I was, but I think it was Sharra. He had a little house there and took care of me until I was fully healed. Then showed me what to do. Trained me on how to be a decent and upstanding vampire. When he felt I was ready, he brought me home. I was gone for three weeks and had to lie to my uncle and cousin about my whereabouts.” He runs a hand over his face, putting his shirt down.

“I’m so glad Christopher saved you. If you weren’t alive when I came back, I - ” Just thinking about him not being here makes me want to cry. “I owe my brother big time.”

“Yeah, that’s how I feel too,” Austin says, in more ways than one. He doesn’t elaborate.

I about to ask him to elaborate, but there’s a noise outside the front door.

We both freeze.

Austin stands, putting a finger to his lips. He goes over to the

window beside the door and peers out. “No one is there.” He opens the door.

There’s a small box on the ground.

“What is it?” I ask, jumping up but feeling apprehensive.

Austin holds me at arm’s length. “It has your name on it.” He looks out into the opaque night, tilting his head as though he’s listening for whoever left the package. Then he cautiously picks up the box.

“Why would they leave something for me here.” Nervous jitters and not the good kind filter along my spine.

“I don’t know.” He puts an ear to it. Smells it and shakes it. Something smacks around against the sides. “I can’t tell what’s in there,” he says, a question on his face.

“Should I open it?” I reach out to take it from him.

“Sure, just be careful.”

As he watches, I rip off the tape and pull back the lid.

“What is it?” he asks, leaning over so he can see, but I turn away.

It’s difficult to register what I’m looking at and why. I blink several times until I realize tears are streaming down my cheeks. “I - it’s - ”

“Wysteria?” He comes around and takes the little box, looking inside. “Who would do this?”

There’s a worry in his voice, but I can’t respond. I can’t do anything but stare. All of the happiness of a moment ago smashes to pieces, and I sink to the floor.

Austin is there, kneeling beside me. The deep timbre of his voice cuts through, but I can’t understand what he’s saying. Finally, he lifts me into his arms and carries me into the spare bedroom. Lays me down and sits beside me, one of his hands stroking my hair. It feels nice, but I’m struggling to breathe.

Inside the box was a photo of my mom and dad lying on the floor in their own blood. Austin’s dad must’ve taken the picture after he killed them, but why? My mind is back at that moment when I

discovered my dead parents' bodies. I wonder how I ever thought I could get over such a gruesome scene. The smell of death, the sound of silence, except for my screams. And then I run away from them. Leave the house to escape what I've seen. As I'm running, someone steps out in front of me. He's tall, feels like a giant. He holds me with one hand while a bag is thrown over my head. Then there's pressure. I think someone performs a spell, and it's like I'm underwater. Drowning.

When I wake, I'm in Redyrin's realm, and all recollections of my life before are washed away.

That's why seeing the photo distresses me so profoundly. I'm still mourning the loss of my family, and someone knows that.

"Redyrin did this," I say, knowing it's true. "She came through before the realm was sealed off. She's here, and she wants me back."

"I think you're right," Austin says. "But I'll be damned if I let her have you." He kisses my forehead. "We'll figure out how to stop her together."

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

EVAN'S COLOGNE

AUSTIN

FOR THE DEAD, the hard part is over. Not so for the living. The difficulty is only just beginning. To rise each day with a gnawing ache while knowing it's important to mourn and try to move on.

The photo of Wysteria's mom and dad lying in their blood sickens me. I can't imagine how finding them like that must've been for her. My dad's death was harsh, and I could barely stand him.

When Wysteria falls into a fitful sleep, I call Christopher and tell him what's going on. He's relieved to know I'm with his sister and that she's okay. I can hear it in his voice, but there's more.

"I'm coming to town. Snow White wants to meet." Christopher's words are clipped, unemotional.

"It's about Doug," I say, knowing the time has come to pay for my sins.

He sighs. "That and you're unsanctioned. It needs to be addressed. We'll discuss it when I get there. I don't want to say more over the phone."

"When will I see you?" Before he answers, someone is at my door, unlocking it. I immediately smell Evan's cologne and the stench of his cigarettes. "I have to go." I hang up and wait for my cousin to enter.

"Austin. Bro. You decent?" Evan is focused on his phone.

I crack my knuckles and take a deep breath, blowing it out loudly as an answer.

Surprised, Evan looks up, only mild guilt on his face. "Hey," he says, eyeing me sharply.

"How did you get in? The door was locked," I say, crossing my arms.

He holds up a key. “Dude, I made myself a spare.” Evan gives me a once over. “Nice outfit. Bet Pudgy Wu— uh, Wysteria loves it.” He laughs, obnoxious, heading over to the kitchen, opens the fridge, removes a beer, and cracks it open. “I know she’s here.” He glances toward the closed door of the spare bedroom. “If you’re done with her, I’m going to take a turn.” His gaze turns down the hall toward my bedroom. “Which room is she in? You promised the last time she was over that I could have some fun with her.”

My mind buzzes with a seething anger as I put myself between my cousin and Wysteria. “What? Are you spying on me now?” I ask, ready to fight if he doesn’t give me an answer I like.

“Dude, chill. I was home when you brought her over. The walls aren’t that thick.” He tries to push past me, but I block him, holding his arm so he can’t move.

“Get out. Wys is sleeping,” I hiss through clenched teeth.

“Not for long,” he says, shoving past me, tucking his phone in his pocket.

I grab him by the arm, using more strength than I should. But what the hell, my vampirism is going to be out soon anyway. “I said no, Evan.”

He looks down at my hand, then up at me. His eyes are hard. “What do you care? She isn’t good enough for you, and you know it. You have royal elven blood. She’s nothing but a stupid commoner. Why are you protecting her? Let’s have some fun—”

“Evan, I swear to all the Gods, if you finish that sentence, I’ll make you wish you hadn’t.” Our little chat the other night meant nothing to him.

Evan snorts. Shoves me. “You saying you’d choose her over me? Over family?” His features contort like he can’t believe it, and he’s pissed.

But I’m beyond caring what he thinks. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Yes.” I nod once. At the same time, I drag him toward the

door. As I go, I notice the box with the photo in it on the floor. “Did you do this?” Evan can be cruel. I pick up the box, which is still holding the picture, and shove it in his face.

“Wow, that’s sad.” He shakes his head in mock sympathy. He doesn’t look sad at all.

“Tell me the truth!”

“No, man.” Evan chuckles. “But maybe I should have. When her parents were alive, they drove a wedge between my dad and yours. She’s doing the same to you and me.” He shakes his head, disgusted. “I don’t get you. You know your ancestry. Yet you fawn over Wysteria like she’s the queen, and you’re nothing but the court jester.” He pulls from my grasp, and I let him.

“I don’t care about that,” I say, snapping my teeth together. Then I think of something. “The bigger question is, why do *you* care? Our fathers were banished. Our mothers are human. No one in the elven realm knows we exist.”

Evan’s eyes narrow craftily. “Maybe things have changed. Maybe the king actually does know about us.” He removes the photo from the box before flinging the cardboard onto the couch. “Think about that as you’re screwing the little nobody piece of ass.” He shoves the picture into my chest. Walks to the door. “Don’t make me regret my friendship, or there will be consequences.” He yanks on the knob, flinging the door open, then slams it shut once he’s outside my apartment.

I heave a sigh of relief after locking the door. Evan’s words echo in my mind. He threatened me, but he’s done that so many times before I’ve lost count. It might be time to add a deadbolt.

Picking up the picture, I scrutinize it, searching for what, I don’t know. I do notice my dad’s favorite baseball hat is on the floor beside Wysteria’s dad. At least I think it’s his. He went over to Wysteria’s house a lot. My dad and Wysteria's parents were friends. It seems odd the hat is on the floor, leaning on its side, so it’s easy to read the

writing: Gothel Police Department. Not only am I a vampire, but I possess a little of the elves' eternal sight. And I know Wysteria is telling the truth about my father. He really did murder them. But why?

I flip over the photo. There are words written on the back. Three handwritten words, to be exact. In all caps, someone wrote: YOU'RE NEXT WYSTERIA.

Devastated, I sit on the couch, trying to figure out what to do next —no point involving the police. Without a doubt, this isn't a human matter, but a supernatural one. The Supernatural Task Force should be involved. I lean back and suck in a deep breath. It hasn't been that long since Wys came back into my life, but I know without a doubt that I'll choose Wysteria over my family every time.

OceanofPDF.com

WE'RE RELATED

WYSTERIA

WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, there's light shining through the blinds. "Austin?" I call out. My throat is raw, and my eyes burn, probably from crying. I'm not surprised by my reaction. Even though I see their dead bodies in my mind almost daily, last night, it was like I was eleven again, and I just found them dead. An ache fills my heart. Followed by hope. Abernathy awakened the power within me to summon the dead. So, while they no longer exist in this realm, they are still out there. All isn't lost, I think, working to convince myself that talking to ghosts is the same as having my parents alive and around. It doesn't work.

I throw off the blanket and stand. I'm still in Austin's spare bedroom, fully dressed, except for my shoes. Austin must've removed them for me, and I'm grateful. Without a doubt, I love him. If he'll have me, I want to be with him forever. It doesn't matter whether I'm meant to be the queen of the elven realm or something else. Austin is a part of me, and I can feel our lives are infinitely intertwined.

As I slide on my shoes, I take a deep breath. "Leva," I call out, even though she isn't here. She's not even in this realm but has returned to Sharra. If only there were a way I could call her and tell her how I feel. I think about Snow White. We're related. At least, according to Abernathy. My brother knows her. Maybe I could ask him. I grab my phone off the bedside table and think about calling him. Before I do, I notice several texts.

Sage texted me twice. *Staying the night with Romney. Don't worry.* And, *Are you and Austin still together? Still the big V? Let me know you're all right.*

"That girl has a one-track mind." I shake my head and move on.

There's also a text from Austin. *Had an emergency. See you later. Lock the door when you leave. We need to talk!*

My pulse quickens. What's the emergency? Does he know who delivered that picture and why? What does he want to talk about? I hope he's safe. I quickly text Sage. *I'm okay.* I debate whether to comment on my virgin status but decide I might as well, or she'll keep asking. *Yep, still the big V*. I don't go into details.

The clock on the wall says it's eight fifty-five. My English class starts in five minutes. I'm not going to make it. And since I have Austin's place to myself for the next hour at least, I decide to take a look around, a.k.a. snoop a little and see what the man I love keeps around his place.

After freshening up in the bathroom, I make myself toast and wander as I eat. On the desk in his room is a computer. The screensaver is an image of scrolling musical notes—a piano rendition of *Titanium*. I can hear the melody in my head as it crosses the screen. His window has blue curtains. They're open, and I peer outside. In the distance is Gothel University. What few trees there are have lost all of their leaves. The grass is yellow, and the wind is blowing. A giant tumbleweed bounces across the park near the complex and gets stuck on the slide.

My stomach grumbles, and I head toward the kitchen, still hungry. Open the fridge. There are strawberries in a blue ceramic bowl. Next to it is a smaller bowl of what looks like chocolate sauce. Underneath is the chocolate soufflé.

Guilt blooms in my chest. We didn't get to eat dessert.

"You're such an idiot." I grab a strawberry and pop it in my mouth. It is delicious. I get a bottle of water and open it. Chug half of it down. I wonder how Austin can afford a three-bedroom apartment on his own?

The bedroom which holds his upright piano is closed, but I can't resist going in. I want to play, lose myself in the music for a little

while. The room smells like old paper and Austin. A heady combination. I sit at the bench and run through a few exercises. Limbering up my fingers. While playing, I allow my mind to wander.

I think about Sage. Abernathy and all he told me, including conversing with the dead. As I play, I close my eyes and imagine my mom and dad. The smell of them, the way my mom would smile, and my dad would wink. I think about our training sessions and all they taught me about supernaturals and how to fight. Our family dinners and movie nights. I think about their love for each other and me. Something inside me springs to life with each memory, connects with my indigo magic, and the two churns together.

There's a sudden, quick breeze, and I open my eyes. Someone is in here. I can feel their presence. Slowly, I turn around and suck in a breath. The ghosts of my mom and dad stand near the doorway.

"It worked." I'm in a bit of shock.

The two of them hold hands. They are smiling and seem content. Happy even.

"Wysteria," my mom says as they both come forward.

My heart is racing, and my hands are sweaty. "Hi," I say, not quite ready to believe I see them.

"We've missed you," Dad says, reaching out like he wants to hug me, but his hand goes right through me. A look of dismay presses down his features. "I know I'm dead, but I should still be able to hug my sweet Freckles." It was his nickname for me back when I was six or seven.

"It's okay, Dad." My voice quivers in conjunction with my body.

Mom claps her hands together. "It's been too long."

It hits me then that this is real. They aren't hallucinations or a figment of my imagination, but they can talk to me just as I can to them. "I'm sorry," I say. It's the first thing that comes to mind.

"Nonsense," Dad says.

“What for?” Mom asks.

“If I hadn’t snuck out. If I’d been there that night, then maybe you wouldn’t be dead.” My bottom lip trembles as I speak. My guilt bubbles over.

“That isn’t true. If you’d have been there, you might be dead too.” Mom wipes tears from her eyes.

Did they know I was taken to another realm? “I’m in love,” I blurt and then cover my mouth with both hands. I hadn’t meant to tell them that. There are other, more pertinent topics to discuss.

“How wonderful,” Mom says, her face softening into a lovely smile.

“Who is this person?” Dad asks, crossing his arms.

“Austin Morrison. Do you remember him?” I try to keep it light even though my feelings for him are anything but.

“The neighbor boy. You always did have a thing for him.” Mom reaches out like she wants to touch me but pulls back at the last second.

“It went away when I was in the other realm, but as soon as I returned and saw him again, the feelings came back too.” I sit back on the piano bench.

Dad snaps his fingers, and two chairs appear out of nowhere. My parents sit.

“What’s going on with him?” he asks, and it feels like an interrogation.

“So, then you haven’t seen what’s been happening since…” I can’t finish the sentence.

Mom looks sad. “No. The After Life is like another realm. We try to make the most of it, but we only hear little things here and there when someone new enters.” She looks at my Dad, and he squeezes her hand. “We think about you every day, though.”

I blink back tears, working to stay strong. “I think about you too.”

I don't add that it's usually of them dead or the guilt I feel over not being there when they died.

"Tell us about Austin," Mom says.

I'm grateful for the distraction. "He's grown so much. He's a vampire now, but a good—"

"He's a vampire," my Dad interrupts.

"Yes." I glance down at my hands. "It isn't his fault. He nearly died, and Christopher, my brother, changed him."

Mom inhales at the name. "You've met my Chris? How is that possible? I thought he was dead. He went out to get groceries and never came back." She covers her mouth with both hands as she cries.

Dad rubs her back. "It's okay."

"He became a vampire," I say simply.

"How?" Mom sits on the edge of her chair, seemingly desperate for news on her first child. "I wasn't a good mother to him," she says, shaking her head.

I don't know the whole story, but I tell them what I do know. That he helped save the world. I leave out the part where he also tried to destroy it. He's changed too.

"Vampires!" Dad says the word like it's venomous.

"I know, Dad. And some are as you and mom taught me. But Christopher and Austin aren't. Especially Austin. He's wonderful, in fact. When I was rescued from Redyrin and the other realm where I was held prisoner, he found me and got me help. And he's been around ever since." I pause and think about all Austin's done for me. "I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for him." An image of Doug fills my mind, and I shudder.

"I don't trust them," Dad says. Mom puts a hand on his arm, and he leans back in his chair. "But, I'm glad he's helped you so much and that you've found love."

"Thanks, Dad."

“You were in another realm?” That fact seems to hit my mom suddenly.

I tell them how I was taken soon after discovering their bodies and kept a prisoner there for seven years. Then I tell them about Leva and all she did to get me out of there and return me to the human realm.

“My goodness,” Mom says. “I’m so sorry we weren’t there to help you.”

“It’s okay.” I smile. “I’m glad you’re here now.”

“Me too, but how is it possible?” Dad asks.

My heart sinks a little. I’d hoped they could give me that answer. “I’m the fountain of youth,” I say.

They look at each other and nod.

“We know,” Dad says.

“But how do you tell a child such things?” Mom asks though it’s obvious she doesn’t want an answer.

“There’s more,” I say.

“Go on,” Mom encourages.

“When I spoke with the dragon, Abernathy, he said our blood comes from elven and unicorn royalty?” I ask it like a question because even though I am able to summon them, I’m still having a hard time believing it.

Mom and Dad are unconvinced. This is news to them. I can see it on their faces. So, I go on. “Dad, your ancestors are descendants of Devoran, the original elven king, which means we’re also related to Snow White.” I cross one leg over the other and rest my upper body on my knee. For some reason, I want to get small. Probably because it feels so weird to be telling them something they didn’t know already.

Dad speaks first. “I mean, I guess it’s possible. I never knew my parents, and your mother’s never shared anything that had to do with family history.”

“Dad’s right.” She shakes her head in astonishment. “But, you

spoke with Abernathy?"

"Yes," I say, sitting up. "He unlocked the power within me to summon you."

"I mean, if the dragon says it's true, it must be." There's a wonder in her voice. "But I'm having a hard time believing it," Mom adds.

"Not only that, but Abernathy said the elf on the throne took it by deceit and that his family doesn't belong there and never did." Now that I'm sharing, I can't seem to stop. It feels good to be talking to them.

"Well, I'll be damned," Dad says, slapping his ghostly knee.

"What?" I ask, thinking that's a weird response.

"Austin's father and uncle are the elven king's banished brothers. Austin's dad told us one night after a few too many the truth about why he was in the human realm." He laughs. "Turns out the murdering bastard is no more royal than a gnat."

"Wait a second. Austin's dad and uncle?" My pulse picks up speed again. Does Austin know?

"Just wait until he hears about this," Mom says.

"Austin's dad is dead. Isn't he in the After Life with you?" I'm unsure how that all works.

"He's dead?" My mom plays nervously with her hair. "We didn't know."

"Why do you think Austin's dad killed you?" I hope the answers will help me figure out what to do next.

"We have our theories," Mom utters.

"Yes, we believe it had to do with you and that you're the fountain of youth." Dad glances at my Mom. "But if what you've told us is true, then there could be more than one reason. It may also be because he knew of our ancestry and wanted us out of the way."

My heart beats so loudly it beats in my ears. A panic attack is coming on, and I force myself to breathe in and out. I can't lose it in

front of my parents. I stand and turn away, focusing on the landscape beyond the window. Another tumbleweed is bouncing along the ground like a rubber ball. It's then I hear the wind whistling through the panes. I hadn't noticed before. "His uncle doesn't seem like a nice man," I finally admit.

"No, he isn't. He never was. You need to be prepared for him to try coming after you again," Dad declares.

"It wasn't him that took me the first time. It was Redyrin. Her desires for me were selfish. She used me to keep her looking young." I face them again, my hands at my sides.

"Perhaps there was more to it than that. What is the name of the realm?" Mom stands and comes closer. So close that if she weren't a ghost, I would be able to feel the warmth of her skin and smell the mellow hints of her perfume. She gives me a sad smile.

"I don't know the name. She never told me." I don't add that I think she's here in the human realm. No need to worry them.

Dad looks behind him as though he can see something I can't. "We have to go, but summon us again soon." He stands behind my mom, resting his hands on her shoulders. "I love you, Wysteria."

"Yes," Mom says, reaching out and trying to take my hand. I do the same, but it's useless. "I love you so much."

I don't want them to go, but I guess I didn't expect them to be able to stay with me like this forever. Even as I think such things, they begin to fade. "I love you too," I say, and they're gone.

In their absence, the throbbing in my chest intensifies, and the tears pressing against my eyes suddenly fall. I turn in a circle, looking for a tissue box. I open the closet, even though there's no reason a tissue would be inside. It's stuffed to overflowing with odd things, but no tissues. Still, the sheer magnitude of stuff distracts me from my sadness.

There are crates of old books and yellowing sheet music. Worn clothes and more. One is piled to the top with sealed envelopes.

That's different. I lift the crate out of the closet and pick up one of the letters. When I see who they're addressed to, my breath hitches in my throat.

It has my name on it without an address. I pull out a few from a stack of dozens. They are all from Austin and addressed to me.

While I was gone, he wrote letters to me. An eager excitement rocks my body to its core. I have to know what they say.

I pick up the crate, thinking I'll carry it and all of the letters back to my dorm. But what if Austin sees me? The container is too conspicuous. I search frantically for a bag, something. Anything. I run into the kitchen and throw open cupboards. I spot bowls, plates, cups, wine glasses. Cereal, boxes of macaroni and cheese. Bread, peanut butter, and jelly. But no bags. Finally, I spot a wadded-up grocery sack on the floor near the trash can.

"Yes!" I cheer.

I shove all the letters inside, grab my phone, and head for the door. I don't have a ride, but it's okay. I can walk.

After locking the apartment door like Austin asked, I realize too late just how cold it is, and I don't have a jacket. The wind whips around my hair, biting against my skin. Small flecks of snow swirl around like a frozen tornado.

At that moment, I consider what I've done. When Austin returns home, he'll discover the empty crate I hastily stuffed back in the closet. What will he think of me for stealing his stuff?

"I'm an idiot," I say, slamming my head against his door, but it's too late. Part of me is glad because I want to read what he wrote.

OceanofPDF.com

PAIR OF SCISSORS

WYSTERIA

WHEN I GET inside the room, I pause, still debating what to do. Should I read the letters now? "Yes." I plop onto my bed and dump them all out. Then organize them into neat little rows. It's then I notice Austin wrote the date on the envelope flap, and I rearrange them according to date. My hands tremble as I touch them. If I open these, there will be no going back. Austin will know I've read them, even if I were to somehow sneak them back into his apartment. But if I come clean now, maybe he'd give them to me. Let me read them anyway. I should've asked him instead of stealing them. I feel terrible invading his privacy like this and stealing from him.

I'm a rotten, no-good thief.

I'm about to pack them all up when I notice one with a single heart drawn in black pen on the front.

A heart.

My heart speeds up and beats against my chest. I have to read it.

Just this one. Then I'll take them back. I cut off one of the short sides of the envelope with a pair of scissors, blow inside, and carefully slide the three-ring binder paper out. I unfold it and read:

Dear Wysteria,

I turned fourteen today. Didn't do much. Hung out with Evan. We saw a movie. Ate. Listened to music.

I kept thinking about you. I never stop.

When we went to the movies, I ordered Junior Mints because those are your favorite. When we ate lunch, I ordered a cheeseburger instead of a chicken sandwich because I know that's what you would've ordered. Evan asked what my problem was, but I ignored him.

You were everywhere today. I could swear I saw you six different times. Your long hair tucked behind your ears. But then the girl would turn around, and it wasn't you.

I kept looking. I'll keep looking. I won't ever stop.

I wish it were you instead of Evan I hung with today. We probably would've done the same thing, but it would've been a lot more fun because it would've been with you.

Remember the cake you made for my eleventh birthday? It was chocolate with chocolate icing. You put sprinkles on it and eleven candles. At the time, I acted kind of embarrassed, like I didn't like it. But I want you to know it meant a lot to me. It still does. Every birthday since, I've thought about your cake. Your kindness. The way your eyes light up when you're excited about something. You. I'm always thinking about you.

Since you've been gone, it's a struggle to get out of bed, do what I have to, because you aren't here. My life was so much better when you were in it.

This may sound weird, but I think I love you. And not like best friend love. Even though I feel that way about you too, but my heart hasn't been the same since you left.

I miss you.

Wherever you are, I hope you're okay.

Austin

I read it once. Then again. And a third time. Studying each word. Each sentence. He thought he loved me at fourteen. I press the paper to my nose and inhale. It may be my imagination, but I swear I can smell his cologne on the paper.

I refold the letter, tuck it back into the envelope, and then set it on top of the pile for that year. I stare at the letters. All of them are written by the man I love. I can't give them back. Not yet. I have to read each and every letter. Each and every word, sentence, and paragraph.

I pick up the one with the most recent date stamped on it. Cut the edge open like I did the first one and pull out the paper. It's dated a year ago. Before I read, I smell the paper. It smells like Austin.

Dear Wysteria,

This will be my final letter. Something's happened. I'm a vampire now. In order to live, I have to drink blood. At first, the prospect was daunting. Then disgusting. Now, though, it isn't bad. I have no choice, and so I make the most of it. The vampire who turned me has been a big help, teaching me how to adapt to my new life. Others aren't so lucky. I see on the news how the Supernatural Task Force hunts down and destroys entire vampire nests. Each time I thankful, Christopher taught me how to drink without killing and tempering my vampire needs. Still, there's a chance the Supernatural Task Force will destroy me anyway. He turned me without getting it sanctioned. Whenever there's a knock at my door, I wonder if this time, they've come for me.

Whatever happens to me, I hope you're safe and happy and that you're studying to become a doctor, like you always wanted to be.

Wysteria. Where are you?

Sometimes I find myself thinking about what you must look like. How tall you are. Whether your hair is still long and if you're eyes are still so expressive.

I'm sure you're beautiful. You always were.

Please know I never stopped thinking about you. I never stopped caring. And I hope with all of my heart that you are living life to its fullest. That you are happy. That's all I want for you.

Always,

Austin

Tears drip onto the page. My heart is soaked with sadness for many reasons because life isn't fair sometimes. I wipe my eyes and steel myself. We each went through hard things, but we made it back to each other. I should be happy, ecstatic. All I feel is guilt. As I ponder my predicament, the door opens, and Sage stumbles in. Her

eyes are glazed.

A strange smile coats her lips. “Hey, Wys. Wysteria. Wys. Bud. How are you?” She falls onto her bed and stares at the ceiling.

I do my best to hide the letters, but there’s a lot. When they are tucked under my covers, I walk over. “Hey, Sage. How was your night with Romney?”

She rolls onto her side. “So good. So, so good. He’s a rock star in bed. Sweet. Kind. Plus, he took me to dinner. We partied, just the two of us.” Her smile gets bigger.

She’s higher than a kite. On what, I don’t know. “What did you take?” I ask, sitting next to her, taking her hand.

Sage looks at me. “Aww, Wysteria. Don’t look so worried. Drugs are recreational. They’re fun.” She closes her eyes, inhales slowly. “I mean, look at me. Do I look like I’m having a bad time?”

Before I can say anything, she answers herself, “No. I feel great.” She lifts her hand and waves it slowly, mesmerized by the movement.

I try to calm down. Take deep breaths. She’s right. She doesn’t seem sad or in pain. “I thought Romney liked to party sober?” I know it’s her business, and I’m trying to be supportive, but all I feel is angry.

“He does.” She leans on one arm. Looks at me and blinks. “He was. I mean, he has his one year chip, but I blew it.” Tears fill her eyes. “He fell back into old habits because of me.” She smacks her forehead several times until I grab her arm. “I’m a bad person. A failure,” she says mournfully.

“No, Sage. You’re just hurting. Maybe you should talk to someone.” I want to suggest her mom or her dad, but I know that will be a bad idea.

“I’m talking to you.” She sits up and hugs me.

I hug her back, wishing I could say or do something to make her stop. “Yes, and I’m always here for you, but I don’t know if I’m enough. What about your therapist?”

She falls back onto the bed. “I will,” she says and rolls onto her side. “But first, I’m going to get some rest.”

I remove her shoes. Then cover her with a blanket. “Will you be okay?”

“Yes, Wys. I just need to sleep.” She snuggles with the blanket.

I shove the letters into my backpack and head for the door. It squeaks slightly.

“Wysteria?”

I turn back, looking at her, worried. “Yes?”

“You’re a really good friend.” She smiles. Her eyes are still closed.

“Thanks, Sage. So are you.”

OceanofPDF.com

GOLDEN LETTERS

AUSTIN

CHRISTOPHER LEADS me through the grand castle that Snow White calls home when she isn't working in the human realm. With my vampire hearing, I listen to students taking classes on the lower floors. This place was once nothing more than a vampire residence. Now, it's so much more. Host to nearly one hundred supernatural students and teachers, the castle is also the Seven Magics Academy. When I was young, around twelve, I heard about the place. Since I have elven blood in my veins, I hoped to go. My dad wouldn't allow it. It was the same with Wysteria's parents. They were probably worried about what someone would do with the fountain of youth. For me, it was because my dad was too arrogant. He thought we should be treated like royalty instead of banished and treated as nothing more than human.

I pass an office with the door closed. There's an inky black sign with the words Headmistress carved out in golden letters.

We don't stop there but continue until we reach another closed door. This time it merely says, Snow White. I'm surprised. Since she's the queen of the vampires and ruler over all supernaturals, I expected more grandeur.

Christopher glances at me. His eyes say something I don't understand. Then he knocks.

"Enter," a strong female voice responds.

Christopher blows out a breath as he holds open the door for me.

I enter nervously. My legs are shaky. I've seen the vampire queen on several occasions on TV, but this is the first time in real life. They say never meet your heroes. Snow's always been one of mine. But what if she hates me? What if she decides I should no longer be alive?

All sorts of reservations cross my mind. As soon as Snow smiles,

they are all dashed to pieces.

“Hello.” Snow moves around the desk, her full-length dress swishing gently with every step. “You must be Austin.” She holds out her hand.

I take it, shaking softly, not wanting her to feel I’m threatening.

She looks at our hands together and squeezes lightly. I respond in kind. “Better,” she says, releasing me. “Now, why don’t you have a seat and tell me about yourself.” She indicates a chair before moving back around to her side of the enormous desk.

“Uh,” I say, glancing sideways at Christopher. She hasn’t acknowledged him, and I’m curious about why.

She speaks before I can say anything. “Christopher, thank you for bringing Austin. Have a seat.” She smiles at him and then me.

A zing of love shoots through my body. I wonder if that’s how everyone feels around her. It isn’t that I’m in love with her, but I do feel love, and like I would do anything she asks of me. Perhaps that’s her compulsion? I study her.

“Of course,” he says, sliding into the chair beside me. “Austin is one of the best. I think as soon as you hear from him yourself, you’ll agree.”

“Great.” She rests her hands on the table, clasping them together. “You are of elvish descent as well as human. I can smell that, though your vampire scent is the strongest.”

I nod. “Yes. My father was an elf, and mom was human. Both are dead. And I guess I should be as well.” I glance at Christopher. “I’m grateful he was around and changed me.”

“Yes, it was convenient that he was there when you needed him most.” The way she says it, I get the feeling she believes there might be more to the story.

“Even after Wysteria went missing, I made it a point to return to Gothel Springs regularly. I knew about Austin, of course, since Wys

spent a lot of time with him. When I smelled his blood on the breeze, I didn't hesitate. He was nearly dead when I found him. But before that moment, I had no intention of changing him. Of that, you can be sure." Christopher sounds sincere. I believe him, but it's essential the queen does. Because she has experience with Christopher, and he betrayed her. Despite what Christopher says, Snow holds my fate in her hands.

She doesn't respond right away as though she's rolling around what he said on her tongue—tasting it for truth. Finally, she nods. "I believe you, Christopher. Thank you for setting my mind at ease. Now, you are excused." Her words are soft but filled with resolve. There is no room for discussion.

"If that is your wish." Christopher clamps his teeth together. I hear them. Then he walks out.

When it's just her and I, she comes around to my side of the table and sits. "Now, tell me about yourself."

At her nearness, my veins seem to quake. She is a vampire and a queen. It's like my very essence knows she is my ruler. "What do you want to know?"

"Since you've asked, let's start at the end. What have you done with your vampire abilities to make the human realm a better place?"

Wow, that's a tough question, but I think I know what she wants to hear. "I recently killed someone who was about to hurt my friend. If I hadn't stopped him, he would've kept trying too." I swallow, knowing if she wanted to, she could tear my head off.

"Your friend is Wysteria?" She tilts her head to the side.

"That's right. From a young age, I knew she was different. But it wasn't until Christopher told me that I found out she's the fountain of youth." I shake my head. "I don't care about that," I say. But a memory of her blood in my mouth and the way it makes me feel comes to the surface. My fangs press against my mouth. "Her blood," I begin and clear my throat. "It's amazing."

“You drank from her?” She seems surprised and eyes me sharply. “I believed she was unable to receive any sort of injury.”

“Me too. I mean, she never got hurt as a kid, but then no one ever tried to bite her before me.” I’m embarrassed and can’t help the physical reaction I have. I also sense that Snow isn’t angry. Nor does her emotions say she wants to kill me, and I’m relieved. “Wysteria, let me drink from her,” I add, just in case she isn’t sure. “I’m not the kind of a person to force myself on others, despite how I was raised.” I clear my throat and work to push the thoughts of my dad from my head. “I’m not that kind of vampire either.”

“Good.” She sits back and her deep amber dress adjusts with her. It shimmers in the low light of the room. “What are your intentions for the girl?”

“I love her,” I blurt. The words tumble from my mouth without thinking. “I'm in love with her," I add to clarify, crossing my arms. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.”

"Of that, I have no doubt.” She leans forward and pats me on the arm. “Now tell me your story from the beginning.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. Snow White isn’t in a hurry. So, I start with my earliest memory, thinking she’ll ask me to skip all of that, but she doesn’t. She listens intently, as though she has all the time in the world. When she’s unclear about something I say, she asks a question. At one point, she asks me to pause and then orders us a drink. The blood is delicious, and I thank her gratefully.

It’s more than an hour before I finish. “All I want is to stay with Wysteria. To love her and care for her. Nothing more.”

Snow finishes her goblet of blood. Sets it on the table. Then looks at me. “Thank you for your honesty. All you've said is sincere. I can feel it." She pauses. Eyes me in a way I don't understand. "There are things about yourself that you don’t know, but that I must tell you.”

“There is?” I’m confused but interested in what she has to say.

“The first thing is your family. Your uncle is on the elven throne,

but he shouldn't be." She pauses, gauging my body language, and probably reading more. "How do you feel about that?"

I shrug. "I don't care about that stuff. I'm not interested in the elven royalty or where I might fit in."

"Well, your uncle does. Be aware of that in all future situations." She stands and walks over to one of her bookshelves. Pulls on a book. A secret door slides open. "Come here, please."

I follow her into a small room lined with all sorts of items, including a crown. Deep blue like the bottom of the sea, each sky-blue gem seems to radiate power. Snow picks it up. "This crown belongs to the true ruler of the elven realm. After Devoran was killed, it was brought to me, and I've kept it safe these many years. But I know who the true heir is."

"It isn't me, is it?" The idea of ruling over an entire group or nation terrifies me.

"No," she says, laughing lightly. Then her features become serious. "It's Wysteria."

I'm floored. Shocked for a moment. In the next, I believe her. And that freaks me out as well. Because if Wysteria and I marry like I want us to, that means I'll be king. "Great," I reply, trying to act supportive. It doesn't work. I know it, and so does Snow.

She pats me on the arm. "Your reaction is exactly as I hoped it would be. You are not power-hungry. You will make a great match for Wysteria."

I think about Snow White and her husband. His name is Dorian, I believe. He is King over all supernaturals, but he isn't in the spotlight much, and he doesn't seem to mind. More than that, he truly loves and supports Snow. If he can do it, maybe I can too. "Thank you," I say, keeping my teeth clenched. "I guess there's no way she can denounce her rightful claim on the throne?" Even as I say the words, I feel like a jerk. That isn't fair to her or the elven people.

"We all have a choice, Austin." I see a moment of sadness in her

eyes. She does what she has to for the good of all supernaturals, but being her must be extremely difficult.

“It’s her destiny to rule, isn’t it?” I ask, only to hear Snow confirm what I already know.

She doesn’t respond right away, placing the crown back on its stand before crossing past me and leaving the room.

I trail behind, tucking my hands in my pockets.

As the secret door closes, she smiles. “It is her destiny, and I fear if she doesn’t take her place, the elven realm and those in it will cease to exist,” she says simply.

I roll my shoulders back. That’s a bold statement. Heavy with consequences. “Then I’ll do all I can to make sure it happens.”

This time when Snow smiles, she shows off her teeth, including her fangs. I suck in my breath. The woman is breathtaking in the immensity of her power. “That’s what I hoped you would say.” She returns to her desk but doesn’t sit. “Kneel, Austin.”

At her request, I sink to my knees. My pulse quickens until it’s all I can hear. Even though she seems willing to let me live, worry ebbs along my spine that she might change her mind and end my life anyway. Snow closes her eyes a moment. A voice inside my head demands I run away. Instead, I clamp my hands into fists and wait. Because there is no place to hide. Wherever I went, she would find me. Not only that but if it’s Wysteria’s calling to rule the elven realm, then it’s mine to be by her side. I know Wysteria won’t neglect her purpose, and neither will I.

Snow raises her head and closes her eyes. Behind her, two shadows appear. They seem to be separate entities as they swirl in and through the vampire queen. Incomprehensible whisperings fill the air with loud whispers. As quickly as the shadows appear, they vanish, and Snow opens her eyes. “Austin, I sanction you a vampire. With that comes all of my protection and powers.” Snow touches her ring fingers to either side of my head. There’s a flash of something red and blue.

“The power of the vampire *hunter* and the elf flows equally within you now.”

Like after I drank from Wysteria, I feel a physical change within my body, and I shudder even as my sight lasers in like a lens. It’s more than a physical shift. My sight is enhanced, sure, but I can see within as well and comprehend so much more. “What am I seeing?” I ask quietly. Behind Snow are what look like ghosts, but that can’t be possible.

“You now have true elven sight. With that comes the ability to see the dead. Use it wisely.” Snow smiles. “Wysteria also has a similar ability. The difference is she can call the dead forth if they are one of her ancestors. You have the ability to see the dead only if they want you too.”

As she speaks, an elven man who looks familiar comes over and tries to rest a hand on my arm. He doesn’t say a word, but I feel comforted by his presence.

“You can see Devoran?” She looks right at him.

“I can see someone. You see him too?” I force myself not to be afraid, but frick! Ghosts are real!

“I see a lot of things,” she says, pressing her lips together. “Devoran approves the gift you’ve been given.”

I look at the ghost. “Uh, thank you, sire?” It feels weird talking to the spirit of the dead, but it seems appropriate.

The elven king smiles. Then he vanishes, as do the others.

I sigh with relief, wishing I didn’t ever have to use that gift again. It feels more like a curse.

“Rise, Austin.” She pushes out her chair and sits, heavily.

I stand and cross my arms, unsure where to go.

She notices my behavior and indicates I have a seat. “Something else you should know is that Wysteria and I are related.” Snow watches me, not unkindly. More like she’s weary.

I can't imagine the burdens she must carry. "I—How?"

She waves a hand. "It's a long story, but it is true."

"I believe you," I say, hoping I haven't disrespected her.

She adjusts a few papers on her desk before meeting my gaze. "Good." She winks and I relax slightly. "Now that you've agreed to keep Wysteria safe and now that you're sanctioned, I have a job for you."

"Whatever it is, I'm in. I'll do anything for Wysteria," I say, and mean it.

"Excellent because your training begins now." She raises a hand, and a ball of red light appears in her palm before shooting into my chest.

Before that moment, I didn't realize the vampire queen still possessed magic. I think to ask her what she did to me, but my body gets heavy. Desperate to stay upright, I grind my teeth. Did she change her mind about killing me after all? As consciousness evaporates, my mind takes hold of an image of Wysteria. She's holding a paper in her hands, and tears leak from her eyes. I wonder what has her so sad. She sniffles and folds the paper, tucking it back in an envelope before picking up another. I see her name written in my handwriting and guess she somehow found the letters I wrote. For some reason, knowing she's reading them warms my heart. When I wrote them, I never thought she'd read them. But she is, which means she's alive, and though I don't know how, I can see that she is moved by my words just as she always inspired me.

I fight harder against the weight settling over my mind, but know I won't win. If this is the end, I sorrow for Wysteria. Me dying will hurt her and I don't want her to hurt ever again.

OceanofPDF.com

AUSTIN'S SUFFERING

WYSTERIA

I SPEND hours reading Austin's letters. It's like getting a glimpse into Austin's world and his soul while we were apart. Each letter is like a gift, revealing his growth, and strangely, I feel like I'm growing too. A combination of love and guilt churns around me. I know I have to tell Austin what I've done. At the same time, I can't stop reading them. Each letter deepens my love for him.

When I read the last one, I cry. The tears are for all the time I lost. For all that could've been. I weep over Austin's suffering. How alone he felt after I left and when his dad died. He suffered through a lot, and finally, I cry for both of us.

When I'm done, I repack the letters in my backpack before placing the stake on top. Then I try to call Austin. The sooner I get this guilt off my chest, the better. But he doesn't answer.

I text Sage. She doesn't answer either.

So, I decided to pull up my big-girl pants and finally call Christopher.

"Hello," he says after the first ring.

"Hey, Christopher." I swallow, surprised. Now that I have him, I'm unsure what to say. "I haven't heard from you in a while. How are you?"

He chuckles softly. "Good. Are you okay? No more panic attacks or dangerous situations?"

"Nope, no panic attacks, thankfully. But, um, I've done something, and I feel bad about it."

"What is it?" Worry tinges his voice.

"I took something I shouldn't have. Well, some things. Letters.

Austin wrote them to me while I was gone, and I found them in his room." I'm speaking rapidly, the way my heart is feeling. "I know I shouldn't have, but I was curious, and now I feel terrible."

Christopher releases a big breath. He's relieved, and I envy him. "It sounds like you and Austin need to talk. He should be back soon."

"You know where he is?" Talking to Christopher does help, at least a little. It's out in the open. I told someone, and the world didn't end.

"Yeah," he says but doesn't continue.

Vague much? I pull on my jacket and leave my room, heading to the elevator. "Where is he? He isn't hurt, is he?"

"No, Wys. He's fine. He's in Sharra. The Vampire Queen wanted to speak with him."

"She isn't going to kill him?" I ask, knowing he's unsanctioned, and that's the law.

"Definitely not. She has a plan for him," he quickly adds before I can freak out.

"Well, that's a relief, but what is it? What does she want with him?" I don't want her to take him away from me.

"I'm not sure," he says and pauses like someone on his end is speaking with him.

While I wait, I exit the elevator and walk through the lobby and outside.

Darkness has settled over the campus. The sidewalk is lit by glowing streetlamps. I step into the street, crossing quickly as a car speeds past. Then hop onto the sidewalk and start toward the practice room. I need to spend time on the duet Austin, and I have to perform.

"Wys, I have to go. Leva is on her way back to you, so be on the lookout. Talk again soon?" Christopher sounds distracted.

"Sure." I feel like there's something wrong between us. Something I'm not understanding. "But… Are you mad at me?"

"No. Not at all. Why would you think that, sis?"

I may be imagining the tension. “It feels like you’re keeping something from me.”

“Wys, I’m sorry. It isn’t you. I—” He pauses. “Just know it isn’t you. Not at all. I’ll call you again soon. Promise.”

“Okay.” What else can I say to that? Nothing.

“Wys, I love you,” he adds. His voice is tender, and I know he means it.

“Love you too, Chris.” I hang up and tuck my phone in the back pocket of my jeans and unzip my bag, bringing it around the front, so if for some reason I need the stake, it’s within reaching distance. At that same time, I feel stupid. People are walking by, laughing and talking. The night is chilly, but the sky is clear. Nothing sinister is afoot. Yet, I still can’t shake my need to be prepared.

Up ahead and to my right, a couple is making out on a bench. One has her head back and looks familiar. When I’m closer, I can see it’s my roommate, Sage, and she doesn’t look right. She looks unconscious. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is partway open. Some might see it as passion, but something is off. “Sage,” I whisper. Trusting my gut, I remove the stake from my backpack and let my bag fall.

At the noise, the girl at Sage’s neck lifts her eyes and stares right at me. It’s then I see she’s drinking from Sage. *Damn vampire!* Without thinking, I rush her.

She’s quicker than me, and she stands, wiping her mouth before smiling. “You’re next, bitch.” She comes to me slowly as though she knows she has nothing to fear. Her dark hair is feathered back like one of the Charlie’s Angels from the seventies, and she’s wearing all leather. She flashes her fangs and moves to grab me by the neck, lifting me off the ground.

“No,” I shout and stab her in the shoulder with everything I’ve got.

Her eyes get wide, and she loosens her grip. “Are you serious?” She

lets me go and reaches over, grabbing the stake and pointing it at me. It's covered in her blood. "You're going to pay for that." She flashes her fangs.

I stand there like my feet are cemented into the concrete and wait for the end. My parents trained me when I was young, but it's been a while.

Before she can use the stake against me, there's a whoosh, like a machete through a coconut, and the vampire's head slides off her body.

Someone screams.

Then another.

There's shouting.

All I can do is focus on the vampire body dropping to the ground. Blood rushes from the place where her head used to be, and then she turns to ash, crumbles apart, and is gone—her remnants taken by the ever-present Wyoming wind.

"Are you alright?"

I look up. It's my English teacher, Ms. Spears. "Yeah," I say, wrapping my arms around myself. Confusion. Gratefulness. And a whole slew of other emotions rushes through me.

Ms. Spears picks up my stake and hands it to me. "I saw what you did. You're pretty good with that thing." She takes a cloth from the oversized bag draped over her shoulder and wipes off her blade. Then sheaths it and tucks it away. It's then she notices all of the students surrounding us.

I'm still in shock and stare without moving at the weapon in my hand. It doesn't feel like it belongs to me.

"Everyone move along. There's nothing to see." Ms. Spears flashes her teaching credentials, which all teachers are required to carry.

The small crowds disperse. Some leave, but many linger.

"Hey," she shouts. "I have most of you in one of my classes. You

want an F for the semester, stick around." Each word comes out clipped. Without a doubt, she's serious. She'll give them a failing grade as surely as she slayed that vampire.

"She can't do that," someone whispers.

Ms. Spears whirls around, facing the one who spoke. She's a taller girl with dark hair and angry eyes. "Heather, right?"

The girl gasps, covering her mouth, her eyes terrified.

"You're taking Advanced Writing. If I remember correctly, and I do, you need to pass that class to graduate."

Heather's mouth falls open, and she tucks her hands into her front pockets.

"Go, or you fail my class," Ms. Spears barks.

The girl spins on her heel.

"Anyone else?" Spears is scanning the crowd. "Ethan? Will? Trent? Brenda?"

As she says their names, they take off. Even though I'm not a fan of my English teacher, she's got quite the memory.

"Shall I continue?" She glares at those few who are sticking around.

A few students are rebellious and stubborn enough to stay. "Very well, I have a photographic memory. Let's see what exactly I can and cannot do, shall we?"

The rest of the group reluctantly leaves, but one guy asks quietly, "Is a teacher allowed to kill supernaturals like that?"

"Listen, you little twerp, a student's life was threatened. That vampire was about to drain her dry. I had every right to protect students, especially when the law is broken on campus. Now, go!" Ms. Spears steps toward him and the others.

They scatter as someone says, "It's true what everyone says about her. She really is witchy."

I can't deny it. More than witchy, Ms. Spears is terrifying. In a lot

of ways, she's scarier than the vampire. I glad she's on my side—or, at least she was. I'm still her student.

It's then I remember Sage. She's lying on the bench, her eyes closed, her face pale. She looks dead in the pale light shining from the streetlamp. "Sage. Oh my gosh, Sage. Can you hear me?" I run over. Blood oozes from the twin wounds at her neck. Without thinking, I place a hand over them. Immediately, my powers ignite, and an indigo light emanates from my hand and into my roommate. "Come on, Sage. You're not allowed to be anything except okay."

After several long minutes, she moans, and her eyes blink open. "Wys," she says softly.

I let out a sob of relief. "Yeah, it's me. You scared me half to death," I say, then glance around, nervous about revealing my power out in the open. Thankfully everyone is gone except Ms. Spears. She's watching me with a strange look on her face.

"It's true what I've heard about you then?" Ms. Spears asks.

I shrug, trying to act nonchalant even though that isn't how I'm feeling. "I guess." I turn away, focusing back on Sage.

My roommate tries to sit but is still too weak.

"Stay where you are, and rest for a few." I squeeze Sage's hand before walking over to my English teacher.

We stare at each other for several long moments. I don't want to reveal anything she doesn't already know. Plus, I'm not sure I trust her.

"Have you heard of the Supernatural Task Force?" she finally asks.

"Of course," I say.

"Well, I think you'd make an excellent candidate. Why don't you come by my office tomorrow night around six-thirty, and we can discuss the requirements for entry."

I want to ask her more about it. Because I'm definitely interested. My parents belonged, and I feel like I should too. "You can get me in

—” I begin.

Spears holds up a hand. “Your friend needs you right now. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“Alright,” I say, frustration oozing from my pores. She isn’t wrong, though. Sage does need my help. “Thanks.”

Ms. Spears gives me a bland smile before cutting across the grass and into the night.

OceanofPDF.com

OVERINDULGE

WYSTERIA

I PICK UP MY BAG, shove the bloody stake into some slushy snow to rinse it, and then tuck it into the front pocket of my bag, so I don't ruin my letters. Then I hurry over to Sage, who's sitting up, though she still seems a little vacant. I'm wondering if it's drugs again. "Can you stand?" I ask, holding out my arm.

She takes it and rises, though I feel her frame shake. "I'm fine," she says, slurring her words.

My worry intensifies into anger. "Drugs are stupid," I say. "Hell, even alcohol is stupid. If I've learned one thing since I got here, it's that people are afraid. And instead of dealing with their fear, they bury it in alcohol or drugs." I wrap an arm around her waist. "So damn stupid."

Sage snorts, looking at me. "Duh! Isn't that why you overindulge every time you partake?"

I let out a heavy sigh. The last time I went to a party, I only had one drink. But I wasn't going to correct her because, yeah, alcohol does take off the edge—at least until it wears off. No surprise, my problems, fears, worries, and troubles are still there, as prevalent as before. "I just want you to be alright."

"I'm fine," she says loudly.

I grind my teeth together. Sage isn't fine, not at all. She's hurting. I know it, and deep down, she knows it too. "You need to talk to your parents," I say softly.

She stops and looks at me. Her eyes fill with tears.

Mentally, I'm preparing myself for a tongue-lashing. She's going to lose it on me, and I can't blame her. "I will," she says. Her shoulders slump, and she leans against me.

“You’ll talk to your parents?” I ask, to verify she understood what I said.

She sniffles and wipes her eyes. “Yes, I’m going…” Whatever she intends to say dies in her throat as we reach the end of the sidewalk. There are students outside, and we no longer have privacy. I help her cross the street and through the lobby of Irvine Hall. When we reach the elevator, we have to wait with a half dozen other students. Some give us strange looks, but I ignore them.

Once we’re inside our room, I help Sage to her bed. “Are you sick?” I ask, just to verify.

She nods her head. “But not in the way you think. My soul hurts.”

“What can I do?” It’s hard to see strong Sage crying and looking so small and broken.

“Help me pack a bag.”

“Sure.” I go over to her closet and get her duffel bag.

From her bed, Sage instructs me to shove some jeans and shirts and almost regular shoes into it as well as undies, a brush, and other toiletries. When I finish, I hand it to her. “When are you going to leave?”

She sits, running a hand over her face. “Might as well get this over with.”

Part of me thinks she should wait until she’s sober. Another part wonders if she’ll back out if she remains, so I nod. “How are you going to get there?” I don’t know much about realm jumping. Only what Leva did when we left Redyrin’s realm and landed in this one.

She goes to her jewelry box and removes a necklace I’ve seen in there before, but she never wore. It’s red and looks like a giant teardrop. She puts it around her neck and stands. Then faces me. “I’m coming back,” she says, placing her hands on my shoulders. “Don’t give away my room or anything.”

I smile as my eyes water. “I never would,” I say and mean it.

“You don’t think I’m an outrageous bitch?” She asked me that question a few days after we met. It was sincere then, and it is now.

“Definitely not a bitch, and your outrageousness is my *favorite* thing about you.” I pull her into a hug.

She wraps her arms around my waist and buries her head in my shoulder. “Thank Wys.” I appreciate her using my nickname. At the same time, I realize I’m not sad about my mom and dad anymore, especially since I can see them whenever I want.

Sage releases me and moves into the middle of the room. “I’m going to see if I can use the realm traveling spell inside even though I know they’ve spelled the dorms to block any super-powerful magic.”

“Come back when you can,” I say. “I’ll be waiting.”

“I will.” She holds the pendant in her hand and closes her eyes.

At first, nothing happens. Before I can suggest we go outside and try again there, the air between us begins to swirl. An opening appears. The center is dark and ominous like the bottom of a well. The edges are filled with light and the colors of the seven magics.

Sage sighs with relief. Gives me a small smile of gratitude. And steps through, leaving me alone.

I’m debating whether to get started on the piles of homework I’ve put off. Before I can sit at my desk, someone taps lightly on the door. Unsure who it could be, I grab my stake and open it a crack. It’s Leva.

“Hi,” I say, my face lighting up as I widen the opening.

“Wysteria.” She smiles and flies forward, her arms outspread as she flings herself into my cheek.

I laugh. “It’s good to see you. Are you staying a while this time?” I still can’t believe I ever told her I didn’t want her with me at college. I’ve missed her so much.

She flies backward, her teal wings changing to pale yellow as her smile dies. “I had to see you and make sure for myself that you’re okay. But I can only stay for tonight. The Vampire Queen needs me…”

She pauses and flies close to my ear. “I have to go to the elven realm,” she says and then flies back so I can see her.

“What for?” Abernathy said the elven king is dangerous, and I’m worried about her.

She presses a finger to her lips and shakes her head.

So she can’t talk about it? “Fine. But you can hang out with me tonight, right?”

“Yep.” Her smile returns.

“What should we do?”

Leva’s wings and hair turn the brightest fuchsia. “I’ve always wanted to go to a college party in the human realm.” She clasps her hands together, and her eyes fill with excitement.

I hold out my hand, and she lands, her hands on her hips.

“Well, then we better find one, pronto,” I say.

OceanofPDF.com

SUPERNATURAL MADNESS

WYSTERIA

WHEN I WAKE, Leva is already gone. Our night out partying was fun and uneventful mainly because Leva used magic to change my hair color to black, and I wore it in twin buns high on my head. No one recognized me. I wanted to leave it that way for a while, but the magic has already worn off.

Oh well.

After getting ready in the communal bathroom, I head over to the cafeteria for breakfast. It's still early, so the room is empty. I fill my plate with scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon. Once I finish, I go back to my room and work on homework. I'm so far behind, and I wonder if I'll ever catch up. I came to college to be normal, but it hasn't happened. The days blurring into supernatural madness. I'm probably failing half my classes. The duet with Austin will mean nothing if I can't get passing grades on the rest of the subjects.

I work through lunch and dinner, just eating some jerky to keep me going. By nightfall, my eyes are blurry, and my brain hurts, but at least I made a dent and submit a bunch of work to my teachers. A late score is better than a zero.

At six, I close my laptop and my books and slide on my tan ballet flats. Before leaving my room, I debate whether to bring my bag along with the letters and my stake and decide I definitely should.

There's only me in the elevator, which is odd. Once I reach the lobby, I take my time, listening for possible dangers. Nothing strikes me as I cross to the exit. I wave at the girl sitting at the front desk. She waves back.

Everything is fine, I think, but tighten my grasp on the bag strap and push the door open. It's cold outside, and I pull the hood of my

oversized sweatshirt onto my head and pick up the pace. Ms. Spears's office is a good fifteen-minute walk. As I go, my thoughts turn to Sage. Hopefully, with her parents' help, she'll get better and be back soon. I already miss her terribly. She's a big personality in a tiny package, and our little room fills empty without her in it.

Even though it's dark, I stay in the light from the streetlamps until I reach the Mikesell Building. Inside, the warmth from the heaters causes my shoulders to relax. Since it's after hours, some of the lights are off. Those that are still on cast shadows, and an eeriness settles over me.

Ms. Spears's office is on the third floor, and I make my way over to the stairs. My shoes echo on the marble floors as I climb. When I see the sign for Ms. Spears's office, I pull open the door and head down the hall. There are fewer lights up here.

In the distance, I notice the shadow of a person and slow.

"Hey, Wysteria."

It's Evan. I lift a hand in greeting, though I'm not happy to see him. I never liked Evan and probably never will. Evan seems jumpy, his hands twitchy like he's on something. His hair is going every which way, and his shirt half untucked, which is so not Evan. "Everything okay?" I ask, more out of concern for my own safety.

"None of your damn business, Pudgy Wudgy." He turns right, heading down another hall.

"Great." I stay the course until I reach Ms. Spears's office. There's a light on, and I knock softly.

Immediately, the door swings open. The man standing there looks like a lumberjack in plaid with a grizzly beard—either that or a linebacker. Either apply. He takes up the whole entrance.

"I'm looking for Ms. Spears," I say, trying not to let my voice quiver.

Before he can respond, Ms. Spears comes around, pushing Lumberjack out of the way. "Bard, don't be a brute and move out of

the way." She shoves him lightly.

"Yes, ma'am." The big guy moves from my view.

Ms. Spears smiles. It's a little off-putting, especially since it isn't something she often does. "Wysteria. Right on time." She stands to the side and waves me in, then moves over to her desk. "Have a seat." Piles and piles of paper, folders, pens, and markers are scattered across the top like an English warzone.

Bard closes the door, and I suddenly feel trapped. Swallowing, I cross my arms. "Thanks for seeing me," I say.

"Of course." She rolls her way under her desk, picks up some papers, and moves them off to the side. It doesn't do anything to help the mess, just shifts it. "You are doing okay after last night?" she asks.

"Sure. Fine," I say, doing my best to dash the strange feeling fluttering inside my stomach.

"Good. And how is your friend? Sage, isn't it?" She clasps her hands together, flashing her blood-red nail polish.

"Yes." I take a millimeter of a second to debate whether to tell Ms. Spears the truth about what's become of Sage. I decide against it. "She's hanging in there," I finish.

"Excellent. Excellent." She taps her hands on the desk as her eyes zero on me. "You've missed more than a few classes. Are you still interested in attending college, or are you ready to train in the Supernatural Task Force full time?"

The question has me frazzled. I hadn't thought about making a choice. "I can't do both?"

She releases a harsh laugh. "At the moment, you aren't doing one successfully. What makes you think you can handle college and training?"

Ouch. But she isn't wrong. "True," I say, staring at my hands.

"How about I help you get caught up on your schoolwork, and then we can talk about the Task Force after freshman year?" She

stands like we're done talking.

"But I thought you were going to tell me how to apply?"

"Well, I was," she says, coming around and leaning against the desk. "Then I saw how far behind you are and your schoolwork and figured we should focus on fixing that first. Snow White will look at your grades. You don't want to be a disappointment, do you?"

Her words come out sweet, but they are brutally painful. "I guess," I say.

"Good. Let me speak with your other teachers, and then I'll email you a game plan for getting caught up."

"If you're sure you don't mind."

"Not at all." She walks to the door. Opens it. Then does something bizarre and shuts off the light. It's then I notice her table lamp is on and it gives the room an eerie glow.

"Are you leaving too?" I ask, feeling edgy once again.

"In a moment." She takes my hand. Squeezes and speaks the words to a spell. One I've heard before.

Confusion rushes through me even as my body starts to go numb. Determined to do something to save myself, I grab hold of the bear bracelet and rip it from my wrist. The action hurts, but I couldn't cry out even if I wanted to. My body is paralyzed, and I start to fall back. The brutish man, Bard, catches me from behind and throws me over his shoulder. He's so tall. I can see Ms. Spears walk back around to her desk, open the top drawer, and removes a knife. It's familiar, and I quickly recognize it as the same one Doug used to cut me.

Somehow it's been spelled or enchanted and unlike most other mortal weapons, this one can cut me.

She moves, so we are only inches apart, her eyes holding mine. "It's always good to play the long game," Ms. Spears says. As she speaks, she shifts from my English teacher and into Redyrin. Up close, I can see the cracks in her skin. The way it's beginning to sag, and the

gray in her hair. She's aging and in desperate need of my magic.

I have so many questions. Because, according to Austin, Ms. Spears has been teaching at the university for a while. How did she do that and live in her realm with me? There were times when she was absent, her excuse was hunting or collecting items, like new clothes, blankets, spices, and other necessities. I never imagined she crossed realms to teach. Frazzled, I try to open my mouth and ask her how, but it isn't necessary.

"I figured you'd escape at some point," she says, tapping my nose with the edge of the blade.

Blood is rushing to my head at being bent over Bard's shoulder. My head is pounding.

"I've been teaching at Gothel Springs University for going on five years." She rolls her eyes. "Crossing realms so often sucked a lot out of me but that's why I have you." She smiles. "But teaching?" She waves her hands around the room, finally acknowledging her messy desk. "It's awful. Kids today are stupid on a cellular level."

From what I've seen, that isn't true. Everyone around me seems immensely smart and infinitely more savvy than most.

Redyrin goes on, "It's been a total pain in the ass to spend time in both realms, but worth it. Especially now." She grabs hold of my wrist and cuts a small gash into my arm, then licks the blood that rushes out. Immediately, she's restored and looking like the Redyrin I remember. She checks the mirror hanging on the wall beside her window. "Much better," she says and continues, "That's why I hired the idiot vampire, Doug, to help me out. Gary too." She clucks her tongue as she watches me in the mirror. Then goes back to rearranging her dark hair. When she's finished, she turns. "I appreciate your predictability. Always did, my dear." She comes in close and kisses my cheek. "Now, be a good girl for mommy and bleed."

I want to kick and scream. Spit in her face and tell her to stay the

hell away from me, but the spell she put on me—the same one she used on me in her realm when I disobeyed—has me completely incapacitated.

"Are we going back to the other realm now?" Bard asks.

"In a moment," Redyrin snaps.

"Okay." Bard shifts me on his shoulder.

Redyrin closes her eyes and holds her hands with the palms up, the blade laying across both. She closes her hands around the knife and says words I don't understand. Blood oozes from the hand clutching the dagger. It's red and sizzles before changing to black and dissipating into a smoky cloud. With each drop of blood, the smoke grows bigger until I can no longer see her hands.

Bard begins to chant the words with her, but I doubt he even knows what they mean. The air fills with the stench of burning flesh consumed by evil magic. And still, I wait, wishing there was something I could do to help myself. Knowing that if she takes me this time, I will never escape. It feels hopeless, and as I watch her, I can't help thinking about Austin. My love for him and all we could've been together.

My heart aches at all I'm losing, but I can't even cry.

Finally, Redyrin opens her eyes. They flash black before returning to her natural color. She smiles, and it's so eerie, my insides shudder. "It's done," she says, her voice low.

The smoke dissipates, revealing the knife is gone and is now a seven-pointed crown. The metal looks like it's made up of silver and gold snakes. They swirl together within and up into the points.

I wonder why she created a crown for herself, especially one so clunky. Instead of placing it on her head, she shoves it on mine. Immediately it feels like thousands of tiny needles lock into my head. I want to cry out in pain, but my mouth won't work. Blood oozes from each pinprick, and I expect to see it drip onto the floor at any moment. But it doesn't. It's like the crown is taking my blood into

itself—like the metal snakes are sucking my blood.

"Wysteria, I must thank you for escaping. You inspired me to take the next step and find a way to create this crown. It isn't like any utilized before. Because this crown connects you through magic to me." Even as she speaks, a crown exactly like mine appears on the inside of her wrist. She hisses in pain as invisible needles tattoo it slowly onto her skin. But it isn't silver and gold. Instead, it's indigo blue, the color of my magic. "You see," she says triumphantly, her eyes flicking from her wrist to me. "Your blood is mine forever and always." She laughs, and I want nothing more than to shrink away. "As soon as it's finished, we will return home."

"And I can play with puppies?" Bard asks.

I hear the smile on his face.

Redyrin glares and rolls her eyes. "Don't be an idiot."

OceanofPDF.com

HOVERING LIKE GHOSTS

WYSTERIA

I WATCH in horror as the crown continues to materialize on Redyrin's wrist. In my heart, I'm pleading for help. Someone somewhere will rescue me. But there isn't anyone. Christopher is away in the land of Sharra, along with Austin. Even my roommate Sage is there while Leva has gone to the elven realm. There's only me. Alone in the human realm.

I can't help a flash of anger. They all knew I was in danger. Cindy cast a spell on me. Snow and Christopher, and Leva wanted to protect me by keeping me prisoner in Sharra. Yet when it matters most, I'm alone.

How could they?

If they cared the way they said they did, then they would've protected me. I can't help wondering if it's all a lie. If they each had their own selfish reasons for helping me, and it had nothing to do with the way they feel about me.

The next moment, my anger turns to despair. I feel beyond alone. It's then I think about Abernathy and the gift he awakened in me. In my mind, I think about my parents, longing to see them, to have them near me.

And suddenly they are there. Hovering like the ghosts they are in the air above Redyrin's desk. My mom comes to me and tries to help. My dad follows suit, but there's nothing they can do. My despair deepens because bringing there here is doing nothing but causing pain. That was selfish.

I long to tell them I'm sorry, but whatever Redyrin did to me, I still can't move. It's a wonder I'm breathing. My mom looks at my dad, and they hug before vanishing.

Again, I'm alone.

If only I could close my eyes and block out everything around me. I try and feel my lids flinch, but before I can do more, the door to Redyrin's office is flung open.

Evan and his dad, Linroe, rush into the room.

"There you are," Linroe says, angling himself to he's right behind Redyrin.

She was too focused on the tattoo, and Linroe quickly gets the upper hand, grunting as he moves in closer to Redyrin.

There's a sucking sound. Redyrin's eyes get big. She looks down as a deep red circle of blood blooms like a deadly rose on her pink blouse.

I don't know for sure, but I think Linroe stabbed Redyrin. That's my guess, not that it'll do any good. Now that Redyrin has my blood flowing in her veins or will once the tattoo is complete, it'll be beyond challenging to kill her.

"Die, bitch," Linroe says, grunting again.

"No," Bard shouts, reaching out his tree stump arms to tackle Evan, but Evan is quick and steps out of his grasp, swinging the ax in his hands directly into Bard's chest. It sounds like a shovel in wet dirt, and I cringe.

Bard groans, stepping back, the heel of his boot coming within inches of crushing my face.

Evan doesn't hesitate and hits Bard again, this time slamming it into Bard's thick neck. Blood splatters everywhere as the big man falls to his knees. The ax didn't sever his head completely off, but it dangles there. I want to puke at the sight of so much gore.

I return my focus to Linroe and Redyrin. She seems to have the upper hand, even though Linroe stabbed her twice. She shoots a spell his way, but the magic doesn't seem to affect him. "You can't kill me, you stupid fools." A ball of black light appears in her hand, and she

starts to speak, but before she can utter a single word, Evan swings the ax, chopping off Redyrin's head.

In horror, I watch her body slump to the ground followed by her head. Blood is suddenly everywhere, including some spatter on my clothes, face, and hands.

Immediately the magical hold she has on me vanishes. The crown releases itself from my head and drops to the floor with a sickening thud, rolling until it bumps into Redyrin's silent body. I am in shock. Redyrin is dead. Just like that? Her face is frozen in horror like she can't believe it either. Shouldn't I feel relief? She held me prisoner for years, using me, keeping me from the human realm and my family. As I stare at her face, my only sensation is sadness for a life wasted over her need for power, youth, vitality—all of it.

Sure, Redyrin would have imprisoned me again. The half fashioned tattoo on her wrist, as well as the crown she created, proves her wicked intentions. Tears sting my eyes at this chapter of my life ending so abruptly. I didn't get to tell her off. The whole situation feels unreal, like I'm dreaming, and at any second she'll become whole once again and finish what she started.

Linroe whisper-shouts something to Evan. They are distracted, discussing what to do about Redyrin and Bard's bodies. I wipe my eyes and sit up straight. I am still in danger. Linroe and Evan are blocking the door and won't let me leave willingly. So, I take my shot, jump up, and run over to the window. As fast as I can, I unlock it and shout, "Help. Please. Someone help me! Hel—"That's all I get out before Evan grabs me from behind, covering my mouth with his hands. I immediately push out my power, searching for any goodness in Austin's cousin. There isn't any—only a longing for power. I bite down on his middle finger.

He releases me, and I run back to the window. "Help," I shout again.

"Bitch bit me," Evan says.

“I don’t give a shit. Tie her up and let’s get out of here,” Linroe says.

“Fine.” Evan drops the ax and pulls rope from his back pocket, but he doesn’t get a chance to tie me up.

“What’s going on here?” It’s a security guard, one hand on his radio, the other going for his baton.

“John Went, is that you?” Linroe asks.

“Yeah.” He’s uncertain. I hear it in his voice. Probably because there is a lot of blood on Linroe and Evan and around the room, not to mention two dead bodies.

I should say something, but I’m distracted by two slithering voices.

“Wysteria,” one of them hisses.

“You must claim us,” another insists.

I glance around, surprised I can hear the voices when no one else around until I realize they aren’t coming from the room but inside my head. My eyes catch hold of the crown. The snakes still writhe around within, but they are no longer silver and gold. Instead, they are indigo, the exact color of my power. Instantly, I know it’s the snakes that are speaking.

What are you saying? I ask, but only in my mind.

This crown was created for you.

The witch, Redyrin, didn’t understand the real power within us, but wearing the crown will allow you to take your rightful place on the throne.

I’m hyper-focused on the snakes, still curious about how I’m hearing them but guessing it’s because of the hundreds of needle marks (bite marks) inflicted around my head from the first time I wore it. *What throne?*

The elven realm is yours to claim.

You are the rightful heir.

Take what belongs to you.

Before it's too late.

My thoughts are swimming with questions, but one thing is sure. *I don't want the throne.*

If you don't claim us, then someone else will.

And the elven realm will be swallowed up in evil.

It is already slowly dying.

You must listen to us, Rapunzel.

It's your destiny!

I don't like that they even know my first name. Plus, I hate when people use the D-word. I'm reasonably certain it wasn't my destiny to spend seven years as a prisoner, yet I did. Beyond that, my only destiny is to love Austin and be loved by him in return.

At the same time, I don't want anyone else claiming this crown. I sense that would be bad, especially if Evan or Linroe got ahold of it. So I take hold of the crown. As soon as my fingers brush against the cold metal, I feel it prick against my flesh.

Place us on your head.

Let us show you the truth.

Almost in a trance, I do as the voices say and set the cold blue metal on my head. It secures itself by piercing me a hundred times over and all at once. To stifle the pain, I bite into my cheek. There is a difference this time. When Redyrin put it on my head, I felt my power draining from me and into her. Now, I feel my power increase, as though the crown is amplifying what I have inside.

I turn to see my reflection in the mirror. The indigo crown seems to pulsate and slither, and it stands out starkly against my blond hair. Without thought, I adjust it, so it's straight. It doesn't move under my touch, but it shifts on its own when I lower my hands.

Behind me, there's a whimper, pulling me from my reflection.

Upon turning, I watch the security guard crumple to the ground. Before I can do anything, Evan presses something into my neck.

Immediately, I'm conscious but incapable of moving as though whatever spell Redyrin used on me has been freshly injected. It frustrates the hell out of me, and my anger burns, causing my power to flare to life. But my power isn't a weapon, it's used to heal, and I'm still unable to move. As my knees buckle, Evan lifts me over his shoulder. I want to pound my fists against his back. Make him put me down and leave me alone.

Evan groans under the weight. He isn't half as beefy as the Linebacker who held me in the same position not so long ago. "Hurry, she's heavy," Evan says, his breathing coming in sporadic spurts under my weight.

Serves him right, I think, trying to make myself feel heavier.

"Don't rush me, boy," his father responds. "We have to do this right. I want my rightful place in the kingdom." As he speaks, there's a flash of light and what sounds like running water. "My brother will give me back what is mine once he sees I've brought him the fountain of youth."

Linroe is talking about me. I'm the fountain of youth. Just a pawn in someone else's scheme, same as it was with Redyrin. Thinking of my pretend mother fills my heart with sorrow. She did horrible things to me, but I can't help feeling a sense of loss that she's gone. Whether or not she was good, she was a part of my life for seven years.

"I hope so," Evan says, interrupting my thoughts. He doesn't sound convinced, but he walks forward, and suddenly we are passing through the portal that takes us from the human realm and into what I'm guessing is the realm of the elves.

As we go, the snakes begin to whisper. Their words are low, and it's impossible to know what they are saying.

OceanofPDF.com

LIKE A CAT

AUSTIN

"THE SUPERNATURAL TASK FORCE is not for the faint of heart," Dorian said. The man is Snow's husband. I didn't think he did anything except support his wife. Apparently, I was wrong. He knew how to wield any weapon and was good at all of them. Lethal is the word that keeps coming to mind.

It's just Dorian and me in the enormous gymnasium, and each step echoes. My teacher holds a katana, and so do I. We circle each other. Each one of Dorian's steps feels practiced. Mine are less so.

Dorian goes on. "As a supernatural, it might feel wrong to hunt and kill our own kind. That is a fallacy brought on by those corrupt supernaturals. They will feed off our kindness and fears if we let them." He steps forward and swings down his sword with speed similar to that of a vampire.

I block at the last moment, and our swords clash, sending sparks into the low lit room.

"Good," Dorian says, stepping back. The man is over six feet with sandy-blond hair and eyes. While Dorian is leaner than Christopher, the two of them could be brothers. I can't help thinking about their similarities as I watch him move, lithe like a cat. Because I know Dorian doesn't like Christopher. Snow White made it clear I shouldn't mention the vampire while I trained, especially if I want him to teach and not just kick my ass.

I accidentally mentioned Chris once a few weeks ago and received the full brunt of his anger. Needless to say, I didn't make the same mistake again.

He lunges, and I block him, then grab his arm and yank him forward, and I move to the side. With him off balance, I kick him in

the back and leap, landing with the blade at his neck as he falls to the ground. It's the first time I've gotten the upper hand with the man. It isn't surprising. He's been distracted. "Got you," I say, stepping out of the way and holding out my free hand.

He takes it. At the last second, I see the glint in his eyes, and he drop-kicks me over him. Rising, and sticking the blade to my neck, drawing blood. "The enemy never drops his guard. That means you never drop your guard, got it?"

I nod, careful not to make a sudden movement.

"Good." He moves the blade and holds out his hand, but I don't have to be told twice. With vampire speed, I stand and ready myself. "Excellent."

Snow is suddenly in the doorway closest to us. "It's time," she says.

"For what?" I ask. In the weeks since I started training in Sharra, I haven't been allowed to contact the outside world. The only people I've seen are Dorian and Snow. That's it. Once I asked about Christopher, but that was the time I got my ass kicked.

Dorian bows, the sign our lesson is over. I do the same, then follow him over to the rack where we keep the weapons. Snow comes in, the door clicking slightly, indicating her presence. She cordially smiles as she moves like air until she's standing next to her husband. They've been married a long time, yet I can still feel the sexual tension between them. Their love is strong—eternal. I hope to have that same kind of bond with Wysteria.

Snow takes Dorian's hand. He kisses her deeply a moment. Turns to me and flicks his chin in acknowledgment, and strides without another word out of the gym. When the vampire queen and I are alone, I swallow nervously. "What is it?"

"Christopher is waiting for you in your room. You and he have a mission." She crosses her arms as she starts toward the same exit Dorian just went through.

“Great. Where are we going? Can I see Wysteria first?” I’m excited to get out of Sharra, out of the training facility. More than anything, I’m desperate to see Wysteria. Last I heard, she was okay, and she’d been told where I am. But that doesn’t change the fact that I want her in my arms.

Snow eyes me shrewdly. “There’s been a change. Wysteria…” She doesn’t finish as she rests a hand on my arm.

It doesn’t register that her hand is ice cold. All I can think about is Wysteria. “Is she okay?”

“She’s been taken and is being held prisoner in the elven realm.”

I’m in shock, stunned. “How long?”

“A couple of weeks,” the vampire queen admits.

“What the hell?” I run my hands through my hair. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why have you kept me here?”

“Austin, you need to remain calm. She is alive. Leva keeps us updated, and we know that much.” Her features harden. “We needed to make sure you wouldn’t die rescuing her. You weren’t ready then, but the last two weeks you’ve trained nonstop, and you are now, which is exactly why I’m telling you about her.”

Anger causes my power, the one I received after drinking Wysteria’s blood, to flare to life. I can sense Snow is telling me the truth. Still, I can’t calm down. “When do we leave?”

“Tonight,” Snow says, patting me on the back. “Christopher has you ready to go.”

“Great.” We use our vampire speed and exit the training center. In seconds, we are down the road, and pass through several fields until we reach a wide stream.

At the base of the bridge, Snow presses a hand on my shoulder. “Austin,” Snow says.

Anxious, I slow beside her. “What?” I snap and then remember who I’m addressing. Bowing my head, I try again. “Yes?”

She doesn't respond right away but looks beyond the field to a forest of trees. A flock of birds take flight, singing and calling to each other like nothing is wrong. "This task won't be easy. Your uncle, Evan, and the king of the elves will be expecting you, and they won't stop until they have what they want. As soon as they get it, they won't need you anymore, so be prepared." She faces me then. "You understand this isn't a game? Your life is in lethal danger?" Her gaze intensifies.

I don't want to believe her, but I know she isn't lying. "Of course," I say without blinking. It's then I realize she and Dorian didn't keep the truth from me all this time because they are selfish or arrogant, but because they are worried about my safety. At that knowledge, I redirect my anger from her and Dorian to the elven king and those holding Wysteria hostage. "I have to go anyway. I would rather die fighting to save the woman I love than to remain safe and oblivious and without Wysteria." I say the words through clenched teeth, thinking she must understand. The way Snow and Dorian are around each other; without a doubt, they would make the same choices I'm about to.

We start running again and don't stop until we reach the building where my room is located. Inside, we cross the foyer and head down the hall until we are at my door. "I know, Austin. And that is why I gave you the task. That is also why Christopher will be going with you. Please understand there is no imprisonment for the elven king. He will fight you to the death." Snow gives me an intense look, one that is begging me to comprehend the seriousness of the situation, not that I wasn't already. I know what she's saying, and while I don't want anyone else to die, most of all, I will save Wysteria whatever the cost. She'd already been imprisoned for seven years. That she's in prison again burns me up inside.

Snow continues, "Whether you live or die, the decisions you make in the elven realm will change the rest of your life."

She seems overly dramatic, not that I'd ever say that out loud. "I

understand," I say and unlock my door.

Snow smiles, though it's one of melancholy, not joy. "I hope to see you again soon, Austin. It's been a pleasure getting to know you. Christopher was right when he saved you. Vampire or no, you are one of the good guys."

"Thank you, your highness." I open the door.

Before I can get inside, two vampire guards glide down the hall. They are afraid. It's easy to see by the looks in their eyes.

"What is it?" Snow asks.

"Trolls," one of them whispers.

"Hundreds of them," another says. "They are dressed for battle."

Snow looks at me, nods, and then turns back to her guards. "Let's go."

"Should I stay and help?" I call after her.

"No, fulfill your mission Austin," the vampire queen responds without turning.

OceanofPDF.com

YANK IT AWAY

WYSTERIA

THE POISONOUS MAGIC injected into my veins wears off slowly. As feeling returns and I become more alert, I'm mindful of the cold. So cold. My body shivers to keep itself from shutting down. When I open my eyes, I immediately wish I didn't. There's a corpse attached to a manacle precisely like the one chained to me. Vermin, similar to rats, gnaw on the carcass, revealing bone, and the aroma of rotting death infiltrates my nose, causing me to gag. Desperate, I huddle as far from the body as I can.

"Evan," I shout, though no one else, except the rats can hear me. Evan and his dad took me and probably brought me here. Wherever here is. I'm guessing the elven realm. That's where they'd been going before I went unconscious. I want to give up. Sob and cry. Throw a temper tantrum. But what's the point?

Instead, I have a thought. One that slithers around like it came from someplace other than my brain. Was it the snakes in the crown? I can still feel the metal diadem attached to my scalp. I touch it, trying to yank it away, but it won't budge.

Determined to control what I can and not what I can't, I carefully shuffle closer to the body, reach out a shaking finger and touch the rat-like creature nearest me. It's chomping down on a finger and pays me no mind. Forcing myself not to vomit, I call forth my powers.

Part of me believed it would be tamped down in this dungeon, but my indigo magic races along my veins and down into my finger. Since my powers are for healing, so I don't know what I expect. Certainly not for the creature to fall onto its back, shudder and writhe before changing into a male pixilette. Burnt orange wings are pressed flat against the hardened dirt. His short hair and clothing are in various

shades of orange as well.

As soon as he's whole once again, he stops moving.

"Hey," I whisper harshly, pressing the point of my finger into his stomach. He doesn't respond. Have I killed him? That seems impossible, given the nature of my powers. I poke him again. He still doesn't move.

I'm horrified. What's happened to my powers? I think it might have to do with the crown, but don't know. Tears fill my eyes, and I reach up with my free hand, desperate to tear the crown from my head, scalp and all.

I tear and pull at it, for I don't know how long, but my fingers are sore from the effort, and it won't dislodge. "You've ruined me." I let myself fall back against the wall and turn away, wishing I wasn't so afraid and pleading in my heart that Austin or Christopher or the vampire queen will discover I'm gone and somehow rescue me.

"You're awake." The male voice leaks through the metal bars, though he isn't nearby, but on the stairs a ways off. His words reach my ears as his footfalls shuffle along the corridor.

I don't respond. Sniffle and wipe my nose on the back of my hand.

"There, there, Wysteria. You're alive, which is better than your cellmate. Be grateful for that," he says, his voice getting closer.

I turn then, knowing from all my parents taught me that it's better to face my problems head-on. The elf on the other side of the bars is menacing looking. His hair is black as a moonless sky and long, hanging down to almost his waist. Half of it is pulled back and secured with an elaborate gold pin in the shape of a three-tiered crown. It stands just above the peak of his head. He's wearing a long navy jacket with golden buttons and filigree. His pants are the same color, but he's shirtless, his creamy skin flawless and hairless. But what's the most striking is his face. A jaw so sharp, it looks like it could cut paper with a pointy chin. His lips are a deep red, and his eyes are gray like storm clouds right before a rain.

After several long moments, he smiles. “I am Tharthus, king of the elves.” As he speaks, he clasps his hands behind his back, revealing more of his bare torso. “Welcome to my realm.”

Behind him are several guards. Dressed in colors similar to the king's, but more their armor is more binding, like a soldier’s uniform.

Tharthus waves his head at the lock on the prison bars. One of the guards steps in front of him and unlocks the bolt, then swings open the door before stepping back and out of the king’s way.

Without a word, he steps into the cell. I think he’ll be disgusted by the scent of rotting flesh, but he doesn’t seem to notice, his eyes remaining on me. “Now, let’s see what all the fuss is about.” From his waistband, he pulls out a knife. Immediately, I know it’s the same one Doug, and then Redyrin used. Leaning in, he cuts into my ankle.

I cry out at the pain, still not used to experiencing it.

Tharthus sticks two of his long and pointy fingers into my blood before bringing it to his mouth. I don’t tell him that there is something wrong with my magic. That I killed a pixilette when I tried to heal him. Instead, I watch as his pink tongue flicks out, and he tastes, then smears the rest of my blood against his teeth. Closing his lips, he lifts his head, his eyes rolling back.

A moment later, he looks at me, his eyes flashing with greed. “My idiot brother and his snot-nosed son were right. Your blood is incredible. I feel my body restoring itself already.”

“But the pixilette,” I say, surprised he didn’t have the same reaction the little pixilette did. I glance over and notice he’s no longer lying on his back. He’s gone. Had the pixilette been faking? Was he alive after all?

“Whatever are you blathering about?” Tharthus asks.

“Nothing,” I say and swallow, working to keep my eyes from wandering the cell and beyond for a sign of the sneaky pixilette.

Tharthus stands and straddles himself on either side of me. His crotch is much too close to my face, and I close my eyes. “What are

you doing?"

Without a word, he places both hands on the crown and uses all of his might to pull. But the same as me, the blasted thing doesn't budge. He keeps at it for much longer than I did and finally steps back, breathing heavily. "You will never be the queen," he says, spitting the words. Fury has changed his eyes, so they are almost black. "I don't care about your DNA. I don't care who you're related to. You will be nothing but a prisoner for as long as you live." His lips curl in a sly smile. "I'll see you again soon." He turns on his heels and exits the cell.

As the guard locks me in, I hear Tharthus order a guard to remove me to the courtesan's quarters. I've read enough historical romance novels to know where that is, and I'd rather stay down here with the dead.

The guards don't remove me right away. When I am once again alone with the rat creatures, I take the opportunity to touch the rest of them. Each changes into a pixilette. This time they don't play dead. They don't thank me either. Just fly away.

Talk about gratitude.

Still, I'm glad my powers are back to working correctly and think about my parents, anxious to speak with them. The new magic Abernathy awakened shudders to life, and immediately, my parents are here.

"Wysteria." My mom comes forward, her arms stretched to hug me, but her arms go right through. I try to hug her back, but it's no use.

My dad watches her and me with sad eyes. "Are you okay?" he asks, doing his best to hold it together.

"Yes," I say, not wanting them to see how afraid I am.

"I knew Tharthus was an asshole, but to keep you down here and chained up? It's monstrous." My mom is pacing back and forth while dad follows her with his eyes.

Should I tell them I was about to get an upgrade to the courtesan's room? No way. "I just wish I could get out of this," I say, pulling on the manacle attached to the chain hanging from the wall.

"There's got to be something we can do." She glances at my dad.

He takes her shoulders, and she leans against him.

"We've failed her," my mom whispers mournfully.

"No," my dad says.

I say it with him. "Mom, that's not true." Playing the blame game wouldn't do anyone any good.

"I think I might have an idea," my dad says.

Mom and I both look at him.

"We're listening," Mom says, crossing her arms, and she comes to stand beside me. It's then she notices the corpse and makes a face. "The poor dear," she says and moves to stand on the other side.

"Remember the Pegasus unicorn we met a few weeks ago. Envy, I believe, is her name." Dad raises a brow, looking for confirmation from my mom. "She told us she died and was buried by an original vampire," he adds.

"Yes, but what does that have to do with Wysteria?" mom asks, her words filled with frustration.

"Envy said she could live again, but only if someone pure in heart awakens her. With Wysteria's power to heal and the kind of woman she's become if anyone can bring Envy back from the dead, it's our daughter."

As dad speaks, my mom starts bouncing on the balls of her feet. "You're absolutely right." She claps her hands together and spins in a circle. Then she pauses. "But what good will that do our Wys?" Her features fall, and her smile becomes a frown.

"Half of Wysteria's magic comes from unicorns. With Envy's help, I think Wysteria could take back the elven kingdom and rule as the queen." My dad's face is triumphant.

“I appreciate your belief in me, but my top priority is getting out of these chains,” I say softly.

“Yes. Yes. But summon Envy. Do your magical whatever to call for her ghost. I’m certain she can help.” Dad is practically beside himself with certainty, and I appreciate it, but I’m not feeling as confident about my situation as him.

Still, it won’t hurt to try. “Okay, dad. I’ll do it.”

Dad takes mom’s hand. “We have to go.”

Mom looks pained. “I love you. Do as your dad says and summon Envy. And if you need us, call us back.” She grips her hands together as though pleading.

“I will. Love you both.” It seems like every time I summon my parents, their time with me gets shorter and shorter. I’m not sure if it’s a cosmic thing or something else, but if their visit period continues to diminish, I’ll be without them again. That thought rips into my heart as I watch them vanish.

Wiping at a wayward tear, I close my eyes and try to think about a unicorn with wings. In the not too far distance, the sound of someone crying out in pain, like someone is being tortured in another part of the dungeon distracts me. My heart aches for them, but I steel myself. I need to focus. For many seconds I try to imagine a black unicorn with wings, but before anything happens, there’s sounds coming from the hallway leading to my cell.

Several soldiers, including the same one who unlocked my cage the first time appears. He pulls a key from his pocket and there’s a click as the lock releases. His eyes are dark and sinister like he intends to make me his next meal. “Are you going to go the easy way or the hard way?” He comes into the cell but stops just beyond my reach.

I don’t know what the hard way would be, and I don’t want to find out either. “The easy way,” I say quietly.

“Good.” He steps close and releases me from my shackle before helping me stand. His supple fingers circle my entire arm. “Let’s go.”

OceanofPDF.com

PINK ROSES

WYSTERIA

THANKFULLY, he does not put me in more restraints, probably because he knows he can overpower me easily. I walk freely, though I'm between two elven guards. The staircase leading up out of the dungeon is soggy, the walls wet and mossy. When we reach the top, I let out a heavy breath. It's then I realize I've been holding it. As I breathe in again, I catch a whiff of mildew and something else—metal? It's difficult to tell.

From the dungeon, they lead me down a hall. The decor is subtle, including white walls with a delicate garland of pink roses along the top. Silver sconces twinkle, bathing the way with light. The floor is white marble, and the ceiling is too.

My shoes and those of the guards ring loud until we arrive at another set of steps. They curve and twirl sharply up and up and up. The further we go, the sicker my stomach gets. This all feels familiar somehow.

In Redyrin's realm, she kept me in a tall tower. It was more rustic than this, but still. I feel like I'm going back in time instead of forward, and I don't like it. Without preamble, I stop, causing the guard behind me to bump into my backside.

"Hey," he growls. "Get moving." He shoves me, but I hold my ground.

"I won't go another step," I say. What I'm hoping my stubbornness will accomplish is unclear to me, but it doesn't matter.

"The hard way it is then," he says and throws me over his shoulder.

I don't fight. It's useless, but I do search for some bare skin, a place I can use my magic. There isn't an opening. He's completely covered

with garb.

When we stop, he's breathing heavily, but I don't care. It should be difficult to imprison me. I hear the first guard unlock a door, and the one holding me whisks me inside and drops me on my butt on the hard wooden floor.

Smarting, I roll onto my knees before rising.

The guards are back at the door, the first one leering. "Tharthus will be in shortly." His eyes rake down my body with a look that says he wants to get to know me better. "Get yourself cleaned up, or I'll be back to do it myself." He licks his lips.

On instinct, I wrap my arms around my body.

He laughs, deep and guttural. "That's what I thought." He closes the door, locking it behind him.

I listen to the echo of their steps as they retreat. Then I sink to the floor and cry. Because it's like the last several months never happened. No rescue or college. No falling in love with Austin. No meeting Sage or taking classes or jungle juice. No freaking freedom. I'm back in a tower. Imprisoned for my magic. For the first time, I wish to be different. Anyone but who and what I am.

"What a waste," I eke out between sobs.

The voices inside my head start up again. They hiss things I don't understand and some that I do.

Your life is exactly as it should be.

Have patience, and all will be revealed.

I do my best to ignore them, but hope still fills my chest. Is it possible good will come of my imprisonment? There is a part of me that doesn't think so. But a spark has been lit. At the same time, I don't want to rule the elven realm. I don't want to be queen. All I want is to return to college and Austin and play the piano duet in the winter gala.

Summon the Pegasus.

Give her a chance.

The voices whispering such things remind me that I promised my parents I would. Her name is Envy. I sit up and wipe my face.

The room is whimsical, with billowing silver drapes hanging from the extra-large window. The walls are made of stone while the furniture is made of wood. It looks hand-carved and decorated with intricate details. There is a door on the same wall as the one the guards brought me through. I crawl over to the nearest piece of furniture, an end table, and heft myself to standing. Then cautiously walk over and twist the fancy robin's egg blue handle. It's the bathroom, and I sigh in relief. Take care of things and then turn on the shower.

The brute of a guard said either I do it or he would, and I shudder at the thought of the elf's hands on my body. That's a hard pass.

When the water is warm, I step in, letting it run against my skin. Immediately, the crown unlatches itself from my head. It slides, and I catch it with both hands, bringing it down so I can look at it. The snakes are there slithering.

Do not set us aside for long, one of them says.

The other hisses in agreement.

Upon closer inspection, the snakes look less like reptiles and more like apparitions. "What are you?" I ask.

Not what but who.

We are known by many names, not that it matters.

The creators of all the realms, including the seven magics.

We created you, dear Rapunzel Wysteria Hart.

For a moment, I debate reminding them of the birds and the bees —about how when a male and female get together. Instead, I just place the crown on the back of the toilet.

Sounds of disgust come from within the metal, and it suddenly vanishes.

I gasp and then sigh with relief that it's gone. “I don’t want it,” I say, holding my head under the water and letting it run down my face for a while. But the guards could return at any time. Or the king. I don’t want to be caught undressed. So I hurry.

When I’m done, I step out and dry myself off. Coil my hair into a thick bun on top of my head. I intend to dress in the same clothes I was wearing, but they have magically disappeared, including my underwear. No question magic is customary here and I’m certain these rooms have been spelled for new arrivals like me, but it’s a bit terrifying.

My old clothes are replaced by new apparel, including a deep navy dress trimmed in silver fur. After putting on the underwear, I stare at the gown. I’m anti killing for the purpose of using fur for clothes. It seems ridiculous, but it’s either the dress or the towel. I offer a silent apology to the animal that died for the stunning garb and slide it on, only slightly curious about where it came from. The fabric is thick and feels like velvet, while the fur makes me want to snuggle. There are socks and matching fur-lined boots as well. I put them on, surprised by how exactly they fit.

As I exit the bathroom, I carefully peer out, hoping the guards haven’t returned, and am relieved to see I’m still alone. Drawn to the window, I make my way over. The pane is thick, and I rest my head against it. Deep snow covers all of the landscape, painting a very white picture. Evergreens hang heavy. Smoke rises from chimneys of little houses in the distance, and beyond them is the ocean. I peer at it closer.

Something about the landscape feels familiar.

I’m not sure why. Not much is the same as the flat land of Wyoming. Still, the feeling won’t go away. Somehow I’ve been here before. As I debate how that’s possible, I feel the wretched crown reattach itself to my head.

“No,” I groan out mournfully, stepping away from the window and

throwing myself on the couch. There are a dozen pillows in various shades of blue and gray decorating the seat. I grab the one closest to me and bury my scream in the fluff.

Call forth the ghost of Envy.

Do it now.

I sometimes struggle with doing what I'm told. Maybe it's the rebellious streak that roars through me. Perhaps it's just genetic, but I resist, covering my ears with my hands. Sadly, that doesn't do anything to stifle them, and they repeat themselves.

You must hurry.

Promptly, Wysteria.

I growl out my frustration. "If I do this, will you stop talking to me? I don't like you inside my head?" I speak aloud while staring up at the white-washed ceiling.

Neither of them responds. At least they aren't liars. "Fine."

Closing my eyes, I try to imagine what a black unicorn with wings looks like while repeating Envy's name over and over. Abernathy said the spirit would only come if it wants to. After several minutes without luck, I think Envy isn't interested in helping me. As I'm about to give up, I feel the slight rush of wind as the windows push open. In soars a ghostly apparition of the loveliest unicorn with wings I've ever seen.

"Hello. Hi. Greetings, Wysteria," she says, stomping her foot while tucking her wings at her sides.

All of my irritation forgotten, I rise and move over to the creature. "You're Envy?" I verify.

She whinnies softly and lowers her head as though she wants me to pet her nose.

I try, but it's no use. My hand goes right through her head.

"Correct. Right. Yes," she says. "And you're Wysteria. The rightful queen of the elven realm." Her violet eyes take in my crown.

I grimace. “That’s what I’ve heard,” I say, crossing my arms.

“You don’t want to be?” she asks, stepping closer, invading my space without actually touching me.

“No,” I admit softly.

She whinnies again. “Lower your head. I want to show you something.”

“Okay?” I’m confused, but duck to make sure my head will pass through her horn. The shart tip pricks against my forehead, and I’m no longer in the courtesan’s rooms but running through a forest.

Fear eats at my insides, and I glance back. Those chasing me are gaining, and I push myself harder. When I reach the glade, I stop. Dozens of unicorns in various shades of white exit, and I am surrounded.

“Our youngest sibling. Black as the night.”

“Despicable.”

“Let’s destroy her.”

They move closer and closer, and I realize I’m not me any longer but am inside Envy’s mind. Seeing her past and living her life.

From behind, someone kicks Envy, shoving her to the ground. And then she's being kicked and stabbed by all of them until she should be dead. For a long time, they take out their anger on Envy's body. When they finish, they stomp and neigh, speaking all manner of horrible things before walking away, leaving Envy to suffer alone.

That moment passes, and I’m walking in a forest with a man—an elven man. He has wise eyes, though they are kind when they look upon me and Envy.

“You are healing nicely? How is the pain where they removed your horn?”

“My king. Devoran. Sire, that is right,” Envy responds. “The wounds are gone. There is only a little pain.”

It breaks my heart that they ripped away her horn. That is where

unicorns hold their power or most of it.

“Good,” he says. The man Envy walks with is the old elven king. My ancestor. “And how are you healing emotionally?”

Envy shakes her—I shake my mane. “I wish to say I am better. You’ve done so much for me. But my emotional injuries are abysmal, cavernous, profound.”

Devoran reaches out and touches the side of Envy’s neck, petting her slowly. “Take all the time you need. It’s difficult to be special. Unique. But it’s that difference, that uniqueness that will save the world and not just once but multiple times, you mark my words.”

We look up at the king, wondering what he means, though Envy doesn’t ask.

“I can see you aren’t sure, but you will know when the time is right,” the king adds.

The scene changes again. Envy is near a waterfall. “You need the healing power of a unicorn horn, don’t you?” Envy asks a strange creature with the most painfully beautiful face, her body is covered in fur like an ape, and she has glorious wings. It’s then I remember a long-forgotten story my mom told of the original vampires, Silindra and Sharra. This being is an original, I can tell.

“Your horn isn’t fully grown. I couldn’t ask that of you,” the original says.

“Silindra, it’s my destiny, my fate, my calling, to do this,” Envy replies, her voice strong and confident.

Before I can get my bearings, the scene shifts again. We are in the midst of what looks like a war. Trolls and elves, and other supernatural creatures are slaughtering each other. Pain radiates from several wounds in Envy’s body. She is lying on her side struggling for breath.

Silindra is there. Concern evident on her lovely face. She uses magic, and a forcefield surrounds us.

“Come closer, Silindra,” Envy says.

The original gets on both knees, leaning her face next to Envy’s. “I’m here, Envy.” A faint scent of lilacs surrounds us, and I know it’s Envy’s magic leaking from her body and into the earth beneath us.

Envy takes a deep breath. A black swirling mist surrounded us, and I sense great inner strength radiating from the unicorn’s body.

When the mist vanishes, Envy’s body is still broken—except for her horn. It spiraled up to a point, fully-grown and beautiful, swirled with silver and indigo. And I’m surprised I can see it, but at once realize it matches my crown exactly.

“Envy, your horn. It’s stunning,” Silindra says.

“It’s my gift, present…” Envy coughs, and blood dribbles from her mouth. I feel her life sucked from her body, and I begin to shake. Then Envy’s spirit lifts and hovers above her body.

With the forcefield still around us, Silindra digs a deep hole and carefully lays Envy’s body within before burying her. “I’m sorry, Envy, but I’ll make sure your sacrifice wasn’t for nothing.” With more magic, Silindra covers the grave with lilacs. Tears drip from Silindra’s eyes as she cries out her grief over Envy’s passing.

“Let this part of the land never be free of lilacs,” Silindra says. With those words came hundreds of beautiful lilacs. “Nothing save true love can ever disturb this resting place, Envy, for you are truly the greatest of all the unicorns.”

With sadness in mine and Envy’s heart, the unicorn leans back, separating my mind from hers. We are back in the present. “I saw you die,” I say, tears filling my eyes.

“Yes, and now you see where my body is buried, submerged, hidden.”

Her words confuse me. “Yes, but what am I supposed to do?” My parents believed she could help but I figured they meant her ghost.

“Find my body. When Snow White separated the realms, my body

came into the elven realm. All you have to do is locate a field of lilacs."

I appreciate that knowledge, but I'm still confused. "Silindra said you could only be awakened by true love." I care for the unicorn, but it isn't true love.

"Your love for Austin is true, correct? Right? Accurate?"

I swallow at his name because I miss him ferociously. "Yes," I reply, my voice hoarse with emotion.

She nickers, nodding her head happily. "Find me, and I can help you take back the elven realm."

"Okay," I say, though I'm not convinced. Because first, I need to get out of this damn tower.

Envy begins to fade. "And Wysteria? If you think this realm is familiar, that's because it is. Redyrin kept you captive here in an unknown part of the realm."

I start at her words. "How do you know?"

Her wings extend, and she flaps them slowly. "Redyrin told me."

"You spoke with her?" That doesn't seem like a good thing. Was Envy working with Redyrin? If I resurrected the unicorn, would Redyrin somehow return as well?

"She sought me out and asked me to help you, as well." Envy shakes her mane. "Death has a way of clearing up inadequacies within us. Redyrin died with good in her. She is working to make amends. Don't lose hope. I'm closer than you think." Envy is nearly gone, but she's still speaking. "Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a field of lilacs. Let the power in the crown, as well as your own, take you there."

I'm too stunned to respond. The unicorn spoke with Redyrin. Had my parents as well? Before I can ask, Envy is gone. Without hesitating, I decided to take my destiny into my own hands. I want out of this tower, and I'm desperate to find Austin.

I throw myself back on the couch. Close my eyes. In my mind, I think about a field full of lilacs, searching for where Silindra buried Envy. The crown flares to life. I feel its heat against my head, but I don't stop.

And suddenly, I'm standing in a field full of lilacs. All around the landscape is mounds of deep snow, but the cold of winter hasn't affected Envy's meadow. It's strangely beautiful. *Magical,* I think.

I glance down at myself, surprised, and see that it isn't my body that's here, but my spirit. Trying not to be freaked out, I float around the landscape in my ghostly form until I come across an area where the lilacs are the thickest. Kneeling, I place my hands on the grassy mound, thinking I have no idea what to do next.

"Envy," I whisper. As I expected, nothing happens, but there is a light breeze that stirs the hairs on my neck. Again, I say her name. "Envy, in the name of true love, I call you forth. Rise from the grave." I pause, thinking I sound stupid. "Please," I add.

Immediately, the ground begins to shake and rumble. I fall back as the mound is peeled back, and Envy flies out of the grave. She drops in front of me, waving her head and flapping her wings. For a moment, I think she'll stomp me to death, and then I remember I'm not actually here. My spirit snaps back to my body like a rubber band, and I open my eyes.

There is a noise coming from the other side of my rooms. Someone or several someone's are on the stairs. They'll reach my prison soon.

Rushing to the window, I push the glass open. In the distance, I see a dark spot. "Hurry," I plead. The voices are closer. Someone jiggles the handle. In a last-ditch effort, I use my might to push the couch in front of the door. But the guards get the lock undone and are forcing their way in.

I turn back in time to see Envy and rush to the window, stepping up on the sill. "They're coming," I shout.

There's a grunt, and the couch is out of the way. Envy is still a

ways away, but there isn’t time.

“Don’t you dare,” the guard shouts.

But I do. And I step off the sill just as the guard reaches out for me. As I fall, the hem of my dress tears, but I don't care because I'm free.

Envy dives and swoops underneath me, catching me just before I hit the ground. “That was close,” she says and shakes her mane, laughing. “But, wow, it feels good to be alive.”

With the wind in my hair and the menacing guards at my back, I laugh with her. “Yes, it does.”

OceanofPDF.com

UNABLE TO FIGHT

AUSTIN

I'M NOT one to imagine ways to die. There was never a point, not since Christopher changed me into a vampire. Between vampirism and my elven blood, I have the privilege of living eternally. But when my uncle Linroe shoves a hot blade in my eye for the fifth time in as many minutes, I can't help wondering if death is a possibility.

Christopher moans beside me. The giant hook poking out of his chest is dark red, almost black from dried blood. Somehow the wound won't close around the metal, and blood still leaks from it and down his clothes and boots in a steady stream onto the dirt floor beneath him.

A pool of blood has formed and has nearly reached mine.

There's a blade sticking out of one of Christopher's eyes too. Evan left it there after stabbing him multiple times.

I want to tell my surrogate vampire father that everything will be okay, but I don't want to lie. Because I don't know that it will. I'm still in shock that we are imprisoned like this. Before we left Sharra, we hoped to rescue Wysteria and help her take back the realm. But a week ago, as soon as we crossed through, we were captured and brought down into this hell-hole. It's dank and smells of dirty seawater and rotting fish.

The guards used magic on us, making it, so we were unable to fight or move. They hung us like meat from the ceiling, skewering us back to front and through the sternum with oversized fishing hooks, like those used for catching tuna. The needle has a barb on the backside, so if I try to pull myself off, it digs into my skin, causing pain, the likes of which I don't understand. All of the metal is soaked in potent spells I can smell and created to keep vampires from

escaping. They knew we were coming, thanks to my horrible uncle Linroe and my cousin, Evan. It hurts nearly as much as the hook through my chest that they betrayed me. If I live through this and see either of them again, I'll tear out their throats without thinking twice about it.

Linroe yanks the blade from my eye and wipes it on a dirty cloth. "Even as a child, you were a difficult boy. That's why your dad had to beat you so often. He needed to whip some sense into you."

"Is that right?" I eke out. My voice doesn't sound like my own, probably because of the pain thrumming from every inch of my body. It's like the magic on the metal has leaked into my veins. Usually, my wounds immediately heal, but whatever spell is on the blade keeps the gash from closing.

"Now then, are you ready to listen, nephew?" Linroe shoves the knife-edge back in the fire burning brightly to our right.

"Que? No hablo asshole," I say and laugh, though it quickly turns to a cough.

Evan kicks me in the stomach, sending me spinning around like a top of a child's plaything before I smack into Chris. "Stop being a dick. You can still come out of this intact. All you have to do is be willing to serve us." He chuckles harshly and spits in my face.

Christopher moans but doesn't say anything. He's worse off than I am, and I'm worried.

"Austin, hang in there," Leva says.

"Quiet, vermin," Evan snaps, walking over to the birdcage holding the pixilette. He slams his hand against the cage so hard, I think it will break, but it holds steady.

With my one good eye, I glance in the pixilette's direction. I forgot she was down here with us. Her prison looks like a birdcage, but I know the enclosure is made up of more than just sticks. Otherwise, Leva would be free already. Something is happening to her body, as well. Her hands and feet are replaced with what looks like small, hairy

paws.

Someone who is light on their feet glides down steps and heads into the corridor outside the room before reaching us.

“How’s it going?” a man asks. His voice is light and airy, and something else. I hear anger just under the surface.

“Great, brother,” Linroe says. “We will have Austin on our side soon.”

“Lies,” I hiss.

Evan returns and slams his fist into my nose. Blood spurts everywhere, and I see red, but only briefly. He didn't wound me with magic, and my fractured nose begins to heal immediately. “Shut it, cuz!”

The king, his name is Tharthus, comes into view. “You coming over to our way of thinking, son?” There’s a gleam in his eyes I don’t like. The elven king isn’t someone to be trifled with. When I don’t respond, he goes on, “I didn’t think so.” Tharthus walks over to the blade, heating in the fire. Picks it up. It’s red-hot again, and I cringe.

“Don’t worry, Tharthus, we’ll break him,” Linroe says, walking over to his brother, arrogance lifting his nose and chin.

“I think not,” Tharthus says and shoves the full length of the sword directly into Linroe’s stomach.

I gasp at the brutality.

Evan, who’s still standing near me, doesn’t move. “The fu—?” All the color drains from his face. He’s in shock, not that I blame him. “Dad,” he ekes out, stepping toward dad.

Linroe turns to look at his son. “Help me,” he says, raising a hand as she falls to his knees. Blood soaks his shirt.

“Don’t move,” someone says. I didn’t hear this additional person come down, but I watch the elven guard clamp manacles on Evan’s wrists.

While that’s happening, Tharthus steps back and slices the blade

across my uncle's neck.

That's when Evan reacts. "No," he screams, shaking himself from the elf's hold and falling to the ground beside his dad.

Tharthus leers at Evan with a smile that is as evil as him. "You did your part," he taunts. "You served your king. But did you really think I would let either of you live?" Evan tries to stand, but Tharthus pushes him back to his knees.

"We brought you Wysteria," Evan begins. "You said—"

My cousin doesn't get the chance to finish.

Tharthus sends the blade across Evan's neck.

I cringe, closing my eyes against the trauma for the briefest moment. Evan's eyes get wide, and his mouth is in a permanent O as his head slides from his body. Alive, I couldn't stand either of them, and I'd even had murderous thoughts about them. But seeing them dead is painful. They are—were the last of my family. I shudder at the sight of Evan's Body crumbling into a heap on top of his father. There isn't anger, nor grief, but fear. Somehow, I must live so I can save Wysteria.

Tharthus turns to me, placing the tip of the sword at my throat. "Now, then. You'll hang around, won't you?" The murderous asshole is trying to be funny since I am hanging by my ribs to an enormous magical hook. I want to snap his neck. For now, I don't reply.

"It doesn't matter," Tharthus says, pushing the blade deeper into my neck. The sharp edge cuts my skin. "The only reason you won't die yet is that I have plans for you."

"I won't help you," I say viciously. "Besides, I have nothing to offer."

"Well, that's not true. You're a half-elf and all vampire. An excellent and deadly combination—a supernatural hybrid."

Sickness winds through my belly as I try to imagine where he could be going with his line of conversation. "So?"

“So,” Tharthus begins before moving over to the fire and shoving the blade into the flames. “I can work with that. See, I want to rule over all the realms. Snow White is weak. She thinks humans deserve to live in harmony with supernaturals, but that’s unrealistic. We are the superior species. Humans were created to serve us like donkeys, not to be coddled and bargained with.”

“It’s good to have goals,” I say and roll my eyes.

“Snow White is the most amazing queen who ever lived,” Leva shouts, her little voice cutting through the silence.

Tharthus laughs. “My dear little one, you’re wrong.” He glances at the pixilette before moving over to Christopher. “And you?” He shoves Christopher, making my surrogate father swing back and forth lightly.

Christopher moans. “Tharthus, let me go,” he says softly.

“Oh, I will release you once your blood is completely drained.” He smiles, and a jolt of fear shoots through me. Tharthus isn’t going to kill Christopher, but he intends to make him suffer for eternity. That’s worse than dying. “By the looks of it, you're nearly dry. All of your disgusting vampire blood is in the dirt.” He kicks at the puddle beneath Christopher, splashing it with the tip of his boot. “Instruct the others to bring in the chest.”

“Yes, sire.” The guard jogs away and shouts that the king is ready before returning.

Four soldiers appear with little grunting or effort, carrying not a chest like what I was expecting, but a casket. It looks to be made of metal. There’s a grate at the top big enough to see through. “No,” I whisper severely as comprehension washes over me.

“You’re smart, that’s good,” Tharthus says as the guards set down the casket to the right of Christopher.

“You can’t bury him alive.” The idea of being buried deep in the earth sends convulsions through me.

Christopher glances at me, a look I can’t understand on his face. It’s like he’s accepting his fate. Like he’s okay with it.

“Chris?”

“Don’t worry about me,” he responds.

“Listen to the Hunter. After everything he’s done, he knows this is better than what he deserves.” All four guards work together to remove Christopher from the hook and place him in the casket on his back. My vampire friend looks withered and frail, like an old man. I watch as the guards put the lid on and lock it shut.

“Stop. I’ll do anything,” I say. I can’t help it. Seeing Christopher sealed inside the casket sends me spiraling inside. I lost my mom and dad. My uncle and cousin. Wysteria. I can’t lose him.

“Good,” Tharthus says, then turns to me. “After a decade, if you’ve created enough vampires-elven hybrids, I’ll think about searching the bottom of the ocean floor to find him.”

“What? No!” The prospect of spending even a day at the bottom of the ocean terrifies me.

“You thought I was going to bury him in the ground, but you thought wrong. I’m going to throw his desiccated carcass into the sea.”

“Chris!” I shout, even though there is no point. I’m trussed up and can’t move.

The king smiles. Anger burns within as he waves a hand at the casket. “Take him away.”

The guards heft Christopher and carry him from the room.

Leva is crying. I can hear her from her cage but don’t acknowledge her. I’m afraid Tharthus will hurt her if I do. Beyond her, my vampire hearing picks up something else, something that can’t be right. It sounds like Wysteria, but she’s laughing.

“Bring in the girl,” Tharthus commands, his gaze on someone behind me that I can’t see.

The soft scent of rose water fills my nose, as does the smell of innocent blood. A guard shoves a lovely young elven woman into my

view. I'm ashamed to admit that my fangs press against the insides of my mouth. As much blood as I've lost, the woman smells like life. Thoughts of draining her while watching the life leave her eyes as her warm blood fills my mouth and coats throat rush across my mind. I shudder and strain against my restraints, ignoring the pain.

Tharthus watches me and chuckles deeply. "You can have her, boy. I know Snow gave you the Hunter's gift. Drink and fulfill your duty to me, your only kin. Create hybrids for me, and you can live in luxury at my side.

Tears fill the elven woman's eyes. If anything, her fear makes her more desirable.

Tharthus nods, and the guard carefully pushes the girl close.

At that moment, there is nothing except for my need. I grab her by the arms and sink my teeth into her flesh.

OceanofPDF.com

LOWER ME

CHRISTOPHER

I'M BARELY conscious as the guards heft my casket up the steps. At some point, I pass out, my dreams fraught with all of my sins. When I come to, I can hear sea birds calling and the push and pull of the waves on the shore.

"Did the king tell you how far we are taking him out?"

"No, but Tharthus isn't a forgiving man. Better settle in. We could be gone for days."

"Ahoy, can we come aboard?" one of them calls.

"State yer business."

"We have the prisoner, fool," another guard says.

"Very well. Careful on the plank."

Their boots clomp up. I hear the wood creak and feel it sway as the guards carefully make their way onto what I'm guessing is a ship. After more jostling, they lower me onto the deck.

"Don't leave it there. Get him below."

"Yes, captain."

I'm lifted again.

"How do we get this down those stairs," one of them asks.

"Easy."

And I feel myself falling briefly before the casket crashes onto the floor.

"Watch it, you damn fool. Want the boat to spring a leak?"

"No, sir."

"If we do, it's your ass that'll keep it stopped. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

My metal home is standing on its end, the way it landed when the idiot guards dropped me. There isn't much to see, especially not with my limited view. A pile of rope, dark wood that makes up the ship, and barrels of what I'm guessing is wine. Vermin skitter about, but their blood smells tainted. Still, I'll take any kind I can get.

Within minutes, a few of the rat-like creatures scratch at the base of my casket, but their nails won't allow them to climb up the smooth surface. "Keep trying," I whisper. If one gets close enough, I won't like it, but I'll drain its blood to restore my strength.

Above, I hear the crew getting ready to cast away. Before long, the ship makes its way out of the port, and it sails out to what I'm guessing is someplace where no one can find me. The idea of spending even a day in the ocean fills me with dread, but if I'm still alive, then there is still hope. I cling to that as the day turns to the night, followed by another day and a night.

A storm whips the ship around like a rubber duckling floating in a child's bathtub. It's nearly dawn, though the dark sky doesn't reveal much sunlight. Salty seawater rages in through the round windows causing the barrels to fall over. My casket does too, and I'm facedown. Above, I hear the men shouting. It doesn't sound good, and then there's a loud crack. The boards on one side of the ship shatter, and water rushes at me until I'm buried and floating.

It's a strange sensation, feeling the weight push me down as water gets into my lungs, drowning me again and again though it doesn't bother me.

After some time, either hours or seconds, I don't know. Time stands still in the deep. Something large bumps against my casket, and then I see an eye so large it fills the window of my metal prison.

I'm past feeling fear or worry. There is only conscious and unconscious. My life is out of my hands. Whatever my fate, I'm consigned to it and close my eyes.

I'M BEING JOSTLED, carried, I think. My watery grave is ascending, and my first thought is that it's already been a decade. Austin must have given in to Tharthus, not that I blame him. If the roles were reversed, I seriously doubt I would've continued to resist. My hope is if Austin has allowed the king to sway him, that he will listen to me, and I can talk sense into him.

But first, I need blood. I'm so hungry. The need is beyond anything I've ever felt. My insides are eating themselves, and if I had strength, I might try to suck blood from myself, not that it would do any good.

While I continue to ascend, I can't help thinking about Snow White's blood and Jasmine's too. Plus, the women whose blood flowed so freely just before Wysteria returned. More than that, I think of Sharra and the way I betrayed Snow White. All of my sins weigh heavily, and I wonder if Tharthus wasn't right when he said I got what I deserved. Despite the good, I've tried to do since. Can good outweigh the bad? That's a question I don't know the answer to and probably never will.

The casket bobs out of the water, and I'm being dragged, then pulled. The sound of huffing and puffing and scraping as my prison is drawn from the sea. The sun beats brightly down, burning my skin, and I wonder if Tharthus has created this as a new form of torture.

Suddenly the sun is blocked by a vision. Her skin is sun-kissed with long dark hair that she twists to one side. "You poor dear," she says, her voice like a song as she peers at me. Then she's gone, and my heart yearns for her return. Until I hear the snap of the locks, and she hefts the lid off. "Who did this to you?" she asks, clucking her tongue in distaste, probably because I don't smell right.

I can't speak as thirst overwhelms me. As beautiful as she is, all I can focus on is the thrumming of her heart. "Come closer," I say, but the words come out garbled. I try to use my compulsion though I sense I'm too weak for it to work.

Still, she kneels beside me and leans in so that her face is directly

above mine. “I’m Ellora.”

Again, I try to speak, but it’s like sand has taken up permanent residence in my throat.

“You’re a vampire?” Her gorgeous green eyes widen, not in fear but with interest. “I’ve never met a vampire before.” She bats her lashes inquisitively.

I want to ask her how she knows what I am. My guess is it’s the color of my skin or maybe because my eyes are red. “Thirsty,” I say, desperate for the warmth of her blood in my mouth.

“You want my blood?” She glances at her hands. Sunlight surrounds them, giving her fingers an unearthly glow. “Very well,” she says and places her wrist on my mouth.

With all the effort I can muster, I bite into her skin.

She lets out a small gasp but doesn’t move away.

Blood slowly flows into my mouth. With each swallow, I feel better and better until I’m able to grab hold of her hand with both of mine, pressing her wrist further into my mouth. She doesn’t know what she’s done. By offering herself as a sacrifice, I’ll live, but I don’t know whether I have the strength to let her live.

“It’s okay,” she says. “Take as much as you like.”

I’m surprised by her kindness, and that’s all it takes to retract my fangs and release her.

“You look much better already. Handsome even,” she says with a smile. “What’s your name?”

I sit up, noticing that she’s completely naked and gloriously breathtaking. “Christopher,” I reply, thinking I've waited my whole life for her.

OceanofPDF.com

SLIGHT GROAN

AUSTIN

I STARE into the eyes of my would-be prey and flash my fangs. The elven woman closes her eyes but doesn't shriek or pull away, even though she could. I'm weak.

"Go on then, boy. Have your fill. Just don't kill her." Tharthus laughs darkly.

I want to drink from her. I'm desperate for her blood. As I pull her shoulder to my mouth, I convince myself that I'll just take enough to get strong. Then I can defeat the king. I close my eyes against what I'm going to do. Go against everything I've been taught. Everything I believe about my species. I'm not a monster, but I'm so thirsty.

"Hurry up. I've already got another dozen waiting for their turn. Once you've created my army, we'll go against Snow White, defeat her, and I'll rule all of the realms with you by my side."

His crazy talk is all it takes for me to decide I can't go through with drinking from her, no matter how badly I need it. I shove her away, though my strength is sapped, and she barely moves. But I glance up at Tharthus, resolve in my veins. "I won't help you," I say.

He removes the blade from the fire and shoves it into my gut. Pain burns through me, and I bite down on the inside of my cheek, drawing what little blood I have left into my mouth. When the hilt of the sword touches my skin, I let out a slight groan. "I don't care what you do to me. I won't do what you want."

Tharthus yanks out the blade and throws it to the ground. "I see that you are speaking the truth. You're stronger than I thought, but you will obey me." He kicks the elven woman in the stomach, and she cries out, scuttling away from him. "Bring me Wysteria. Perhaps after Austin watches me torture the woman he loves, he'll change his

mind."

At Wysteria's name, I cringe.

"That's what I thought." Tharthus laughs again. "Get her now," he shouts.

Boots smack down the hall and up the stairs. I keep track of him, using my vampire abilities. He climbs and climbs until I think he can't go any further. When he reaches his destination, I hear the slightest gasp. "She's gone."

Relief fills my guts, and I close my eyes. If Wysteria escaped, then I can die a happy man. Instead of returning to my cell, the guard takes off in the opposite direction. He doesn't want to tell the king what's happened, and I don't blame him.

Tharthus waits impatiently a few moments before going over to the elven woman. She presses against the wall when she sees him coming for her. "There, there, young one," he says, brushing some hair off her face. "You want to serve your king in any way I ask, don't you?"

Her eyes are bright with fear. "Yes, your highness."

"That's what I thought." He pushes her dress up and pushes her knees apart as he positions himself between them.

"Stop it," I shout. I cannot allow him to force himself on someone right in front of me. I don't care who he is or that I don't know the woman. No one deserves to be treated in such a way.

Tharthus glances back, his features dark and hungry with lust. "If you won't change her, then she is useless to me, except for pleasure." He tilts his head to one side. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

"Shouldn't I start with you?" I ask. "If you want to rule all of the supernaturals, shouldn't you become a hybrid first?"

Tharthus rolls his eyes. "Nice try, nephew. I don't trust you now. But once you've changed enough that I have plenty of hybrids loyal to me, I'll have you change me then." His eyes flash in anger. "Now, are

you going to do as I command or not?" His gaze falls on the elven woman still cowering near him.

"Very well," I say and swallow down what feels like sharp razors that have found their way into my throat.

Tharthus tucks in his shirt. "You are a soft-hearted sap, aren't you?" He stands, taking her by the arm and dragging her back over. "Now then, don't waste my time. Change her now."

Changing any creature, supernatural or not, into a vampire is against the law. When Christopher changed me, I became unsanctioned. And I wonder how the vampire queen knew I was changed. Whether some part of her vampire magic allows her to see when a creature has become like her. If that's the case, maybe she'll send help. I take the woman by the shoulders. "Tilt your head," I order.

She does as I command, and I sink my teeth into her pulsing vein. Blood fills my mouth, and for several seconds I am lost. There is nothing except her blood as I drink and drink until I feel nearly whole. I can also feel the twisted magic on the hook still piercing through my sternum. That part of my body won't heal.

Since I have the Hunter's magic, changing someone into a vampire is easy. But it's also strange. As her blood flows into me, so do her memories, including her likes and loves, her secrets and desires. It's like she becomes a part of me. Did this happen with Christopher when he changed me? I know the answer is yes. With the elf, I now know her name is Gida. Though her blood and body are innocent, her mind is full of hate for the king. Tharthus killed her family, making her witness his wickedness. As I watch her little brother and sister beheaded and her mom and dad drawn and quartered, my hatred for my uncle builds too.

Gida, I shout into her mind.

She shudders. *I-I can hear you.*

Do you feel the change happening?

Yes, she says slowly.

When the transformation is complete, you must kill the king, I say.

She shudders again and doesn't respond right away. Finally, I feel her sigh internally. *Done.*

In the king's arrogance, he's put himself in a very vulnerable position. Gida will be stronger, faster, and more powerful than him.

On top of that, my strength grows as well.

When her change is finished, I stop drinking, but keep my fangs inserted into her vein. *Are you ready?* I ask into her mind.

Without responding, she takes off. In an instant, Gida has the king kneeling before her, his neck twisted at an odd angle.

His eyes are bugging out of his head, but he doesn't speak. My uncle is pissed. "What do you think you're doing? You serve me. Release me now, and I'll consider letting you live."

I shake my head, and with all the newfound blood in me, lift up on the chain and push myself off the hook. It hurts, and I groan but don't stop until I'm free.

Tharthus and Gida look at me.

I glance down at the hole in my torso just below the ribs, waiting for it to heal. It doesn't. And Gida's blood gushes out of me like a bloody thunderstorm. I fall to my knees, pressing my hands to the hole.

Gida looks nervous.

I swallow. "It's okay. Do what must be done."

She nods and uses her new strength to clamp down harder on the king's head, but she can't go through with it.

"You're weak," Tharthus shouts, trying to escape her grasp.

At the same moment, there is stomping or clomping of hooves on the steps. It doesn't sound like guards, but a horse, which is strange. "Hurry," I shout, trying to stand. If I can get the door closed, maybe I can keep whoever is coming out until the king is no longer a threat. I

lift one leg and put my weight on it, but fall forward. “Kill him, Gida!” My strength, my life force, is literally rushing out of my body. It’s the magic in the spell. It’s then I realize there is no cure for me. My uncle, King Tharthus, never intended to let me live—at least not at his side like he said. It was just another damn lie.

OceanofPDF.com

WITH PLEASURE

WYSTERIA

As Envy and I search the elven realm for a way to escape, three pixilettes come into view. They carry something strange between them. When they see Envy and me, I wave. One of the pixilettes lets go and flies over.

"You're the one they call Wysteria." The male pixilette, dressed in all green, speaks as though he knows me.

I tilt my head to one side, trying to place him. "Yes, I'm Wysteria. And who are you?"

He bows briefly. "Houda," he says. "Will you help us save our friend? She's been spelled, and the magic is changing her into a vermin, the way I was." He pauses and points back at the others. "The way we all were before you saved us."

That's how I know him. He pretended to be dead until I turned my back on him. "I'd be glad too." I pat the side of Envy's soft neck. "Can you find us a safe place to land?"

"Certainly. Happily. With pleasure," Envy responds.

It's cute that she says the same thing three different ways when she responds. "Thank you, Envy."

"Hang on." She tilts us downward.

I wrap my arms around her neck as she aims us toward a particular spot where the snowy-covered forest butts up against the sandy beach. It's like two different seasons in one picturesque location.

"It's because of Tharthus," Envy explains. "The realm is rebelling against his rule over the land. That's why it's winter in the forest and over most of the land. Once the frigid cold reaches everywhere, life will slowly die off, and the elves will have no choice but to abandon their realm for another.

I think about humans and supernaturals in my realm. It's a delicate balance that sometimes doesn't feel balanced at all. "How do you know all of this?" I ask her as she lands on the beach, her hooves sinking slightly into the sand.

"Devoran and I have been keeping tabs since Tharthus killed him and took control. The realm won't last much longer."

As she speaks, I feel the cold slowly advancing onto the beach. "I wonder," I say and touch my hand to the invisible barrier between the cold and the hot air. Then I call forth my power, allowing my magic to work.

At my magic, the cold recedes. At the same time, the voices in my crown begin to whisper.

You must take your place first.

The realm's control is too strong.

First, you must dethrone Tharthus.

The pretend king must go.

"I understand," I say softly and withdraw my power back into myself.

"What?" Envy asks.

"Nothing," I respond as I climb off her back.

The three pixilettes bring the one suffering from the enchantment and carefully lay her in my hands. As soon as I see her pallid face, I gasp. "Leva!"

"You know her?" Houda is surprised.

"Yes," I say, and while cupping Leva in my hands, I send forth my healing magic. It covers her in indigo light until I can't see her any longer.

As the three pixilettes watch, the one whose name is Houda speaks. "She was being held in another part of Tharthus's dungeon with a hybrid called Austin and the vampire known as Christopher."

"Austin is here?" My heart pounds against my ribs. "Is he alive?"

The pixilettes face turns sour. “Last I saw, he was drinking the blood of some elven woman.”

“That doesn’t sound like my Austin.”

The pixilette shrugs. “I don’t think he had a choice. Tharthus wants him to change all elves loyal to him into vampire hybrids so he can take over all the realms.” He clucks his tongue in disgust. “Why is it always the narcissists who wind up in positions of power?”

“Good question,” I say, my eyes flicking back to my friend as my magic slowly diminishes back into my hands. When it’s gone, Leva is whole once again. “Leva,” I whisper. “Are you okay?”

Her lashes flutter against her tiny cheeks before she opens her eyes. “Wys?” She coughs, expelling the last of whatever enchantment was shifting her.

I can’t help the laugh of joy that escapes. “That’s right. I’m here.”

She sits up, her hair, wings, and clothes changing to blue—the same dark color as my magic. “Thank you,” she says, standing. “My thoughts were getting all wobbly.” She sticks out her tongue. “I was craving dead bodies,” she says and gags.

Leva only eats fruits and vegetables, so I can understand why she’s repulsed. “But you’re back to yourself now?”

“Yes.” She gives me a broad smile. “I feel great.”

I’m relieved, but now my thoughts turn to Austin. “What is Tharthus doing to him and Christopher?”

Leva lifts into the air, testing out her wings.

Envy comes to stand beside me, and the pixilette clasps her hands together in glee. “You’re astonishing,” she says, my question forgotten.

Envy whinnies happily. “Thank you, Leva. So are you.”

My pixilette best friend flies over to Envy’s glorious horn and touches it. “It’s warm, and I feel your power flowing through it.” Her voice is awed.

Though I'm worried about Austin, I can't help but smile. "She really is the best, isn't she?" I rub my hand along her side.

"You're making me blush," Envy says, but I hear the happiness in her voice.

"Will you rule the elven realm?" Houda asks, sucking all of the light-heartedness from my heart.

I face him, knowing the time for cheeriness is gone. "Yes, Houda, I will."

He bows, and the other two pixilettes whose names I don't know bow with him. "Very well. We will seek out those loyal to Devoran and the rightful heir."

"Thank you," I say. "And I will do everything in my power to stop Tharthus."

"You are the true queen." Houda claps a hand over his heart before flying away.

I watch as the other two fly after him. Then to Leva, I say, "Take me to Austin and Christopher." I hop onto Envy's back.

Envy nickers, extending her wings and flapping them a few times as though she's checking that they still work.

Leva clasps her hands together. "Christopher—" She doesn't finish.

"It's okay," I say. "Just take me to Austin." Urgency eats at my insides. Even though Houda said Austin was drinking from an elven woman, I don't care. As long as he is alive, we can work through everything else.

At least that's what I tell myself.

Envy lifts into the air.

It doesn't take long for us to reach the castle. At the back entrance, I slide off Envy before she touches down.

"Where do you think you're going?" Envy huffs.

"I didn't think you'd want to go down into the dungeon," I say, my eyes taking in her beautiful ebony wings. Her body was buried in the

earth for many, many long years. To go down, beneath the ground once again, I shudder for her.

“Nonsense,” Envy says, her voice strong and determined. “Where you go, I go.”

“Envy is right,” Leva says, crossing her arms.

“Very well, then lead the way.” I am in awe of their courage, and even though my insides quiver with the idea of facing Tharthus, I will be brave because of my friends.

We descend the stairs together. I keep thinking there should be guards coming after me—after us, but it’s quiet. Our footfalls echo and bounce around us.

“How much further?” I ask, biting down on my lip.

I reach the bottom step, and we are moving down a narrow corridor, the walls slick with moisture and moss. Envy is behind me.

“Not much farther,” Leva responds, her voice so quiet, and I barely hear her.

Sounds are coming from the room at the end of the hall. It’s Austin, and I take off, running past Leva, my fears replaced by my desperation to see him. It feels like forever, even though it’s only been a few weeks.

When I enter the room, I’m not prepared for what I see. An elven woman has Tharthus on his knees while Austin tries to convince her to kill the king.

Her scared eyes flick to mine.

Austin’s do too.

Tharthus uses my distraction and jumps up, hitting the woman in the face before rushing toward me.

Then Envy enters, blocking his escape, and he skids to a stop. “Let me leave this place,” he demands. His eyes are wild. He knows he has nowhere to go.

“You will not be leaving here as king of the elves,” Austin says. He

takes me in, and his features soften, but only briefly. “The king must die.”

“I’m your kin. Would you kill your blood?” Tharthus’s shoulders sag as he steps toward Austin and then pauses.

“I saw first-hand the way you treat your own blood. Uncle Linroe and Evan. You killed them like they were little more than an inconvenience on your shoe.” Austin’s face is hard, and his eyes flash red.

I don’t speak, my heart fluttering slightly at the sight of the man I love. Without a doubt, Austin won't hurt me. I'm not afraid, even though he is built for death. In one breath, he can snap his uncle’s neck. His humanity holds him back. I sense that about him. Austin might be a vampire, but he's a good man.

“They were different,” Tharthus says, but even I can hear that he isn’t telling the truth. The elven king knows he’s trapped, and there’s no way out. “But fine,” he says, grabbing me by the throat, the spelled knife Doug and Redyrin used appearing in his hand. “If I die, then I’m taking her down with me.”

Austin glances back at the elven woman, who has fallen to her knees. Fear lingers along the lines of her face.

“Get out of the way, you old cow,” Tharthus shouts at Envy.

She lifts her head and neighs, irritated.

“Tharthus,” I say as he tries to drag me with him. With both hands on his arm, my power flares to life. Images of the king’s life dash across my mind. Like a reckoning, I see every deed he’s done, every memory he has, from the time he was a boy until this moment. I witness the whippings his mother gave him. The way his father taught him to take without guilt. If Tharthus showed even the littlest bit of compassion, his father or his mother would beat it out of him. By the time he became an adult, there was only a vast and unquenchable hunger for power. Death would be welcome. I sense that about him, too, though it’s buried deep.

Even though I know he should perish, I can't allow myself to go there.

From beyond the walls, a strange chanting has started.

"Hu! Hu! Hy-huh!"

Leva covers her mouth.

The elven woman's eyes widen with fear.

Envy has moved out of the way, and Tharthus walks us over to the base of the stairs. "Hear that? That's the sound of my warriors. They will come for me, and you will pay for what you've done," he says into my hair. His breath is hot with fury. "Of course, I won't kill you. Your blood is too important to me. But I will use your body, abuse your mind, and make you wish you were dead."

"You will do no such thing," I say, though I don't know where the words come from. Immediately, the crown on my head flares to life, its power causing my skin to tingle.

The voices hiss inside my mind.

You did good, Wysteria.

We will take it from here.

Yes, the time has come for us to separate from you.

Tharthus will become one with us.

We will take him back to ourselves.

Destroy his body and take his essence into us.

Then we will try again.

Yes, try again.

Like we always do.

As we must.

I quake at the voices in my head. Whatever their plan, it doesn't sound pleasant. "You aren't going to like what happens next," I whisper, my voice sounding a lot like the ones in my head.

"Oh, but I think I will." Tharthus tightens his grip.

I swallow in despair as the crown detaches from my head and hovers like a flying disc at eye level. I feel the king tense before he pushes me away and runs for the steps. I whip around, struggling to keep myself upright. The crown skitters around and starts after Tharthus. As it goes, it separates into two dark snakes that become two entities. It's hard to tell whether they are male or female as they zip in and through Tharthus.

The king screams and tries to fight against them, but it's useless. They can't be stopped. He looks at me, his eyes full of terror. The things continue to drive around and through him, growing bigger and bigger until Tharthus is no longer visible. The shadows seed to fade together. Tharthus's cries turn to agonizing moaning before he becomes quiet. It's like they are eating him alive—body and soul, devouring him until he is no more.

When Tharthus and the shadows are gone, I fall against the wall, trying to catch my breath. Whatever they were, I hope I never come into contact with them again.

"What the hell just happened?" Austin is directly behind me, one hand on my shoulder.

At his nearness, I lean into him. "We no longer need to worry about king Tharthus." That's all I can say because I don't know more.

Leva flies in front of my face. "He's gone?"

"Yes," Envy says, shoving her nose past Austin and licking my cheek.

I pat her softly. "Thanks to you," I say and turn, holding out a hand for Leva. I meet the gaze of each of those in the corridor with me. "Thanks to all of you."

OceanofPDF.com

OFF THE SNOW

WYSTERIA

AT THE TOP of the stairs, Austin and the elven woman whose name I learn is Gida step in front of me.

The sounds are even louder, as is the clanging of swords against shields. They bang in unison before those holding them chant the same words over and over. “Hu! Hu! Hy-huh!”

“Why are they doing that?” I ask, working to fight down my nervousness. Since Tharthus is gone, I should be fine, but I’m worried about those who supported the king. How will they react when they learn he is no longer their leader, but I am.

“I guess we’re about to find out.” Austin pushes open the door, rushing out into the sunlight. It gleams off the snow. Gida follows after him, baring her fangs, followed by Leva, then me, and finally Envy. She whinnies nervously and takes to the sky.

Directly in front of us and as far back as I can see soldiers standing together in organized lines. Each is dressed in the same dark armor from head to toe. In one hand is a long sword and in the other and shield. Made of some silver metal, they gleam in the light coming off the snow and from the sky.

The front line steps as one toward us. “Hu! Hu! Hy-huh!”

“Should we flee?” Leva asks.

“They need to know their king is gone,” Austin says, standing in front of me—my vampire protector.

Just having him close eases my mind. He’s alive. He’s close. He’s mine, and I will never be without him again. “I must speak with them,” I say, my words sounding braver than I feel.

“Not until we know they aren’t going to try and kill you,” Austin says, taking my hand in his.

The warmth of his touch leeches into me and trickles up my arm like a happy buzzing. I wish we were alone, but my wish is wasted. There is still much to do. “Only one blade can do that,” I reply, knowing that might not be true. Magic can penetrate my skin, just as Austin’s teeth did. “Let me try.” I press myself against Austin in a hug, pleading with my eyes for him to trust me.

He nods. “I’ll be right beside you.”

I press my cheek against his chest. “I wouldn’t want you anywhere else.”

Together, we walk out into the snowy tundra. I’m not wearing the right shoes for the occasion, but I ignore the snow as it melts in between my toes. Raising my free hand into the air, I shout. “Let me speak.”

They don’t immediately listen, and the front line takes another step toward us. Their faces are stoic and menacing. A warrior in the middle steps forward without the others. “Where is our king?” he demands.

I swallow, nervous about how to begin. To them, I am no one. It doesn’t matter that I am the true heir. How are they to know? Aside from my secret captivity with Redyrin, I haven’t lived in this realm. “I —” I begin but falter as a red circle of magic begins to form in the air beside me. I’ve seen such a thing before when Sage traveled from the human realm to Sharra. This time Snow White steps through.

Dressed in a stunning deep red gown, the bodice is tight, the front laced like a corset with black ribbon. The skirts billow around her. Her lips are ruby red, and her hair is dark as night. Piled on her head and topped with her crown.

She gives me a look, one that says she will take it from here. In her hands is another crown, this one deep blue with sky-blue gems surrounding it. I wonder what that’s for, but don’t ask. Without a word to Austin or me, she walks forward until she’s directly between the army and me. “I am Snow White, queen over all supernaturals, and you will listen to me.” Her voice is strong, confident, and

straightforward. I hope one day to be able to address those around me with the same kind of assertiveness.

The one who stepped forward bows. The rest follow suit, giving me a view of just how massive is Tharthus's army.

Even Envy, who is flying in the air, bows her head. Myself and the rest of our little band do the same.

"Rise," Snow White says. Then to the warrior who stepped forward, she asks, "What is your name, soldier?"

His face reddens. "I am Quin, your highness."

"Good to meet you. Please step back in line."

"Yes, ma'am." He immediately does as she asks.

"Now, then. A wicked king has ruled you all for far too long. His was not the line meant to rule your land, and Tharthus has wreaked havoc here. But all of that has ended. Because the rightful heir to the throne is here."

"If you don't mind my asking, who is she?" He looks directly at me.

Snow turns and holds out her hand. "Come here."

I try to pull from Austin's grasp, but he doesn't let go until we are close to Snow. She smiles at him, and he releases me. Snow takes my hand and lifts it into the air along with hers. "This is Wysteria Hart. She is a direct descendent of Devoran, your beloved king."

"Not to step out of line, but how can we know of a certainty? Tharthus said the same thing." The soldier is becoming bold.

I sense Snow's body tighten, but she doesn't let it show. "Because I hold in my hands the crown worn by your king. As the lore goes, only one directly descended can wear it without being cursed to an eternity of pain."

I've never heard the story. Cursed with eternal pain doesn't sound good. I cringe because what if Snow White is wrong?

She senses my trepidation and drops my hand, turning to me. "You

need not worry. Without a doubt, you are the rightful heir."

I nod because I have no other choice.

Snow White places the crown on my head. It's heavy, and I imagine it's more than the metal's weight, but the burden of caring for an entire people. When she's adjusted it on my head, she turns. "Your new queen. Wysteria, the Healer, and Queen of the Elves."

Silence permeates the land for several long beats.

Then the front line steps forward and bows.

The rest of the army does the same.

"They are yours to command," Snow White says to me. "I have no doubt you will lead them well."

There is power in the crown, and it increases my sight, allowing me to see each of those in the army for who they truly are within. Most will be loyal, but some still support the king and his desires. They will need to be dealt with, but not today. I release Snow's hand and step in front of Snow and Austin. "You give me great honor," I say, but my voice doesn't carry. I clear my throat and try again. "Today is a new day," I say, digging deep and allowing my voice to be heard by every soul around, including the dead.

The ghost of Devoran makes an appearance and is standing beside the army. There is a smile on his face, one of encouragement.

"You don't know me, but that will change immediately. My first order of business is to heal the realm and free it from the eternal cold." I lift my hands in the air and call forth my power. It's united to the crown, which I now understand is linked to all who've led before me. That influence strengthens me, and I send my healing magic into the air.

A beacon of indigo light cuts straight through the frigidness and shatters into a billion pieces before covering all the land. As it slowly falls like twinkling blue snow, it takes the chill with it. The air turns warm, and the snow melts until all of the snow is gone.

Sounds of excitement and awe pass through the army. Some of those who are still loyal to Tharthus change their mind, and their loyalty turns toward me.

“She truly is the rightful heir,” I hear those in the army exclaim to each other.

Once my magic has healed the entire land, the group, whose numbers have increased exponentially, including hundreds of men, women, and children, watch me in anticipation.

I’m unsure what to say.

As one, all of the elven people chant, “All hail the queen!”

“Is that for me?” I can’t believe they’ve accepted me so readily.

“Only one of Devoran’s direct line can wear the crown,” Austin says, squeezing my hand. “As soon as it was placed on your head, everyone knew the truth.”

I wonder how he knows, but decide I’ll ask him later.

OceanofPDF.com

BLOOD TO SURVIVE

WYSTERIA: ONE WEEK LATER

"Do you, Austin Morrison, take Rapunzel Wysteria Hart to be yours forever and always? Do you promise to love her, cherish her, and treat her with respect and admiration? Do you promise to keep her feelings close to your heart at all times?" Sage watches Austin waiting for him to answer.

I can't help but stare at my soon to be husband as well. The man is hot as hell in his elven garb, including black pants, a long navy jacket with silver accents. His dark hair is combed, though there's a light breeze coming off the water, and it ruffles his hair, making it messy, the way I like it. But it's his eyes—so full of love and joy. I've never seen him so happy, and I know they reflect the way my eyes look.

Even though it's been a week since the Unknowns took Tharthus back to themselves and Snow gave me the elven crown, it feels like only minutes. Because I've been with Austin, and time moves much differently when I'm near the man I love.

"I do," he says, smiling at me.

"Damn good thing," Sage utters, then turns to me. "Are you sure you want to marry a vampire?" she asks her voice heavy with sarcasm. "Gorgeous or not, he needs to drink blood to survive." She rolls her eyes and gags.

Envy whinnies, irritated, nearby. She doesn't feel the same way about Sage as I do. The rest of the group laughs nervously. Vampires aren't well-liked in this realm. But Austin will be. The people may be leery of him now, but that's because they don't know him. Once they do, they'll fall in love with him, the same as I did.

We're in a secluded little area of the beach. Nearby, the waves push and pull lazily while sea birds dance across the sky.

Only the three of us are in attendance, as well as Snow, Dorian, Abernathy, Gida, Envy, my dearest friend Leva and her new boyfriend, Houda. I am surprised Snow and Dorian were able to come. Trolls invaded Sharra a few days ago. Or, at least they tried to. Snow's army shut them down efficiently within twenty-four hours. Ever the peacemaker, Snow, signed a treaty with the creatures and they've returned to their own realm, a new King leading his people. Hopefully, there won't be any more war for a long time.

In this realm, Austin and I formally announced our wedding news and invited all of the citizens to attend a celebration. Even at this moment, thousands are gathered back at the castle. It's like a renaissance fair with singers, musicians, and jugglers. People are selling their wares, all kinds of food, and baked goods. Games are played in the great courtyard by children and adults. It's a glorious day on so many levels, which is why Austin and I wanted our wedding to be a small affair. One last thing that is just his and mine.

When I told Sage that Austin and I wanted to marry, she got the okay from Snow to officiate. Even with her attitude, I have no regrets. She is like a sister to me, and I couldn't imagine life without her.

"Wys?" she asks, shifting a little nervously.

I nod. "Yes. Or course I want to marry him. With all my heart, yes," I say and squeeze Austin's hands.

"Whatever," she says and then smiles. "Then by the power vested in me by the queen of the vampires and all—"

Leva clears her throat as she flies between Austin and me. She's carrying my crown while the one called Houda is holding Austin's.

"Oh, right." Sage snaps her spell book closed, and it vanishes into thin air amid a bunch of sparkles. "You two are going to be queen and king of the elven realm. Let's make it official." Her smile widens. "Houda, please hand your crown to Wysteria."

The pixilette flies over, and I hold out my hands. When I take the crown, the pixilette wipes his brow. The crown isn't light. "Thank

you," I say.

He bows deeply. "It is my pleasure, Queen Wysteria." He disappears somewhere behind me.

"Place the crown on your vamp—Austin's head."

I didn't tell her or Austin that I wanted to say a few words, but I do it anyway. "Austin, thank you for caring about me. Thank you for saving me, even from myself. And most of all, thank you for your love. Life was hard after my parents died, even when I didn't remember it. I was a prisoner in a tower and missing out on life. But thanks to Leva," I smile at her. "She rescued me from my prison and brought me to you." My eyes fill with tears. "I love you, Austin." I place the crown on his head, adjusting it until it's just right. The silver crown with seven points looks good against his dark hair, tanned skin, and handsome face.

"Leva, give the crown to Austin."

The pixilette does, then kisses his cheek. She says something to him, but it's so quiet I can't hear. Then she kisses my cheek and flies behind me, presumably so she can be next to Houda. I'm happy those two have each other. Both have agreed to be on my council, as has Envy and Gida.

"Wysteria." He says my name, and I shiver. "You're always keeping me on my toes, and I wouldn't have it any other way. You read my letters," he says and pauses.

In the days since the end of Tharthus, Austin and I talked about them. Well, I apologized, and he kissed away my worries. At that thought, I shudder. The man is such a great kisser.

Austin's eyes darken. "So you know how lost I felt when you were gone. If anything, it was you who saved me. You're easy to love. You make me a better man." He looks at Sage. "A better vampire."

The small crowd chuckles, including Abernathy. The dragon sends a plume of smoke into the air around us.

"With all my heart, I will love you, serve you, and be the man you

need for the rest of our days." He places my crown on my head.

Sage produces a blue, silver, and red chord. "Take each other's hands."

Once my hands are in Austin's large ones, Sage drapes the chord on my wrist before wrapping it around our hands and placing the other end of Austin's. Then she utters a spell, and the chord catches fire.

The group gasps and cheers as the chord, which isn't hot at all, sinks into our hands before it vanishes.

"No take-backs, the two of you are bound, body and soul, for as long as you both shall live," she says and steps back. "Austin, you may kiss your queen."

"About damn time," he says and pulls me to him.

His lips brush mine, and I melt.

Everyone cheers.

After congratulations, I walk over to Sage. A week ago, when I told her Austin, and I were getting married, I also asked if she wanted to be on my council. It's a selfish request because I want her to be with me. She said she would have her decision by today.

When she sees me coming, she smiles. "That dress is obnoxious," she says, taking me in.

"How can you say that? You created it for me." I glance down at the exquisite white dress. It's sexier than I would've chosen, the straps thin with a small V in the front and a deep V in the back that goes past my waist. Leva did my hair, wrapping it up in a bun and placing small white flowers that look like roses within. There are similar roses made of material on my dress and down my extra-long train.

She laughs and pulls me into a hug. "You look amazing," she says.

"Thank you." I pull back but keep my arms around her waist. "So?" I leave the question hanging.

She glances down a moment, then meets my gaze. "I can't," she

says simply. “I like teaching. Therapy is really helping, and it’s good to be around kids who need me.” She swallows, and I can see she doesn’t want to let me down.

“I understand,” I say and hug her tightly to me again. “Those kids are lucky to have you in their lives. Come and visit again when you can.”

“You better believe I’ll be here often.” She looks at me, mischief on her face. “There’s this elf—Finn is his name—totally hot. He’s already promised me a date.”

I laugh. “So you’re ready to parrrr-tay?” I ask, repeating one of her favorite sayings.

“Definitely.” She giggles and I can’t help but join in.

OceanofPDF.com

FIND HIM

WYSTERIA

THE CELEBRATION WENT on until the early hours of the next morning. By the time Austin and I reach our room, I'm exhausted but don't want to sleep.

"What did Leva say to you during the ceremony?" I've been curious ever since.

He chuckles softly. "She said she'd make my life miserable if I ever hurt you."

I laugh with him. "So she threatened the king? I may have to talk to her about that."

"No need. I think it's sweet she is still protecting you. Plus, I don't intend to give her cause to fulfill her threat." His thumbs brush against either side of my face.

"And Christopher?" I want Austin, but I need to settle the questions pressing against my heart first.

"Gida and Envy left to begin their search. We will find him."

"Good." I turn and kiss the tip of first one of his thumbs and then the other.

"There is still something else on your mind," he says softly.

"Should we return to school and play our duet in the Winter Gala? It's in a few days." I don't care either way. Sage spelled two grand pianos into our main sitting area in the castle to play anytime we want. And other things too. I have this fantasy of making love on a piano. It's silly, but I'm sure Austin will help me fulfill it at some point. Maybe later today.

He trails a finger down between my breasts. "Do you want to?"

It's a simple question, but at that moment, I know the answer.

“No,” I admit. “I thought I wanted to be normal, to live in the human realm, train to be part of the Supernatural Task Force, and live the life my parents always wanted for me. But now?” I rest my hands on his chest. “Now I feel the full force of my place here in the elven realm. With you.” I take his thumb in my mouth and suckle, desperate to get back to kissing and hopefully more. “What if I want a certain kind of pain?” I ask, looking at him shyly from under my lashes. I can’t help thinking about the last time Austin drank from me. There was a little discomfort followed by a lot of pleasure. I want more of that.

Austin’s eyes darken with need. “Well, my Queen, I am here to serve.” He tugs me to him, his lips suddenly on mine. And I’m lost in him as he presses my mouth open and explores me with his tongue. A quiver of hunger flares to life low in my belly. I tangle my tongue with his, and he growls low, grabbing hold of my hips and pulling me close.

I want to wrap myself around him, get all the way intimate, and make love to him, but my dress is in the way. As he trails hot kisses down my neck, I plead, “My dress.”

He looks at me, and his eyes flash red for the briefest moment. “Let me help.”

“Hurry,” I say, knowing with his vampire speed, we can be in each other’s arms in no time.

“No way.” He spins me, so my back is to him, and unzips my gown. “I’m going to take my time.”

I glance at him over my shoulder, no longer the least bit tired and no longer worried about anything but whether or not Austin will be happy with me. “Austin?” I want to ask him because I’m afraid. He’s experienced. I’m not. Will I be a disappointment to him?

He puts a finger over my lips. “You’re perfect,” he says. “Do you want me to draw you a bath?” he asks, his mouth working magic across my shoulder blades.

“Only if you take one with me.” I reach back, desperate to touch

him.

“I think I can swing that.” He helps with the straps, and the dress falls into a lavish puddle at my feet. Austin takes my hand, and I step out of it. Then he spins me, so I’m facing him. “You’re the most exquisite woman in the world, my queen.”

I want to offer a snarky comeback, but his hands are on my hips, and his lips are at my neck. I tug his jacket off of him and undo the buttons on his shirt, desperate to touch his bare skin. He senses my need and kicks off his boots before undressing himself. I can’t help but admire him. “You’re pretty damn gorgeous yourself,” I say, walking to him.

He winks, and together we head into the bathroom, where he stops the tub and turns on the water. Filling it will take a while. It’s big enough for more than two. Then he adds some scented oil.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” I ask playfully. It's certainly possible I stink. We danced and danced at the celebration until I was sweaty.

“No, this oil is an aphrodisiac.” He places the bottle under my nose.

“It smells good,” I admit. “But you smell better.” I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down so I can kiss him again.

“Is that so?” He caresses my skin, bringing his lips to mine for a brief kiss before he kisses his way along my jaw and down to the vein where my neck meets my shoulder.

My thighs shake at the thought of him drinking from me. “Please,” I whisper.

He doesn’t hesitate and slowly presses his fangs into my flesh. My skin gives way, parting readily for him. It’s uncomfortable, but only for a moment. And then it’s all gratification.

I cry out, my hands clinging to his back as he starts to suck. I kiss his shoulder, his arm, any place I can touch with my mouth. “Don’t stop,” I say.

He does stop too soon, though, and he looks at me with a combination of wonder and exultation. “Thank you for that,” he says, his voice hoarse, some of my blood still on his fangs.

I pull him down and kiss him with all the love in my heart. When we pause briefly, I say, “You never need to thank me. We are one now. My blood is yours.” I wrap one leg around his hip, and he lifts me so I can cling to him with my thighs.

His big hands trail down my back, cupping and caressing as he’s kissing me and suckling until I don’t know where he ends and I begin.

When the tub is full enough, Austin climbs in. Then he holds out a hand for me. As I step into the warm water, I have to admit the scent of the oil is heady. Austin sits. I can’t help but admire his glorious body. Toned. Muscled. Sinewy and massive. I kneel in front of him with my knees on either side of his.

He kisses me again, his tongue filling my mouth, hungry with passion.

As I kiss him back, all I can think is that I’m the luckiest girl in all the realms.

OceanofPDF.com

BOTTOM OF THE OCEAN

WYSTERIA

I WALK ALONG THE BEACH, wearing a loose sundress while carrying my flip-flops in one hand. The warm sand squishes between my toes, soft and fine. Each time a wave comes in, it brings more water. Low tide will soon give way to high. Everything I'm walking on will once again be buried in the crisp and clear water.

The sun has nearly reached its zenith, and I shade my eyes, taking a deep breath, enjoying the salty aroma. It doesn't matter that I was born in the wilds of Wyoming. My heart yearns for the organized chaos that is the sea, despite my years of imprisonment. The sea will always be my happy place. Well, okay, my biggest happy place is in Austin's arms.

My new husband is back at the castle. He intended to come with me, but Gida returned with an update on her search for Christopher. I'm worried about the vampire hunter. How he must be feeling all alone at the bottom of the ocean. Not dead, but not living either. The experience must be terrifying.

At the thought, I glance left, inland, allowing my gaze to travel along, past the trees until I am staring at the top of my tower. The one I spent seven years living in as a prisoner. I used to gaze out at this very view. My heart softens for the girl I once was staring out that window. A lot has happened since then.

Redyrin is dead. The memory of Evan killing her still haunts me. And it's for that reason I've come back to the place where she kept me. I want to speak to her ghost. Envy said she helped—that she was seeking redemption. I have little hope that's true, but I need to try. Redyrin and I aren't blood relatives, but I did consider her my mother before I knew any better. Hopefully, she'll hear my call and do me the

courtesy of answering my questions.

I need closure, and I hope by talking to her, I'll get it.

Closing my eyes, I think of Redyrin's dark hair. I imagine her face, her clothes, and the light and sweet scent of her perfume.

"Hello, Wysteria," she says.

I stiffen and look at her. The witch came quicker than I expected. She's wearing her favorite color dress, a burgundy gown with long sleeves and a tight bodice that accentuates her curves. "Redyrin," I say quietly. "Thank you for coming."

"I wanted to," she says, glancing up at the tower. A look of nostalgia softens her ghostly features. "Living here with you was the happiest time in my life."

Her words irritate me. After my parents died, I saw Austin's dad leave my house. He was speaking with another man. Without a doubt, Austin's dad killed my parents. My biggest question is, why? I think I know. He wanted to use me as leverage to return to the elven realm and live like a royal, the same as what Linroe and Evan wanted. That's my theory anyway, but I don't know for sure. I still don't have definitive answers. What I do know is Redyrin took me right after my parents were murdered. It would seem Redyrin was working with Austin's dad, except she must've betrayed him and kept me for herself. That doesn't feel right either.

I could try and summon Austin's dad, Linroe, or Evan. Technically, now that Austin and I are married, his relatives are mine. I casually asked Austin once I found out he can see the dead if he's seen his father. He told me he never wants to. His mother, on the other hand, he's seen her a few times, and I feel his heart healing. I'm sure if I explained to him why I want to see him, that Austin would change his mind. My Vampire King will do anything for me. But I can't be that selfish.

So, trying to summon them is plan B. If I can't get answers from Redyrin, I might do it myself because I need to heal too. "What

happened the night my parents died? Were you working with Austin's dad? Did you deceive him so you could use me for your own purposes?" I grind my hands into fists. I want answers. She better give them to me.

"You don't know?" She's surprised, and her face lights up. "But then I guess you wouldn't."

"Know what?" I ask, my teeth clenched together. "And don't lie to me."

"No point threatening me, Wysteria. I told Envy about you. I've been trying to help, to redeem myself." Her words aren't the least bit sincere. Whatever help she offered Envy, it wasn't out of the kindness of her heart.

"Is that so?"

"I came to speak with you, didn't I? I want to tell you everything." Redyrin smiles. "Austin's father, Mack, and I were in a relationship."

She throws the sentence out like she's speaking of the weather. My pulse quickens, but I tamp it down. There's no way Austin knew about Redyrin and his father.

"You're wondering if Austin ever met me?" She shakes her head. "No. Mack felt it best to keep our affair a secret—even from his brother." She giggles then. "The funny thing is, I was in a secret relationship with Linroe too." She brushes some of her hair off her shoulder. "The Morrison brothers are good lovers, as you well know."

What I know is the lengths she'll go to get what she wants. "You used them?"

"I mean, of course, I did." She clucks her tongue. "I knew who they were, and it didn't take much to figure out what they wanted. Neither of them was happy living in the human realm as regular citizens, not when they believed they should be here, living like royalty."

"It was easy to drop a hint here and there about who you were and the opportunity they were missing by not using you to their advantage." She paces back and forth in front of me as she speaks.

I track her, waiting for her to continue. When she doesn't, I ask, "They were in it together?"

Redyrin pauses mid-step and laughs. "Oh, no. Those men were too proud for their own good. One could barely stand the other. Their relationship bordered on passive-aggressive. They would've been pissed if they found out I was sleeping with both of them. So, it was easy to help them develop a plan to get rid of your parents. Mack had resources and was much more efficient." She closes her eyes a moment. "He never told me his exact plan, but even when we weren't together, I tracked his movements. The night he went over to your house, I heard them fighting. I heard the gunshots." Her eyes become two slits of wickedness. "I heard you come home. I watched you go inside. It was important for my spell that you find our parents dead. Seeing such a horrific scene would help with the memory spell I placed on you." She claps her hands gleefully. "And it worked like a charm. Better even than I hoped."

"So, you didn't pull the trigger, but you orchestrated the whole thing." My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest.

"That's right." Redyrin sighs. "What I didn't think about was Mack's deathbed confession when he told Linroe what he'd done. That's when Linroe knew I betrayed them both, but it was a moot point because no amount of magic or supernatural power could find me. It all worked perfectly until you escaped." A shadow crosses her face. "All good things must end, I guess." She glances down at herself. "I mean, look at me. Dead. Nothing but a ghost."

"That's the thing about plans. They never go the way you expect them to." Each word comes out in furious anger. If she weren't already dead, I would seriously consider murdering her for what she did to my parents, me, even Austin.

"Very true." Redyrin moves toward me, holding out her hands like she wants to give me a hug.

I sidestep her. "I order you to leave." I'm breathing heavily. It feels

like a panic attack is coming on, and I fall into the sand. Water laps at my feet and my back. The high tide will soon swallow me if I don't get up, and I'll be washed out to sea.

"Goodbye, Wysteria. I'll see you sooner than you think." She's gone. I can feel her presence evaporate back to the After Life.

I try to sit, clawing my way away from the water, but I'm seeing spots, and my chest feels like an elephant is crushing me. My vision diminishes, so it's like I'm in a tunnel. All of my efforts are sluggish, and the water is too powerful. I roll onto my back as a wave washes over me. It pushes me toward the shore before pulling me with it back toward the ocean. When the water recedes enough that it's only covering my legs and feet, I roll onto my side, coughing and sputtering.

Before the water can bury me again, I'm lifted into strong arms. "Deep breaths, Wysteria. Come on. In and out."

I blink several times. At the sight of him, I immediately feel better. "Christopher!" I throw my arms around his neck. "Austin is going to be so happy to see you. How did you escape?"

He gives me a broad smile. "You're okay?"

I nod, biting my bottom lip. "Much better." It's true. The spots are gone, and the invisible elephant has left my chest.

"Easy," he says, setting back onto my feet.

When I'm no longer wobbly, I smile. "Gida said Tharthus put you in an unbreakable iron casket."

"I don't know who Gida is, but they are right." Christopher starts down the beach back in the direction of the castle. It's a long walk, especially at such an unhurried pace.

Envy and I made plans that she would come and get me in a few hours.

"I take it your happy to see me too, right sister?" He looks back at me, an enormous smile lighting up his whole face.

“You better believe it. But Austin…” I pause. For the first time I use my healing powers on myself to send away the effects of my panic attack as I run to catch up to him. “I still hadn’t figured out a wedding present yet. You’re perfect.” I take his hand, squeezing it joyfully.

He stops. “Wait, you’re married?”

I nod, feeling my smile grow more prominent. “I love him so dang much.”

He blows out a breath as several emotions change his features before he smiles indulgently. “Very well.” He hugs me tight. “Let’s go find Austin so I can welcome him into the family. Then I can tell you what happened when we’re all together.” Christopher wraps an arm around my waist and starts to run. He doesn’t stop until we’re inside the castle and in the throne room, where Austin is still speaking with Gida.

When Austin sees us, it takes a minute for him to understand.

“Look who I found,” I say, biting my lower lip, beaming with delight.

“I hear you married my sister,” Christopher says, crossing the room and hugging Austin. They clap each other on the back several times.

“She is my everything,” Austin says, glancing at me nervously. “Sorry, you weren’t there to witness our wedding, man.”

“Shit happens. Besides, I wouldn’t want it any other way.” Christopher’s smile fades as he looks at us.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, coming over and hugging them both.

“Isn’t the Winter Gala tonight?” Christopher looks at me and then Austin. At that moment, he seems more like a father than a brother.

“We weren’t going to participate,” I say, shrugging. “What’s the point? We aren’t attending college there anymore. We’re needed here.”

“Nonsense.” He crosses his arms. “Get dressed. The two of you are going to that gala. I want to hear this duet you’ve been talking about

off and on for months."

I look at Austin, who smiles.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"Might as well. My aunt and uncle will be thrilled to know we're playing after all."

"Then it's settled," Christopher says, eyeing Gida. "Now, bring me some blood. I'm parched."

OceanofPDF.com

TANGLED CHRISTMAS

OceanofPDF.com

CHRISTMAS DAY

"YOU KNOW it's Christmas Day in the human realm, Wysteria, and we *are* elves." Austin, who lays beside me in bed, smirks, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

I hadn't thought about us like that before. I mean, technically, he's right. Neither of us is like the elves running around wrapping presents or putting gifts under the tree or anything like we see in Christmas movies in the human realm. But still… "True," I say, rolling onto my side and scooting closer to him. Our bed is enormous. It's easy to get too far away from each other when we're sleeping. "What did you have in mind?" We finished celebrating our biggest gift-giving holiday of the year last night by hosting a ball. There was great music, magic, dancing, and all sorts of delicious food. "Aren't you tired? I thought we'd spend the day in bed."

"Well, my lovely wife," he pauses and brushes some hair off my cheek. "I'm not opposed to that either." He pulls on my thigh, so it's resting on his hip.

Desire tingles throughout my body. How I love him. We've been married for nearly a year, but my intense need for him hasn't lessened. If anything, it's intensified. Austin's eyes darken as he leans up on one elbow, letting the covers fall, revealing his gorgeous chest.

"Wysteria. I need to talk to you." It's my friend, Leva, outside our bedroom door. Her tiny voice is urgent. I might be imagining it, but even her wings beat insistently. She's also on my council. If she's here this early, then something must be wrong in the kingdom.

I'm still new to the job as Queen of the Elves, but it hasn't been so bad with Austin by my side. "Just a minute." I sigh internally as Austin nuzzles my neck, letting me know what I'm giving up.

Austin is a vampire. It's damn sexy and beyond intimate when he

drinks from me. My blood has changed him, so he's more like me than he used to be. Not quite a healer, but he can sense what a person needs.

"I'll meet you in the shower in five," I say.

"You better." He grazes my neck with his fangs before rolling out of bed.

A shudder of anticipation runs through me, but I take a deep breath and pull on my robe. At the door, I tie it closed to cover up my nakedness. "Hey, Leva," I say and smile, leaving the door open as I head over to the windows. It's another beautiful day in the elven realm. The trees are vibrant green while the sunlight twinkles and dances across the ocean. "Is everything okay?" I ask when she flutters over and lands on my shoulder.

"In the elven realm, yes. The party last night was epic." Leva smiles. "But—" She pauses and hovers over so I can see her face. Her ruby hair, wings, and outfit shift to azure. She's a rare pixilette. Like a chameleon, she can change colors to blend into her surroundings. "Have you heard of the one called Clara?"

I have. Everyone has. She is another of Snow White's adoptive daughters. "She's ten now, isn't she?" I push the curtains open further, thinking I might want a swim in the ocean today, especially if Austin comes too.

"More like fourteen. She's growing faster than Jasmine did." Leva returns to my shoulder and sits wearily. She celebrated hard last night.

"What about her?" I ask, going over to a chair and sitting.

Leva flutters over to the breakfast table beside my chair. "She's run away to the human realm again, and Snow White has asked that you and Austin seek her out."

"Did she say why us?" I figure it's because Austin is a vampire. But there's Professor Pops and Kenmei, even Christopher, that could help. Professor Pops still lives in the human realm—at least the last time I

checked.

“She’s been spotted at the hospital in Gothel Springs. Her sister, Silindra, spoke with Snow, and they both agree that you specifically should be the one to help her.”

I’m about to ask why, but Leva continues, “Since you’re the fountain of youth and you have healing properties, Silindra wants you to heal the rebel out of her.” I hear the confusion in her voice. She doesn't understand the request any more than I do. “Or something like that. I guess they’re worried the darkness in her will win out again.”

“She said that?” Apprehension fills my heart. Clara is an original vampire, and blood is part of her daily diet. My first thought is she’s drinking the blood of the weak. That would be wicked, indeed. “What is she doing there?”

“As far as the informant can tell, nothing nefarious. She was seen reading a story to one child. Helping an elderly man walk around the hospital.” Leva shakes her head. “She’s using compulsion on the doctors and nurses there to remain in the hospital, which, as you know, is against human laws.”

“It seems like she’s doing good, though.” I cross one leg over the other and rest my hands on the table.

“Agreed, but she isn’t supposed to be in the human realm, and she left without asking or telling anyone.” She hugs her arms to herself. “The Vampire Queen and Silindra want you to get to her and… heal her before the Supernatural Task Force, or the chayot find her. That’s the real worry—that they might hurt Clara. The chayot don’t like her and will use any excuse to capture and imprison her.”

“But if she’s doing good…” I continue, still working on wrapping my brain around what’s needed.

“Snow is especially worried about how Clara will respond when cornered or if she feels threatened. Then there could be a fight, and humans might get hurt.” Leva clasps her hands together.

That makes sense, I suppose. “We will leave immediately then.” I

stand, but a thought holds me in place. “What if there isn’t any good in her?” There’s no way Austin will agree to kill her. Vampire or not, Clara is a teenager. That’s all he’ll see.

Leva’s eyes get wide, and her shoulders sag. “You are to let Snow White know immediately.”

I’m about to ask what the Vampire Queen will do, but I don’t want to know. “Hopefully, we’ll arrive before the chayot or the Supernatural Task Force.”

“That is Snow and Silindra’s hope as well.” Leva flies over to the door and stops, a curious look on her face. “What do you think happened to the old elven king?” she asks, changing the subject. “I know the Unknowns took him back to themselves, but what does that mean? Do you think he’ll return kind of like Clara? Reincarnated or something?”

“I don’t know,” I say, adjusting the covers on my bed, even though the young elven woman who takes care of our rooms gets flustered when I do her job.

“I hope he never comes back. He was a very bad man.” She flies back over and lands in my outstretched palm, hugging my finger. “Don’t worry about this realm. I can handle things while you’re gone.”

I smile big. “Of course you can. Thank you, Leva.”

She winks, her attire, wings, and hair changing back to ruby red. “Safe travels, Wys.”

As I close the door, I wonder why the Vampire Queen didn’t ask me herself. Not only are we relatives, but I thought we were friends. Maybe she was in a hurry. Not that it matters. Austin and I will go.

At thoughts of my husband, I make my way into our grand bathroom. The shower is running, and Austin is inside. Steam circles his naked form, and I remove my robe. “Mind if I join you?” I ask, stepping in.

Austin ravishes me with his eyes. “Damn, you’re gorgeous.” He

pulls me to him, presses open my mouth with his, and nothing else matters.

OceanofPDF.com

FOLLOW AUSTIN ANYWHERE

OUR JOURNEY from our realm to the human one is as easy as stepping through a magical portal. Austin opened it for us near the farm where I first ran into him again after all those years in captivity.

Snow covers the landscape like a shining white blanket. Cows moo with apprehension at our appearance. Each breath comes out in a cloud of warmth.

Austin reaches over to stroke the head of the heifer nearest us. “That’s a good girl,” he coos. It’s the sweetest thing.

Someday he’ll make a great father, I think. Vampire or not, he has an innate goodness and gentleness about him. “They remember you,” I say, watching them flock to him like he’s their long lost shepherd.

“I guess so.” Austin chuckles lightly, walking and caressing their heads as he makes his way over to the fence. Placing one foot up on the rail, he climbs over without missing a beat. His jeans hug his butt and thighs in all the right places.

When I reach the barrier, Austin takes my hand and helps me over. Along with his jeans, he’s wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and a tan corduroy jacket with matching square toe cowboy boots. His dark hair is still slightly wet and curls at the nape of his neck. “Before we go into town, I want to show you something.”

“Okay.” I’d follow Austin anywhere.

Austin takes my hand and walks us over to the expansive red barn with white trim. The paint is faded and peeling in some spots but still looks to be in decent condition. He slides open one side of the double doors. The odor of hay and farm animals reaches my nose, and I find myself holding my breath. It isn’t bad, just different than what I’m used to.

“We won’t get in trouble for going in?” I ask, feeling nervous. In the elven realm, we have animals, but they aren’t kept in a barn or fed and treated like pets or servants. They come and go as they please. Envy, the black unicorn pegasus who helped save my realm, is also one of my dearest friends and has a place on the council. I couldn’t imagine her in a stall being fed, watered, brushed, and cared for when Austin or I ordered it.

“We’ll be fine.” Austin disappears into the dark interior.

I’m right behind him. Each stall is occupied with… “Are these reindeer?” I ask, as the animals come in close, curious. Some have a fantastic rack of antlers.

“They are.” He nods and goes to the nearest male, letting it smell him before rubbing the pad between his eyes. “This is Dancer.”

“Shut-up,” I say, thinking he’s teasing me.

“My name is Dancer,” the reindeer says, surprising me.

“Um, hello.” I let him sniff my hand, working not to act as shocked as I am. I look at Austin, begging him to explain how this is possible.

“The guy who owns this place lets them winter here every year, though he doesn’t know they can talk.” Austin moves on to the next stall, and a female nickers softly.

“Have you always been able to talk?” I ask Dancer.

It sounds like he laughs. “All reindeer can talk,” he says. “It’s been that way since the beginning of time.”

“I didn’t know.” There’s a basket of apples in between stalls. I pick one out and hand it to him.

Dancer takes it and disappears inside the stall.

“Nice to meet you,” I say and move over to Austin.

“This is Nells. She’s new to the area.”

“Hello, Nells.” I hand her an apple.

She eats, and we move on until I’ve met all of the reindeer, except one. He’s lying in the hay in his stall and breathing heavily.

“Are you okay?” I ask, unlocking the door.

“Don’t go in,” Austin says, but it’s too late.

I kneel beside the reindeer. He is undeniably sick and dying.

“It’s dangerous,” Austin says, kneeling beside me. “Be careful.”

“May I touch you?” I hesitantly reach out a hand to the animal.

At first, I think the reindeer is going to bite, but he just lowers his head.

As my fingers touch his fur, my magic rumbles to life. Instantly, I know he ate something he shouldn’t have. Untreated, the reindeer will die. “It’s going to be okay,” I say, pushing my magic into him. It finds what’s causing his condition, surrounds it, and strangles it until it's gone. I move my hand away as the reindeer stands.

“I feel much better. What did you do?” He shakes himself, sending his antlers precariously close to my head.

“I have healing magic and used it to get rid of your illness.” I glance at Austin, who is pulling us out of the stall.

Once we’re safely on the other side and the door is locked, Austin heaves a sigh of relief.

The reindeer sticks his head over the stall. “Thank you,” he says. “The name is Vixen. I’ve been nauseous for a couple of days. You saved my life.”

The rest of the reindeer in the barn add words of agreement. “It’s no big deal,” I say and smile. “Glad to help.”

I follow Austin to the exit.

“Hey,” Vixen calls.

I turn back. “If you wouldn’t mind, my son, Randy, is out in the cold somewhere. He got sick first, and the farmer wouldn’t allow him into the barn. I’m worried.”

“We’ll find him,” I say. Outside, I breathe in, happy for the fresh air.

“Was it a good idea to promise him that? We have to find Clara,”

Austin says, his gaze roaming the white winter landscape.

“Perhaps if I weren’t with a vampire, there might be a problem.” I snuggle up against him. My head tilted so I can see his face. “You’re super-fast. You can find Randy.”

He kisses me and wraps an arm around my waist. “You’re always right.” He caresses my cheek. “I already did.”

With a literal whoosh, we’re moving so fast. It takes my breath away. Austin stops just inside the tree line, and I have to catch my breath. “Warn me next time,” I say, punching him lightly and putting a hand to my head. My hair is up in a tight bun, and I check to make sure all the pins are still there.

“Where’s the fun in that,” he teases, kissing me passionately.

I get lost in him, letting myself be filled with his warmth and love. And then I hear the familiar sound of a reindeer. “He’s this way.” I take off in the direction of the noise. Sure enough, a white reindeer is lying in the snow, laying on his side. That’s never a good sign. “Hey, boy. Your father sent me to help you feel better.” I step close and squat, reaching out a hand to his face.

He sends out a gust of hot air through his nose. “My dad?” He sounds young. Poor thing.

“That’s right. Vixen is your father, correct?” Carefully I touch the fur on his face. He’s burning up.

Randy closes his eyes, and I feel him give in.

Immediately, my power rushes along my arm and out my fingers into Randy. The sickness is everywhere. He only has moments left to live. Resolute, I send my healing power into him and feel it burn out all the illness. It’s so bad, and his body starts to glow indigo. I glance at Austin, who nods his encouragement.

It isn’t long before I sense the change. He is healing. I keep going until every last bit of the affliction is gone. “There,” I say, patting him softly.

He doesn't move right away.

"Randy?" I nudge him.

"It's gone," he says, quietly. "I feel wonderful, and I'm scared that I'm dead, and this is the After Life."

"You are alive and well." I stroke his soft coat, encouraging him. "Stand up. Come on."

Randy opens his eyes. "I thought you were an angel and that my dad was dead and sent you to bring me to him."

I hear the fear in his voice and feel bad that I wasn't more clear. "I'm sorry, Randy. Your dad is alive, and so are you. Promise." I give him a light smile.

He rolls off his side and springs to his feet, shaking the snow from his fur. Cautiously, he takes a few steps and then a few more before turning back to Austin and me. "I feel like I could fly." As he speaks, he leaps into the air and remains there.

"Did you do this?" Austin asks, surprised.

"What? Reindeer don't usually fly?" I look at my hands, wondering if my magic over-healed him or something else.

"I mean, they do but only on Christmas Eve." He chuckles, and I join him.

"Look at me," Randy says. "This is so totally awesome." He hoots and hollers as he flies around the countryside and back to us. "Thank you," he says, coming over and nuzzling my side softly.

"You're very welcome." I scratch in between his eyes. "Let's get you to your father. He'll be glad to see that you're okay."

Randy takes off at a breakneck speed, then bounds into the sky. "Wahoo!"

Austin and I laugh joyously as he wraps me in his arms, and we travel together after Randy. He doesn't go as fast this time, and I'm glad. It gives me the chance to admire him.

When we reach the barn, Randy is already there and dancing

impatiently in front of the door. Austin yanks it open. Randy runs in, calling for his dad.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Vixen says to me after he checks over his son.

“Have a Merry Christmas,” Austin says. We both wave our goodbyes and close the door.

The barn goes wild with pounding feet and snorts and exclamations of surprise—noises that fill my heart with gladness.

“Let’s go find Clara,” Austin says.

“I’m ready.”

OceanofPDF.com

THAT'S A PROMISE

AUSTIN SLOWS to a stop when we are a few hundred feet from the back of the hospital. Hand in hand, we walk around to the front and enter the double sliding doors.

"Now what?" I ask. We're here, but that doesn't mean the nurses and doctors will let us roam around beyond the waiting room without reason.

Or actually…

"Hello, Fern?" Austin waits until the nurse is looking at him in the eyes. "My wife and I want to check on some patients. Let us in, will you?"

Her eyes widen a moment. Compulsion. "Let me get you some visitor badges." She opens a drawer and picks up a pen. "What are your names?"

Austin tells her. As she writes them down, he asks, "Is there a teen by the name of Clara here helping out as well?"

Recognition flashes across her middle-aged face for the briefest moment before she closes down. "I'm not supposed to say."

Austin smiles. "Never mind." Her answer is all we need.

"Here you go, Wysteria and Austin." Confusion fills her eyes. "Who are you here to see?"

Austin catches hold of her gaze. "We are going to look around, but we won't hurt anyone or get in the way. That's a promise."

Her face relaxes. "Thank you, Austin." She presses a button. The door buzzes and opens.

Austin holds it open for me and then follows in after.

The door closes with a click. "You are the most gorgeous and scary man, I know."

Austin chuckles. “Thanks for the compliment.”

It doesn’t take more than a moment for me to remember we are in a hospital full of sick or broken people. Smells of death and dying linger all around us. It burns my nose and causes my heart to ache. An idea forms in my mind. “You go look for Clara. I’m going to visit each of the patients.”

Austin’s eyes soften. “Don’t overexert yourself and save some for Clara. Who knows how difficult it will be to heal the rebel out of her.” He rolls his eyes at the idea. We both agree there’s nothing wrong with a little rebelliousness. It allows for free thinking. At the same time, we get why Snow is worried. “Keep an eye out for the chayot or the Task Force.” He squeezes my hand.

“You do the same,” I say, rising on my toes and kissing his cheek.

He heads down the hall, and I knock on the first door before entering. An older woman is hooked up to a bunch of machines. Her eyes are closed. She already looks dead. Her face slackened in peace. I rest a hand on hers. She’s icy cold. Sunspots and wrinkles cover her aged skin. Without thought, my magic rushes into her, seeking out her ailment.

The woman’s eyes flash open. “Are you here to take me to my Harold?” she asks delicately. “I’m ready.” Her thin lips try to smile.

That’s twice in one day I’ve been mistaken for an angel of death or a reaper. I’m neither. “I’m here to heal whatever afflicts you.”

At my words, she pulls away from me. “Don’t you dare. I’m ninety-two, and my sweet Harold left me more than thirty years ago. I want to go.” Tears push against her lashes. “Please.”

My powers race through her. She is full of cancer and will die very soon. “What about family? Is there anyone you want to see before you go?” I can give her a little more time, at least.

She shakes her head. “My Peggy died a decade ago. She was my only posterity.”

“I understand,” I say. “Are you in pain? At least let me take that

away."

She nods. "That would be appreciated."

My magic seeks out and encircles those portions of her illness that are causing pain. I don't heal them but numb her pain receptors.

All the while, the woman watches, focusing on the indigo light before meeting my gaze. "I've heard of your kind."

"My kind?" I ask, puzzled. "There isn't another like me anywhere.

"In possession of magic." I smile, and she goes on. "Do unicorns exist? As a girl, I always hoped to see one. Whenever my parents took me camping, I would spend hours searching."

"Not very many, but yes, they are real."

"Oh, I knew it." She treats me to a toothless grin. "Thank you," she says.

"Have a Merry Christmas," I respond and then feel stupid. She's about to die. There isn't anything *merry* about that.

"It will be if I get to see my Harold." Her eyes close again.

I leave the room as quietly as possible and head to the next. It's another elderly patient. He looks older than the woman, and he, too, doesn't want to live any longer.

"I've had a good life. My time has come." He pats my hand gently.

"Merry Christmas," I whisper and walk out. I don't know what else to say.

In the next two rooms, it's the same. I'm beginning to think I won't need to heal anyone. Sighing heavily, I open another door, steeling myself. Instead of an older man or woman, it's a young girl with wispy blond hair and vivid brown eyes. She can't be more than seven or eight. Seated beside her is an older girl. Immediately, I know it's Clara.

She looks at me, and I stare back for what feels like an eternity though it can't be more than a few seconds. "Clara, I'm Wysteria," I say, raising my hands.

“You know the angel?” the little girl asks.

“I know her, Sydney,” Clara says cautiously and stands, moving in closer to the girl.

“She isn’t going to take me to Heaven, is she?” Her voice quivers. “I’m not ready to die, Clara. Tell her.”

“She’s here to help,” Clara says. Her eyes question the truthfulness of her statement.

“Yes, I am.” I walk to the other side of her bed. “May I hold your hand, Sydney?”

Sydney looks at Clara for confirmation that I don't mean any harm.

“It’s okay,” Clara says.

Sydney holds out her hand.

I take it in mine. It’s so tiny with very little skin and bone, and I force myself not to flinch as my magic rushes down my fingers and into the girl. All the while, Clara and Sydney watch me. I concentrate on the girl’s fingers as my magic searches for the reason why she’s in the hospital. At her heart, I find my answer. It isn’t strong enough. “Is she on a donor list?” I ask Clara even though it’s doubtful she knows.

She shakes her head.

“It’s too late,” Sydney says, blinking at the water that’s suddenly in her eyes.

“Where’s your family?” I ask, as my magic assesses what needs to be done. I refuse to let this one die.

“I’m an orphan,” she admits and seems embarrassed by it.

“Not anymore,” Clara says. “You have me, remember?” Clara smiles big, encouraging the girl.

“Yes, I do have you as my sister…” Her voice trails off. “But I don’t want you to be sad when I’m gone. It’s better if you aren’t my family.” A single tear drips down and lands on her pillow.

“If Wysteria can’t fix you, then I can,” Clara says, her voice

stubborn and determined.

“That isn’t necessary,” I say, knowing she intends to turn the girl into a vampire. “Besides, you’d get into all sorts of trouble.”

“I don’t care.” She wraps her other hand around Sydney’s so that the little girl’s is entirely covered by Clara’s.

“I can heal her,” I say and close my eyes.

Restoring Sydney’s heart isn’t easy. She’s been suffering as the rest of her body got bigger, but her heart didn’t. Still, I push with all my might. In my mind’s eye, I watch the heart reform and become perfect. It’ll last her a lifetime and longer. As I work, the girl’s heart gets stronger but her body is tired and she drifts off to sleep. Her breathing evens out, and the machines that were assisting her heart just stop working.

Even when I’m done, I keep my eyes closed. It’s essential I figure out my next step. I need to touch Clara too and see about her rebelliousness. Her intentions for the little girl were good, but the execution would have caused lifelong repercussions. A child changed into a vampire can never progress mentally or physically.

“It’s okay,” Clara says.

I gasp and open my eyes to see she’s standing directly in front of me. So close. Too close. “Clara,” I say and stumble back.

The teen reaches out and rights me before I fall. “I know why you’re here. I heard Snow and Silindra talking. Go ahead.” She takes hold of my wrist.

“You’re sure?” I hesitate, resting my fingers over hers.

Clara shrugs. “I want to know if I’ll be evil too.” Her face falls. “But, if you can’t heal me or whatever, promise you’ll let me leave with Sydney. She needs someone to look after her. I can do that.”

“Clara,” I begin.

The door flings open. A man and woman block the exit, their faces hard as they look at the two of us. Each of them carries a sword in a

sheath across their backs.

“What are you doing?” the man asks, coming forward, his hand reaching for the hilt of his sword.

“Get out,” I order.

But Clara is faster than me. She pushes past the two of them and is gone.

They look at each other and me.

“Where did she go?” the woman asks.

I grab hold of each of their wrists. My magic races through them. They are chayot, and they want to kill Clara. I pull back. “You saw how fast she ran. I don’t know.”

OceanofPDF.com

BRING HER BACK

SYDNEY WAKES and starts to cry. “Where’s Clara?”

I go to her. “She’s okay. She’ll be back.”

The chayot leave. Before the door closes, Austin pushes in. “You found Clara?”

“Yes, but so did those chayot. They’ve gone after her. Don’t let them…” I glance at the girl and don't finish my sentence. She will be upset if she knows Clara is in danger.

“On it,” he says and vanishes.

“He can move fast like Clara,” Sydney says, sitting up. Her skin no longer looks pallid, her lips are rosy red, and her eyes sparkle with energy.

“He’s a lot like Clara,” I say, sitting beside her. “How are you feeling?”

“So much better,” she says and takes in a deep breath. “Better than I’ve ever felt.” She pulls at the tubes and removes one of the sticky nodes on her skin. At the change, one of the machines beeps loudly.

A nurse rushes in. “Sydney, are you alright?” She looks at me like I’m a monster. “Who are you?” she asks as she checks the machine.

“I’m fine,” Sydney says. “And this is my friend, Wysteria.”

“Well, your friend needs to leave.” She glares with irritation.

I go to the door.

“Please don’t go,” Sydney cries.

“I’m going to find Clara and bring her back,” I whisper tenderly.

She doesn’t look like she believes me.

“You’ll see her soon,” I say and exit.

I hurry through the hallway and out into the waiting room. From

there, I head outside, and then I'm at a loss. If I were Clara, I'd head for the woods. But she can move so fast. She could be in Cheyenne in minutes. Except she won't leave Sydney. I saw how much she loves the girl.

It's then I hear sounds of grunting and the clang of swords. Fighting. I hurry around to the back of the hospital. The parking lot separates me from the group, but they aren't so far that I can't make out Austin and Clara are fighting the chayot. To the right, I notice another group moving in.

I don't know whether they are more chayot or the Supernatural Task Force. Either way, it doesn't matter. Austin and Clara will be outnumbered. I start running.

Austin sees me, and a look passes between us. He wraps an arm around Clara and shouts one word. "Barn." Then he's gone, faster than my eyes can track.

The chayot look at each other and then at the group coming for them. Swords drawn, the male chayot says something to the group. Obviously, they aren't friends or coworkers.

Before they notice me, I hide behind a giant green trash can.

I know where Austin and Clara are, but it will take me at least an hour to get there if I walk. I could steal a car, but no. I really couldn't. But there is one things I can do. I go back into the hospital and call my aunt and uncle.

"THANKS again for driving me out to where Austin used to work." I watch my aunt, enjoying the vanilla scent of her perfume and the peppermint on her breath.

My uncle is at work, so it's just my aunt with me. She glances over. "I'm just so glad to see you. It's been too long."

I clutch her hand to my chest. "Yes, it has. Are you and uncle doing alright?"

"Oh, yes. We're ornery as ever, but doing great."

“Glad to hear it.”

She flips on some Christmas music. Jingle Bells is playing, and we spend the next ten minutes singing at the top of our lungs. When we reach the turnoff to Herford Ranch, my aunt puts the truck in four-wheel drive. The road is just dirt and deep snow.

At the barn, my aunt parks. “You got it from here?” she asks. She never was one to linger or mince words. Get to work. Get it done. That’s how she is.

“Yes, thank you so much.” I reach over and hug her. “And I promise I’ll bring Austin to dinner next week.”

My aunt beams. “New Year’s Eve, right?”

“We will be there.”

“Good, now I’m going to go talk to Mr. Herford and explain why I came out all this way to see him.” She winks, patting my shoulder.

“You’re the best. Love you.” I open the door and climb out.

“Love you more,” she says and waves.

I watch while she turns the truck around and heads back to the main house. Carefully, I move to the barn door, pull it open, head inside, and close it behind me. While I wait for my eyes to adjust, I listen. Austin and Clara are laughing. None of the reindeer are in their stalls. I continue back until I reach the arena. All of the reindeer stand in a circle, with Clara standing next to Austin. He has a protective arm around her shoulders.

A good dad, I think again.

As I get closer, Austin and Clara turn.

“Come and see. Randy is making a fool of himself,” Clara says in the sweetest way. She’s going to be okay. Snow and Silindra don’t need to worry so much. She’s a good kid.

All the reindeer face me, including Randy, whose antlers are covered in tinsel and Christmas ornaments. He jumps into the air and struts around like he’s the coolest reindeer on Earth. The rest of the

reindeer laugh. Even his dad.

“Where did he find the Christmas decorations?” I ask Austin, who wraps his other arm around my shoulders.

“In the loft,” he says and points to an area in the rafters. Boxes are open with all sorts of holiday fare strewn everywhere.

“Well, you look like a tangled Christmas miracle,” I say, loud enough that Randy can hear.

“Aw, shucks,” he says, and they all laugh.

OceanofPDF.com

SHE ISN'T A PET

AS THE SUN starts to set, the three of us say goodbye to the reindeer, including Randy, who asks if he can come to visit.

"Anytime, as long as it's okay with your dad," I say, hugging him.

Out in the cold, Clara takes my hands in hers. "Do it," she says. "Go ahead."

This time, I don't hesitate but send my magic into her. It twists and swirls, searching out anything that might be construed as darkness. It's there, and definitely more than most, but Clara has it contained and doesn't give into it. My magic circles it. Hers, sensing danger, lashes out. Before I can fight it or try and heal it, Clara pulls from my grasp.

"I felt it. I saw what you did." She isn't troubled. "You saw I haven't given in to it, and I won't."

"Yes, but don't you want me to get rid of some of it?" I don't mention there's more in her than most.

She shakes her head. "It's part of me. Resisting has shaped me into the person I am, and I like myself." She smiles. "Besides, while you were in there rooting around with your magic, my magic discovered something about you."

"Let's not get off-topic," Austin says. "Those chayot want to imprison you. You know they don't like you in the human realm. You need to return to Sharra." His voice is calm but firm.

Clara snickers. "I know, and I will, but first I have to get Sydney. She's coming home with me."

"Clara," I begin. "She isn't a pet. You can't keep her like one." I keep my voice gentle.

A shadow of irritation crosses Clara's features. "Sydney doesn't have anyone. She needs me and… I need her. Snow will agree and let

her live with us."

Who am I to tell her no. "If it's okay with Snow. You'll ask her first, right?"

Clara crosses her arms. "Of course. I'll go back to Sharra now." She draws a circle in the air, and a portal opens, easy as that. Before she steps through, she hugs Austin and me. "Congratulations," she says.

Austin and I look at each other, confused.

"What for?" I ask.

"You're having a boy." Without another word, she steps through the portal and is gone.

Austin looks at me, wonder on his face. "Is it possible?"

We didn't think we could have children. "I don't know."

Austin kneels in front of me in the dirty snow, resting an ear against my stomach.

I put my hands in his hair, nervously running my fingers through it. "Do you hear anything?" I want to be pregnant more than anything else in the world. The feeling swallows me in such a way that I think I'll be physically ill if I'm not.

He looks up. "We are having a baby," he says, barely contained excitement in his voice. Then he stands and lifts me into his arms, spinning me around as we laugh and cry.

"You're sure?" I ask when he sets me on my feet.

He lifts my face and lowers his head to kiss me, pressing my mouth open, deepening the kiss as our tongues tangle passionately. *The man has a way with words,* I think, wrapping my arms around his waist.

When our lips part, our eyes meet. His are dark with hunger and with exhilaration.

"I'll take that as a yes," I say barely able to contain my excitement.

"And I'm taking you to bed, sexy wife." He pulls a pin from my hair, tucking it in his pocket.

I lift a brow. "Should we shower first?" I think about the cows and

the reindeer and all we've done today.

"You're right. We'll start there." His words are low and sensual as he opens the portal that will drop us back in our rooms in the elven realm and into our happily ever after.

THANK you for reading these fairy tale reimaginings set in the Seven Magics World. To read more in this same world, be sure to check out the grittier and edgier suspense series, Eerie Valley Supernaturals.

Undercover Reaper

Twice Reaped

Reapers Creepers

Deadly Reaper (coming 4/24)

IF YOU'RE interested in the same world but lighter, check out my Broomstick Bay Cozy Mystery series.

Zucchini Cake and Zombies

Wedding Cake and Werewolves (coming 7/23)

Vanilla Cake and Vampires (coming 11/23)

OceanofPDF.com

LEAVE A REVIEW

SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER

Did you enjoy the Seven Magics Academy Ultimate Omnibus?

Please leave a review.

Join RaShelle's newsletter to stay updated on new releases and be part of her giveaways.

Join RaShelle's newsletter here.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RaShelle Workman is an international bestselling author of reimagined fairy tales, science fiction, time travel, and romantic suspense. All of her novels have been listed on multiple bestseller lists, including her Blood and Snow series (now Seven Magics Academy), which has sold more than a million copies worldwide. Three of her books have been translated into Turkish.

When RaShelle isn't writing, she enjoys baking, creating new taco recipes, and watching her favorite new series. She lives in Utah with her husband, children, and their dogs. Find her online by visiting her website at www.rashelleworkman.org. And sign up for her newsletter to receive free books and get information on book release dates: http://eepurl.com/chMcej.

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY RASHELLE WORKMAN

RaShelle Workman's Books in Reading Order According to Series World

IMMORTAL ESSENCE WORLD

YA Science Fiction Romance

Exiled

Destined

IMMORTAL ESSENCE BOX SET

SEVEN MAGICS WORLD

SEVEN MAGICS ACADEMY SERIES

YA Paranormal Reimagined Fairytales

Blood and Snow: Blood and Snow, Revenant in Training, The Vampire Christopher, Blood Soaked Promises

Fate and Magic: Prey & Magic, Masquerade's Moon, Seal of Gabriel, Telltale Kisses

Queen of the Vampires: Love Bleeds, Eye of Abernathy, Resolved to Rule, Vampire Ever After

SNOW'S BITE BOX SET

Deadly Witch: Witch Magic, Witch Land, Witch Time

Royal Witch: Witch Kiss, Witch Love, Witch End

CINDERELLA'S MAGIC BOX SET

Vampire Lies

Vampire Secrets

Vampires and Gargoyles

Vampires and Dragons

Vampire Magics

JASMINE'S WISHES BOX SET

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

SEVEN MAGICS ACADEMY BOX SET BOOKS 1-10

SEVEN MAGICS ACADEMY ULTIMATE OMNIBUS BOX SET BOOKS 1-21 + BONUS CONTENT

BEASTLY SERIES

A Beauty so Beastly

FAIRY ACADEMY SERIES

Hidden Princess

Broken Curse

Stolen Magic

AURORA'S CURSE BOX SET

DEMONLAND SERIES

Alice in Demonland

Alice Fights Demonland

Alice Takes Demonland

Alice Ignites Demonland

ALICE'S DECEPTION BOX SET

ETERNALLY ENTANGLED SERIES

Eternally Entangled

Thoroughly Tousled

Infinitely Intertwined

WYSTERIA'S HEART BOX SET

EERIE VALLEY SUPERNATURALS

Supernatural Suspense

Undercover Reaper

Twice Reaped

Reapers Creepers

Deadly Reaper (4/24)

BROOMSTICK BAY PARANORMAL COZY MYSTERIES

Paranormal Cozy

Zucchini Cake & Zombies

Wedding Cake & Werewolves (7/23)

Vanilla Cake & Vampires (11/23)

FABLE TOWN MYSTERY SERIES

Paranormal Cozy

Iced Raspberry Cookies and a Curse

THE SHADE RASA WORLD

YA Paranormal Romance

WOLF BLOOD ACADEMY SERIES

Initiation

Induction

Inheritance

WOLF BLOOD ACADEMY BOX SET

MAGIC BLOOD ACADEMY SERIES

Elemental Outcast Games: Fire

Elemental Outcast Games: Water

Elemental Outcast Games: Earth

Elemental Outcast Games: Air

Elemental Outcast Games: Shadow

Elemental Outcast Games: Monster

MAGIC BLOOD ACADEMY BOX SET

VAMPIRE BLOOD ACADEMY SERIES

Vampire in Training (8/23)

Monster Trials (9/23)

End Times (9/23)

THE FAIRYTALE CHRONICLES WORLD

High Fantasy Fairytale Reimagining

THE FAIRYTALE CHRONICLES SERIES

Royal Selection

Royal Contract

Royal Keeper (1/24)

Royal Everlasting (3/24)

ACROSS THE AGES WORLD

YA Paranormal Time Travel Romance

ACROSS THE AGES SERIES

Goddess Curse

Mystical Gift

ACROSS THE AGES BOX SET

PARANORMAL INVESTIGATIONS SERIES

Supernatural Suspense

Ghoulish Whisper

OceanofPDF.com